

## ***THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE***

### ***MODERN CAVALRY: MOUNTED RIFLES, THE BOER WAR, AND THE DOCTRINAL DEBATES***

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The Boer War came at a time when there was an active, and at times fierce, debate in the British Army about the future of horse mounted soldiers. Specifically that debate revolved around what armament horse soldiers should rely on as their primary weapon. In an age when military commentators were placing in increasing emphasis on the moral factors of war traditionalists were anxious to see the continued use and predominance of the *arme blanche*.<sup>1</sup> Meaning literally the 'white arm', it was term used to describe all forms of steel bladed weapons. For infantry this meant the bayonet, for cavalry the term was synonymous with the sword, and more emotionally the lance. Intimately associated with the *arme blanche* were the shock tactics of the mass cavalry charge and the offensive place that cavalry had traditionally found for itself through such tactics. Reformists wanted to see the *arme blanche* relegated to a secondary place behind firearms, or even better for some, disposed of altogether. For them it was an anachronism threatening the battle utility of the combat arm that, in an age before the perfection of the internal combustion engine, still possessed the greatest speed and mobility. It was a debate that, interestingly, also had a definite divisions broadly reinforced by the position of those involved in the colonial scheme of things. Officers and theorists focussing on a potential European war tended to have a conservative outlook and those officers, both citizen and regular, who had been involved in soldiering in Britain's empire were often in the opposing camp. It made for an interesting debate and one that went back to well before the Boer War.

Despite their continuing social and military prestige European cavalry were having an increasingly hard time in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The technological revolution that had begun with the invention and widespread adoption of the muzzle loading rifle in the 1850s had continued through the second half of that century and culminated at the turn of the century with the general use of breech loading magazine rifles. These high-powered rifles charged, not with black powder, but with the high explosive smokeless powder that made Boer riflemen so hard to pick out on the veldt, gave a massive boost to the firepower of the defender on the battlefield. A development that was increasingly casting the role of cavalry, traditionally the offensive arm *par excellence*, as an anachronistic one. Faced too with rapid developments in artillery, and increasingly the machine-gun, there seemed an ever diminishing likelihood that European cavalry would be able to conduct the tactic that cavalrymen were still trained in, and that they were almost obsessed with on a doctrinal and emotional level, the massed charge. In the 1850s cavalrymen simply tried to ignore the possible impact of the technological development that was revolutionising the power of their infantry colleagues, but wars in both North America and Europe in the 1860s and 1870s soon caught the attention of even the most conservative horse soldiers.

Traditional cavalry played virtually no part in the American Civil War and the horse mounted soldiers of that war, on both sides, displayed a clear preference for using the firearms they carried rather than any form of bladed weapon. More often than not they dismounted in battle to use their carbines or, if they chose to remain mounted, their preferred weapon was the new revolver. The general consensus amongst American cavalrymen was that the modern battlefield was no place for a mounted man if it could at all be avoided, and it was certainly no place for a mass charge against infantry.<sup>2</sup> Cavalrymen in the Franco-Prussian War also experienced considerable difficulties. Here, on ground where cavalry had been an important battle arm for centuries, infantry managed to turn cavalry charges, in the words of Michael Howard, into 'a line of kicking, bloodstained heaps' with alarming regularity.<sup>3</sup> The sole successful large charge by cavalry during the war, by a German brigade at Vionville under quite favourable conditions, had been so costly in lives that it came to be known, almost

reverentially, as Von Bredow's Death Ride.<sup>4</sup> These bloody experiences soon led to the conclusion that cavalry was now facing a situation that demanded some degree of reform. The great question was how much reform, and in what direction?

