2014

Acrid Smoke and Horses' Breath: The Adaptability of the British Cavalry

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ACRID SMOKE AND HORSES’ BREATH:
THE ADAPTABILITY OF THE BRITISH CAVALRY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

By

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B.A., Ohio State University, 2004

2014
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The purpose of this thesis is to re-examine the nineteenth century British cavalry as an organization, one which has generally been characterized as deeply conservative and resistant to change in organization, operations and tactics. While the charge of conservatism is true in terms of the command structure of the British cavalry, this research demonstrates that the British cavalry of the nineteenth century typically adapted itself to the conditions in which it found itself, adopting whatever methods, tactics and weapons best suited the campaigns in which it fought. Beginning with the Crimean War’s cavalry actions as a baseline for what was generally expected of nineteenth century cavalry in the British Army, the thesis then moves on to demonstrate that in other circumstances the cavalry would neither follow such strict and stringent rules of engagement nor rely on the massed charge as the best or only method of engaging the enemy. Moving chronologically through several campaigns in which cavalry figured prominently, including the Indian Mutiny, Anglo-Zulu War, the war in the Sudan and the Anglo-Boer War, this thesis points out the many and varied ways in which the British cavalry adapted itself to different climates, opponents and tactics around the globe, and makes clear that the British cavalry was capable of a great deal of flexibility and resourcefulness. Thus, institutional intransigence was offset by operational flexibility in the actual theaters of battle, with official doctrine often being changed in the wake of a successful campaign or battle.
# Table of Contents

- **Introduction**..................................................................................1

- **Chapter 1: The Crimean War**.......................................................11
  
  - Map 1: Regional Map for the Crimean War..............................13
  
  - Map 2: The Battle of Balaclava .................................................19
  
  - Map 3: The Charge of the Light Brigade.................................28

- **Chapter 2: The Indian Mutiny**..................................................44
  
  - Map 4: India 1835-1858............................................................45
  
  - Map 5: Indian States during the Revolt of 1857.....................48

- **Chapter 3: The Anglo-Zulu War**.................................................68
  
  - Map 6: Battle of Isandlwana.....................................................73
  
  - Diagram: Buller’s Forces at Ulundi.........................................77

- **Chapter 4: The Gordon Relief Mission in the Sudan**
  
  1884-85 ..................................................................................86
  
  - Map 7: March of Desert Column...........................................96
  
  - Map 8: Battle of Abu Klea.........................................................98

- **Chapter 5: The Anglo-Boer War**..............................................103
  
  - Map 9: South Africa 1899- 1910..........................................116

- **Conclusion**................................................................................136

- **Bibliography**...........................................................................149-158
List of Figures

Figure One: Map 1: Regional Map for the Crimean War.................................13

Figure Two: Map 2: The Battle of Balaclava ..........................................19

Figure Three: Map 3: The Charge of the Light Brigade.........................28

Figure Four: Map 4: India 1835-1858..................................................45

Figure Five: Map 5: Indian States during the Revolt of 1857.............48

Figure Six: Map 6: Battle of Isandlwana.............................................73

Figure Seven: Diagram of Buller’s Forces at Ulundi..............................77

Figure Eight: Map 7: March of Desert Column..................................96

Figure Nine: Map 8: Battle of Abu Klea.............................................98

Figure Nine: Map 9: South Africa 1899-1910....................................116
Introduction

The British cavalry of the nineteenth century has, as an organization, been painted as a deeply conservative branch of the army which was unwilling to change or adapt its ways in the face of new weapons and methods of war. Such broad generalizations fail, however, to capture the truth of the British cavalry’s accomplishments and achievements, and certainly they overlook the adaptability the cavalry frequently showed in the many and varied theaters of operations in which it was asked to perform its duties.

The British cavalry demonstrated time and again that it could, when called upon, adapt itself to a variety of environments and conditions, from the excessive heat, humidity and monsoons of India to the arid plains and mountainous reaches of South Africa. In the deserts of the Sudan, it left its horses and lances behind and adopted camels and the carbine as its primary mounts and weapons, and the British cavalry made far greater use of mounted infantry and irregular cavalry, two very similar creatures in practice though raised differently, than any other nation during the Victorian Age.

The assertion that it was unchanging and hopelessly conservative also ignores the ongoing attempts to refine the weapons and equipment of the cavalry soldier, as well as the search for the correct and most effective training techniques to build strong and useful cavalry troopers. These efforts can be found in the writings of the officers and men, as well as in the various training manuals and books authored by cavalry officers seeking the best ways and means of improving the cavalry and making it the best it could be. Frequently hampered in its efforts by Parliament’s attempts to keep military expenditures low and the dual needs of preparing for a ground war on continental Europe and policing a rather vast and ever growing empire, the cavalry still managed to improve in small ways its equipment and to experiment with its training.
It is perhaps in these dueling needs, those of empire and home defense, that the problem arises. Those most focused on defense of Britain herself, and preoccupied with the idea of a war on the mainland against another Napoleonic-style warlord, tended to be the conservative voices. The army, in all its branches, had to be capable of fighting a well-organized and professional army built along Napoleonic lines. It resisted major changes, because the armies of the Continent had not adopted such changes, the conventional thinking apparently being that experimentation might well lead to a disaster, since using untried methods against well-organized and well-trained professional armies could only lead to disaster. Better to face an enemy on their own terms and with an army similarly organized, so that superior leadership and discipline would win the day.

Continental methods, however, proved to be less than satisfactory in maintaining an empire where native fighters could not or would not, for the most part, employ Continental methods of fighting. Despite assertions that, in the maintenance of the Empire, “The cavalry had a small share of the work, since so much of it was done in dense jungles and waterless deserts or on bare mountain sides,”¹ the cavalry was constantly at work subduing uprisings and battling against the erosion of Britain’s vast holdings. In these far-flung corners of the empire, junior officers frequently had to adapt methods to fit the situation and employ irregular methods of fighting unconventional enemies. Here, use of irregular cavalry, fire-action as opposed to the charge home with lance and saber, and open order instead of the knee-to-knee charge often proved effective.

Many of the junior officers whose improvisations and adaptations proved effective managed to rise higher in the cavalry or overall military establishment, bringing their ideas with them. This

second school of thought was more progressive and willing to embrace new methods and tools of war. More well-versed in the ways of modern warfare than those who served in the highest positions of command at home, they began to make systemic and lasting changes in the cavalry, belying the suggestion that, “the British cavalry…took no account of the changes which the passing years and the experience of far distant campaigns were imposing on cavalry tactics.”

In the years prior to World War I, a very vigorous and frequently heated debate was underway between the voices which advocated following the Continental approach, which appeared to be validated by the events of the Franco-Prussian War, and the colonial approach, which seemed to be validated by the events of the American Civil War and the numerous small wars and actions in which Britain had been involved throughout Queen Victoria’s reign. Each side managed to make legitimate and defensible points, and in hindsight it is easy to see that the advocates of fire-action and dismounted combat were right, and those who advocated the horse-mounted knee-to-knee charge of the Napoleonic and Crimean Wars were disastrously wrong in their estimation of how future wars would be fought, but one must be careful of hindsight. Much remained unknown and unclear to the military thinkers of the day. As with most organizations, military complexes are always conservative and slow to change, in part because of cost, in part because the task of re-training and re