Many British observers of the American Civil War, foreshadowing to some degree what would happen after the Boer War, were content to simply write the lessons of that war off as aberrations caused by the unique local environment and American citizen armies.<sup>5</sup> Some others, however, drawing also on the wars in Europe in the following five years, were willing to call for some drastic changes to the way British cavalry trained for and fought wars. Sir Henry Havelock discussed cavalry reforms and advocated the use of mounted soldiers armed primarily with rifles in his 1867 work *Three Main Military Questions of the Day*, but the first large monograph on the topic by a Briton was published by the Canadian, Lieutenant-Colonel George T Denison.<sup>6</sup> In his 1867 publication of *Modern Cavalry* he advocated the reform of cavalry along broadly mounted rifle lines.<sup>7</sup> In this way cavalry could once again become 'the most powerful, as well as the most useful, portion of the armies'.<sup>8</sup> Taking into account the Franco-Prussian War he had much the same, though reinforced, message in his next book *A History of Cavalry: With Lessons for the Future*, published in 1877. Denison argued that three-quarters of a modern cavalry force should be made up of mounted riflemen who would be capable of fulfilling the traditional cavalry roles of screening, reconnaissance, conveying, outpost duties, turning movements, defensive operations, and his favourite American Civil War operation—the cavalry raid.<sup>9</sup> The remaining quarter of this force would be made up by 'cavalry proper' but in his second book he advocated the disposal of the *arme blanche* for these troops and its replacement with the revolver, a weapon much more lethal in the close range fighting often done by traditional cavalry.<sup>10</sup>

For Denison the adoption of a modern firearm and the accompanying tactics was the key to cavalry staking its place on the battlefield of the future. In his view the mobility and speed conferred by the horse were the great assets still at the disposal of cavalrymen, it was now up to them to modify their views about the roles and armament of cavalry so that the advantage was not squandered on what was now a very dangerous battlefield for exposed horsemen.<sup>11</sup> Denison was probably the most influential British cavalry theorist in certain circles of the British Army, but others were decidedly sceptical.

The majority of British cavalrymen, focussing on the possibility of having to fight a European enemy, remained intent on preparing to fight the next war with the *arme blanche*. Their ability to do this resulted from the fact that though they were now willing to concede that charging infantry was foolish, they were not willing to concede that charging the enemy's cavalry was also going to be a thing of the past. With end of the Franco-Prussian War cavalry throughout Europe became intent on fulfilling the traditional screening, outpost and reconnaissance duties that had long been the less glamorous, but highly important, lot of cavalry on campaign.<sup>12</sup> Implicit in these tasks was the requirement to disrupt and destroy the cavalry performing the same task for the enemy. It remained the firm faith of cavalrymen throughout Europe that this cavalry to cavalry combat would take place on horseback with lances and swords. For these men training and developing doctrine around the *arme blanche* remained the focus until well after the Boer War. They did not have the theoretical ground to themselves, however. Set against them were a number of officers who had undergone totally different experiences patrolling and fighting throughout Britain's colonial empire.

Mounted troops on colonial service did not have a European cavalry foe to prepare against, but were usually involved in the tasks of constantly patrolling and controlling large tracts of territory. This task often fell to infantry regiments and, as an expedient, local commandants and governors regularly took to mounting all or part of the infantry units under their command so that the job may be more efficiently and quickly done. Part of the 3rd Regiment of Foot was mounted to combat bushrangers around Sydney in 1825 and from this early experiment the Mounted Police was created by 1830. A body that Governor Darling viewed as 'of more importance than all the other troops put together'.<sup>13</sup> The practice was common at the Cape Colony and in 1827 the first dedicated mounted rifle unit in the British Army was raised there from the already mounted elements of the Cape Regiment. The Cape Mounted Rifles was, in the words of one of their officers:

[A] well mounted and very serviceable corps, well adapted for the work which they were intended, viz, skirmishing and patrolling through large tracts of the country which we included in our frontier positions ... they wore a rifle uniform, with the addition of cavalry accoutrements, and were armed with double barrelled Victoria carbines ... A cavalry sword completed their equipment. They were taught to act mounted and dismounted as occasion required, [and] were admirable skirmishers.<sup>14</sup>

Cavalry regiments on colonial service were also frequently required to become more proficient with their firearms and temporarily relegate their bladed weapons to second place.<sup>15</sup> Improvised mounted infantry units were also used in larger colonial conflicts, proving valuable in the Zulu War of 1879, the First Boer War of 1880-81 and the Egyptian War of 1882. In these cases mounted infantry bodies were created largely because there was no, or an insufficient number of, regular cavalry available to fulfill the necessary roles on these campaigns.<sup>16</sup>

The successes of ad hoc mounted infantry and mounted rifle units in colonial wars gave this form of mounted soldiering a firm toe hold in the doctrinal discussions that were taking place in the British Army in the second half of the nineteenth century. The theorising of Havelock and Denison was all well and good, but hard won colonial experience gave adherents of mounted infantry and rifle theories real ammunition to use in these debates. Even some conservative cavalymen were willing to admit that mounted infantry was a good idea for use in the colonies, though generally they would not countenance the idea for a European battlefield.<sup>17</sup> The reason that even conservatives were able to concede that mounted soldiers equipped with a rifle might be useful in the colonies was that, as Denison had pointed out, the rifle could give the horseman a strategic presence that the *arme blanche* never could. British colonial experience and the American Civil War had demonstrated that mounted troops equipped with rifles and accompanied by horse artillery could operate independently and make up large columns that could launch themselves deep into enemy territory. Alternatively they could operate separately from, but in support of, another force. Being equipped with effective firearms meant that they could generally withstand efforts to destroy them or attack any type of force of appropriate size. This in essence was what the British Army wanted its colonial forces to be able to do. The ability to operate independently and swiftly over long ranges was a vital element to the British requirement for keeping control in its colonial possessions.

This factor was instrumental in gathering support in the British Army for the cause and it won over some high level adherents. General Sir Evelyn Wood wrote in his book, *Achievements of Cavalry*, that:

There can be no doubt that, for the British Army, which must necessarily be employed more frequently in savage warfare, and over extensive tracts of country, such as are found in South Africa, trained and picked Mounted Infantry will prove of immense advantage, to the Army generally, in the future as it has done in the past ...<sup>18</sup>

Britain's most prominent soldier of the period, Viscount Wolseley, was also something of a supporter. He claimed that an army that possessed mounted infantry 'and whose leaders know how to handle it, will have an enormous advantage over an army that adheres to a stereotyped employment of cavalry, infantry and artillery'.<sup>19</sup> Men like these, however, were not advocating the reform of cavalry into mounted rifles, but the creation and maintenance of infantry units capable of being mobile by the supply of horses or some other beast of burden. Wolseley was in fact interested in mounted infantry as way to make use of mounted militia and volunteers in the defence of Britain from any potential invaders—an idea that the volunteers were not capable of fulfilling and that the yeomanry was decidedly against if it meant disposing of their swords.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in 1888 two mounted infantry schools were established in Britain for the training of detachments of regular army battalions in the required skills and tactics of mounted infantry.

In Australia the development of the mounted arm by colonial governments for colonial defence, rather than policing, had begun as early as the first years of the 1840s, but for the first decades it was a haphazard affair.<sup>21</sup> The citizen volunteer corps that were formed were usually small, short lived, had variable or often nearly nonexistent official backing, and suffered from a lack of either internal or external military direction. Until the 1880s whether the small mounted corps of the Australian colonies set themselves up as cavalry, mounted rifles or mounted infantry depended, as often as not, on the individual whim of the person or persons who had undertaken to establish each corps. Colonial governments seemed to be aware that they should have some form of mounted troops but, anxious to put as little strain on their exchequers as possible, they seemed generally content to take whatever was on offer from enthusiastic citizens rather than make rulings about what form of mounted soldiery should defend the colonies. Though colonial governments usually made some steps toward uniformity it was not unusual, in the 1860s and 1870s, to find several mounted corps with different notional military roles within one colony. Both South Australia and New South Wales, with their thoughts on the treasury, looked into the possibility of using augmented Mounted Police rather than having to support mounted soldiers at different times before 1885.<sup>22</sup>

From 1885, however, there was a marked change in the form of mounted troops to be found in the Australian colonies. From that year until the end of the decade the ineffective and inefficient volunteer mounted corps that previously been the mounted troops of the Australian colonies were replaced, at least in the larger eastern mainland colonies, by relatively large, stable and efficient units raised as partially paid militia. These units took various forms but there was emerging an evident preference for mounted infantry and mounted rifle units. Only in New South Wales would traditional cavalry remain a significant part of the pre-federation mounted troops of the Australian colonies.

The notion that mounted riflemen may be the best form of mounted soldiers for the Australian colonies was not necessarily a new one. Interested soldiers and citizens had been long aware of the value of mounted rifles in colonial situations. As early as 1860 the *Launceston Examiner* had expressed its appreciation of the potential military value of the local mounted rifle corps then being raised there.

It is not expected that [they] will ever be employed as regular cavalry; indeed in a country like Tasmania, densely wooded and full of broken ground and mountain gorges, regular cavalry would be almost useless, but as irregular cavalry and scouts the services of Mounted Rifles would be invaluable, and as such we rejoice at the addition which has been made to our defences.<sup>23</sup>

The forecast use of mounted rifles, as what was broadly termed at the time as irregular cavalry, was a model that had particular appeal to the citizen soldiers of the Australian colonies. Both mounted troops and infantry were increasingly practising at this time what were broadly called skirmishing tactics. Roughly speaking these were the skills of 'being proficient in marksmanship in the field, highly mobile, and capable of taking advantage of natural cover'.<sup>24</sup> These were the sort of tactics the Cape Mounted Rifles had been using since the early part of the century and that light cavalry had been using somewhat longer on reconnaissance and outpost duties. It was experience in these irregular tactics that was reportedly behind the selection of the Indian Army-trained Colonel Tom Price to command the Victorian Mounted Rifles when it was raised in 1885.<sup>25</sup> The theoretical issues involved were also understood and in 1889 at least one South Australian parliamentarian urged his colleagues to consider the arguments of George Denison and establish a force of mounted riflemen around Adelaide.<sup>26</sup>

Contributing to this colonial trend was the then common idea that it would be far easier to train citizen soldiers in the arts of being a mounted rifleman than it would be to train them as cavalrymen, and this idea gained wide acceptance.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on this notion, others were inspired by the example of the Boer mounted riflemen that had defeated the regulars of the British Army at Majuba Hill and Liang's Nek in the First Boer War of 1880-81. In 1894 Edward O'Sullivan, a New South Wales parliamentarian, produced a pamphlet titled the *Power of Mounted Riflemen*. In it, besides betraying a marked interest in Denison's arguments, he

sought to draw parallels between the hardy Boer farmer and his Australian counterparts in a social as well as military sense. For him the Boers were 'graziers and farmers who correspond almost in every particular to our selectors'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the Boers had 'shown clearly that in forest or bush warfare the colonial soldiers are superior to the best trained troops in the world, and it indicates the kind of tactics which our volunteers should resort to if New South Wales is ever invaded ...'.<sup>29</sup>

The upshot of these colonial sentiments was that, apart from in New South Wales where the Lancer Regiment, and in the late 1890s the 1st Australian Horse, constituted the only significant cavalry units in Australia, by the late 1880s only mounted rifle style units were generally thought to be of any real value to local defence. In 1890 an application to form a cavalry troop in Melbourne was rejected by the government for number of reasons, but key among them was a reluctance to raise any cavalry in the colony. One bureaucrat noted that:

As regards their wish to be enrolled as Cavalry [the minister] cannot recommend their application to the government. It would be unwise of the Defence department [sic] to encourage the formation of an arm of the service which was not likely to be valuable. What the colony required was an efficient and well-drilled body of men able to move rapidly about from place to place for purposes of locomotion (but fighting on foot). The Regt of Mounted Rifles fulfills these conditions and [the minister] would advise them to consider whether it would be wise to join this body. The opinion of the highest authorities at home as well as those in command here are strongly against Cavalry.<sup>30</sup>

A few years later the Queensland Staff Officer for Mounted Infantry, Major Percy Ricardo, stressed in his preface for the new, locally created, Queensland mounted infantry manual that whilst that colony's mounted infantry may be required to carry out cavalry duties on campaign, 'it must be impressed on the men that *they are in no sense cavalry*, their horses being provided merely as a means of locomotion' [italics in original].<sup>31</sup> Contributing to this sentiment by local officers and officials was the generally pro-mounted rifle attitudes of a number of the Imperial officers who were sent to Australia to command and inspect in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Major-General J Bevan Edwards was sent to the Australasian colonies in 1889 to conduct a review of the defences. His review was wide ranging and his recommendations many but among them was an effort to encourage the use of mounted rifles as the mounted troops of the colonies. In his report he recommended that the cavalry corps of New Zealand would 'be of greater use if they were drilled and equipped as mounted infantry'.<sup>32</sup> He told Victoria that 'no greater part of your force will be of greater use in war than the Mounted Rifles, and it is the arm most suited to the defence of the Australian Colonies ...'.<sup>33</sup> New South Wales was urged to increase its mounted infantry regiment from its current 297 personnel to over 1000 organised into three regiments.<sup>34</sup> In contrast the local cavalry bodies received virtually no support apart from the obligatory polite remarks.

The arrival of Edward Hutton, with the local rank of Major-General, as New South Wales Commandant in 1893, brought to Australia one of the British Army's most vocal and active advocates of mounted infantry. Though he was careful to praise the enthusiasm of the cavalry regiment under his command during his tenure in New South Wales, he was evidently more interested in mounted soldiers capable of using their firearms. During his time in New South Wales he renamed the mounted infantry the Mounted Rifle Regiment, reorganised the mounted forces into a brigade that, probably for the first time in Australia, could be called a combat formation rather than an administrative arrangement, and made the Lancers carry out some 'necessary changes in the method of carrying the firearms, and some alteration in tactical training, so as to develop the power of dismounted action....'.<sup>35</sup> He wrote and lectured on the role of mounted troops in modern war, and supervised the creation of the *Manual of Drill for the Mounted Troops of Australia*. This manual diplomatically gave all forms of mounted soldiers in Australia a doctrinal place, but the publication had a marked focus on fire tactics. In the preface he wrote for the manual he revealed, not for the first time, the influence of George Denison in the formulation on his thoughts on the use of mounted forces and transferred them to the local context.

In no country in the world will a mounted force be found more necessary for military operations than in Australia. Distances are so great, transport away from the great lines of rail so difficult, that, as in America at the commencement of the great war of Secession [sic], 1862-65, so in Australia would success be to that force which had the best and the most completely equipped mounted force. It was entirely due to the magnificent force of improvised mounted troops which the characteristics of its inhabitants enabled the Southern States to put in the field that their initial success was due, and it was not until the Federal States, with their far greater resources, following in the footsteps of the South, similarly provided themselves with a powerful and efficient mounted force that the tide of success finally turned in their favour. So will, undoubtedly, be the result of any warlike operations which may in the future be conducted on this continent. Success will be to that army which can turn to account the splendid inherent resources which the Colonies of Australia possess in the supply of horsemen ...<sup>36</sup>

Though not a man normally described as diplomatic, Hutton displayed an ability to be so when it came to the mounted troops of New South Wales, being careful never to over praise or offend either arm of his Mounted Brigade. His successor in New South Wales, Major-General GA French possessed a limited amount of that quality, however. In his report on the colonial defences for 1897 he took a decidedly partisan position and dismissed the local cavalry as next to useless for the defence of the colony. He then told the government that 'I have no hesitation in advising that any extension of our Mounted Forces should be in the direction of Mounted Riflemen ...'.<sup>37</sup> His counterpart in Victoria in the late 1890s, Major-General Charles Hotted Smith was of a similar opinion.

We want as many mounted rifles as we can get. They are essentially the arm for Australia. They know the country to be operated over, and they can ride. You don't want cavalry, for there are any amount of wire fences and other obstacles to the proper and efficient use of cavalry, but Mounted Rifles are absolutely the most important force in the defence of the colony, always excepting an adequate force of artillery at the Heads to work the guns. I cannot help thinking ... how absurd it was in our campaign against the Boers in the Transvaal to employ such a large proportion of infantry. The Boers were practically mounted rifles and as such were, of course, able to outmarch our infantry everywhere. They were what mounted rifles should be—good shots and good riders.<sup>38</sup>

His Governor was of much the same opinion and in 1897 Lord Brassey tried to convince the colonial and defence authorities in London, unsuccessfully, that Australia would be a perfect place to raise an auxiliary force of mounted rifles for service with the imperial army anywhere in time of war.<sup>39</sup>

Given the general Australian preference for mounted rifles there is some irony in the fact that the first Australian troops to see active service was a detachment of the New South Wales Lancers. Sailing home from a period of training with the British regulars at Aldershot the Lancers disembarked at South Africa and, eventually getting attached to the Cavalry Division of Major-General Sir John French, marched off to fight the Boers.

The Cavalry Division, like cavalry in Europe 30 years before, was to have quite a difficult war. Cavalrymen in South Africa, having come south with lances, swords and their Martini-Metford carbines, found an enemy who had no intention whatsoever of obliging them by facilitating a glorious charge with the *arme blanche*. Though two squadrons of British cavalry had an initial success at Elandslaagte in October 1899 when they managed to successfully charge an already withdrawing Boer force, there would be few other opportunities, in the words of the Marquess of Anglesey, Elandslaagte proved to be 'the solitary genuine example of a profitable charge with the *arme blanche* in the whole war'.<sup>40</sup> The men of the Cavalry Division were facing an enemy who, mounted on their hardy veldt raised horses, would, as much as possible, use the full, superior, range of their artillery and Mauser rifles when engaging their enemy. Cavalry, with a very few exceptions, never got close enough to use their swords or lances and often had trouble getting close enough to use their carbines—a weapon with an

extreme range not even half that of the Mausers of the other side. It is not so surprising then, that in October 1900 Field Marshal Lord Roberts, commander in South Africa and no friend of traditional cavalry, moved to alter the armament of cavalry. He ordered all lances and carbines withdrawn and replaced them the standard infantry rifle and bayonet—only the units of French's Cavalry Division were allowed to keep their swords.<sup>41</sup> This largely formalised what had been the reality for nearly a year. That the regular cavalry of the British Army had to fight this war as mounted riflemen. Without this change the cavalry had become:

Big men on increasingly undersized mounts, too heavily equipped and armed with carbines much inferior to the enemy's rifles, prevented from conforming to their original tactics, yet loath to abandon them to new methods, [they] were now shown without any doubt to be powerless to exert any real influence on the course of the fighting.<sup>42</sup>

The value of cavalry lay, not in their armament and ethos, but in the mobility and speed they derived from their mounts. Cavalry, however, no longer held this advantage as a monopoly.

In order to combat a highly mobile enemy the British Army increasingly began to mount its own soldiers on horses. Battalions of infantry regulars, drawing on the experiences gained pre-war in the mounted infantry schools, were soon mounted and the raising of new mounted rifle units from Britain and the colonies quickly became a high priority. Some of these troops, made into a Mounted Infantry Brigade, commanded by Edward Hutton, had proved themselves very valuable to Lord Roberts on the advance to Pretoria where they had restarted his stalled advance at the Vet River and had also managed to cut off a significant Boer force trying to retreat from Johannesburg to Pretoria. It was 'one of the few instances during the whole war in which a direct pursuit resulted in a sizable capture—and it was not made by the cavalry!'<sup>43</sup> As the relatively conventional war of the first months transformed into a mobile guerilla war after the fall of Pretoria, cavalry had even less scope for its traditional role. What was emerging on the battlefields of South Africa, on both sides, was a single form of useful mounted soldier—the mounted riflemen, and British Army couldn't seem to get enough of them. In 1899 Captain Antill of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles wrote that the British:

[A]re sadly in want of mounted troops, and are sighing for mounted rifles. We could do with a few more thousand. They have lots of artillery but the difficulty in every fight is that the enemy get away without our being able to outflank them, being too weak in the mounted rifles arm. I have worked my men up very well. Pity there is not 1,000 of them.<sup>44</sup>

The ascendancy of the mounted rifleman in South Africa did not necessarily transform into a massive conversion of cavalry in the years following the Boer War, however. In Britain there was an increasingly heated debate about the role, place and form of cavalry and even in Australia, a place where the mounted riflemen had been dominant for nearly ten years, traditional cavalry found its defenders.

In Britain the reformists got the first shot off when Lord Roberts, now Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, abolished the lance, that most coveted but anachronistic cavalry weapon, for all but ceremonial use. In the Army Order that carried the message to his cavalymen he wanted to 'impress upon all ranks that although the cavalry are armed with the carbine (or rifle) and the sword, the carbine (or rifle) will be henceforth be considered as the Cavalry soldier's principal weapon'.<sup>45</sup> He then went further in 1904 and had an anti-*arme blanche* preface written by him inserted in the new provisional edition of the manual *Cavalry Training*. In it he plainly stated his view on cavalry doctrine and told his subordinates that "instead of the firearm being an adjunct to the sword, the sword must henceforth be an adjunct to the rifle ..."<sup>46</sup>

Conservative cavalymen were nonplussed. There followed a decade long debate between conservatives and reformers that would not be settled, and even then not finally, until the eve of the First World War. The ranks of the vocal conservatives were well manned, but their

champion was the man who had commanded the Cavalry Division in South Africa, Sir John French. While commanding the Corps at Aldershot after the war he had allowed the 1st Cavalry Brigade to openly defy the lance abolition order and in late 1904, after Roberts had retired, he had successfully campaigned for the removal of the Roberts preface from the final edition of *Cavalry Training 1904*. In 1905 he publicly waded into the debate by providing a pro-*arme blanche* preface to a translation of a book on cavalry written by a Frenchman identified only as PS.<sup>47</sup> Providing prefaces to polemics on cavalry was to become a favoured tactic of French and Roberts over the coming years and in 1906 French did it again when he wrote a preface for another book written on the continent, Frederick von Bernhardi's *Cavalry in Future Wars*. French was not a fool and had seen the power of the rifle in South Africa but he remained convinced that cavalry that abandoned the *arme blanche* would be easy victims for European cavalry that remained focussed on their bladed weapons.<sup>48</sup> Roberts, now retired, countered in 1910 by contributing his own introduction to *War and the Arme Blanche* by Erskine Childers. A book in which Childers, a journalist, novelist and author of one of the volumes of the *Times History of the War in South Africa*, made an attack on cavalrymen who felt that the Boer War and the use of fire tactics by cavalry was an aberration. This personal debate seesawed back and forth and French responded later that year with another preface to another book by Bernhardi, *Cavalry in War and Peace*, in which he attacked Childers and Roberts and invoked the sort of quasi-religious tone that cavalry conservatives were sometimes inclined to take, writing that:

I am convinced that some of the reactionary views recently aired in England concerning cavalry will, if accepted and adopted, lead first to the deterioration and then the to the collapse of cavalry when next it is called upon to fulfill its mission in war. I therefore recommend ... to read and ponder this book, which provides a strengthening tonic for weak minds which may have allowed themselves to be impressed by the dangerous heresies to which I have alluded.<sup>49</sup>

French supported the author he was introducing in his assertion that though the war in South Africa, and more recently that in Manchuria, had provided some interesting highlights, it had not revealed any dramatic conditions that would affect the cavalry in any coming European War.<sup>50</sup>

Roberts fired a final shot in 1911 with a preface to Childers' attack on French and Bernhardi in the book *German Influence on British Cavalry*. Central to Childers' arguments was his dismissal of the notion that European cavalry would only fight each other on horseback with the *arme blanche*. Childers wondered what would cavalry do if the rifle fire they were receiving was coming, not from infantry whom cavalry could not attack mounted except under the most favourable conditions, but 'unconventional cavalry, who, from a sense of fun or sane instinct for fighting, have determined to play a practical joke on the devotees of the pure faith'.<sup>51</sup>

It was a question that conservatives were either unwilling or unable to answer, but it did not matter. The conservatives were in the majority, held most of the key positions in the British Army, and were not, in the end, particularly worried about what they saw as the radical ranting of an Irish born journalist come novelist and historian. Roberts and Childers produced a convincing intellectual argument in their various writings but they had no chance of out gunning the key officers that remained convinced of the power of the sword and lance in trained hands. Roberts had been retired but French had remained in the army and held a number of key appointments and since 1906 had been Commander-in-Chief designate for the British Expeditionary Force. In 1912 he was made Chief of the General Staff. He was ably assisted by the likes of Douglas Haig who was a passionate, if sometimes illogical, defender of traditional cavalry and Robert Baden-Powell who, as Inspector General of Cavalry from 1903 to 1907, had abandoned his past support for mounted infantry and supported French.<sup>52</sup> Outside the army they were helped by Colonel Repington, the military correspondent of *The Times*. Men such as these ensured that *Cavalry Training 1907* had a pro-*arme blanche* preface, that in 1909 the lance was reinstated and that in 1913 the Army Council ruled that mounted infantry would have no place in any expeditionary force sent to a European war.<sup>53</sup>

This is not to say that British Cavalry had remained in a total state of ossification. When still Commander-in-Chief, Roberts had ensured that the cavalry were rearmed with a rifle nearly identical to that of the infantry and from time to time some officers even made the cavalry practice using it effectively, most famously the infantryman Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien at Aldershot in 1909.<sup>54</sup> French had introduced machine guns to the cavalry and ensured that they were part of each regiment's establishment well before the First World War. He had also, evidently displaying that South Africa had taught some useful things, had also been moved to criticise cavalry with poor dismounted skills at the annual Aldershot manoeuvres in 1908, 1909 and 1910. The result of these limited reforms was that in 1914 British cavalry was able to act far more effectively dismounted than the cavalry of their French allies or German enemy, a fact greatly appreciated on the retreat from Mons. The fact remained, however, that in as late as 1913 as much as 80 percent of cavalry training time was devoted to training in shock tactics.<sup>55</sup>

The part-time cavalymen of Australia were no more willing to accept the strong anti-cavalry opinion coming out of the Boer War than were their regular brethren in Britain. New South Wales Lancers and the 1st Australian Horse found their public champion in 1901 when the journalist Frank Wilkinson wrote a small history of the two regiments. In it he attacked those who would seek to dispose of the *arme blanche* as operating on the 'supposition that the modern tendency is to extravagantly magnify the virtues of the new and experimental to the detriment of most things that have stood the test of time'.<sup>56</sup> Like those of a similar bent in Britain he also sought to minimise the lessons learnt in South Africa and attacked what he saw as the:

[U]nsound conclusion that because cavalry—*qua* cavalry—have not been a pronounced success in this campaign, therefore the days of cavalry are numbered ... as though one could transplant the kopjes of South Africa to all future battlefields.<sup>57</sup>

He then made a plea that the cavalry in Australia, especially the established units in New South Wales, should be maintained in the Australian military organisation. Another pro-cavalry voice was also heard from across the border when the Melbourne Cavalry, a small cavalry troop that had been established in 1899 against the wishes of the then colonial commandant, Charles Holled Smith, went public and told the local papers that they did not want to give up their status as volunteer cavalymen.<sup>58</sup> Their refrain, like that of not a few pre-federation units, was that they were being bullied by the new General Officer Commanding of the Australian Military Forces and that they should be able to take their place in the new Australian Army on their old terms.

The man they felt they were being bullied by was the seemingly omnipresent Edward Hutton, who had recently returned to Australia to command and organise the Australian Army. When it came to the organisation of a mounted branch for Australia there was never going to be much doubt about which way this long standing proponent of mounted infantry and mounted rifles was going to go. In 1902 he produced yet another manual for Australian mounted troops and in it his first words were:

Important as dismounted fire action of mounted troops has always been held to be, the recent improvement in fire-arms, and above all the introduction of smokeless powder, has given the fire action of mounted men a power which, in future, must materially modify, if it does not revolutionise, the tactics of the field of battle and the strategical combinations of a campaign.<sup>59</sup>

When the Minister of Defence informed Hutton that for reasons of economy and efficiency it would be best to establish just one form of mounted arm in Australia, Hutton created the mounted rifle Light Horse regiments. These units were to train to carry out all the tasks of cavalry short of the charge with a bladed weapon, that is they were to fight on foot in both offensive and defensive operations, conduct reconnaissance and screening duties, and afford protection to all bodies of troops, both on the march and at the halt.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore they were to be prepared to conduct long range strategic operations aimed at attacking the enemy's lines of communications or isolated garrisons.<sup>61</sup> Fire tactics were to be the accepted norm and traditional cavalry now had no place in the schemes of Australian defence. The cavalry units

of the pre-federation era were converted to Light Horse in the first years of the twentieth century and after the initial resistance the only serious discussion about the *arme blanche* in Australia before the First World War was about whether the Light Horse should be issued with bayonets or not.<sup>62</sup>

The establishment of a national mounted rifle organisation such as this was in line with what was being done at this time elsewhere around the empire with citizen based, partially paid, mounted units. In Britain the yeomanry, having resisted for so long, traded their swords in for rifles and the mounted troops of New Zealand and Canada too underwent a thorough conversion to mounted rifles.<sup>63</sup> Partly this was simply a reflection of the long standing idea that it was easier to train citizen mounted soldiers as mounted riflemen than traditional cavalry, but it would be wise not to underestimate the role of Hutton, and those like-minded, in the development of the mounted troops of Australia in particular, and the empire in general.

The mounted warfare manual that Hutton wrote for Australia in 1902 was the theorising of George Denison turned into doctrine. The regiments of the Australian Light Horse, like their comrades around the empire, were the product of 40 years of doctrinal debate about the role and place of mounted troops on the modern battlefield. The debate had been a long one but the mounted troops of Britain's Dominions were, in the years between the Boer War and the First World War, training and developing in such a way that they were in fact preparing for what the next war would demand of them, the ability to fight as mounted riflemen. The importance of the Boer War for the citizen mounted soldiers of the British Empire, and for Australia in particular, was that it validated the generally established faith in mounted rifle theory and brought about a significant degree of uniformity in its organisation and training. The regular cavalry of the British Army made a far more ambiguous response to the lessons of the Boer War and, despite their making a number of significant reforms, the dominant voice there was that of the conservatives. When, in 1914, British cavalry was forced by the conditions of battle to get off their horses and fight dismounted, the limited number of fire oriented reforms that had been allowed proved their great worth. Ironically, this put British cavalry in the position of being proving what its key defenders had been trying to deny for well over a decade.

## Endnotes

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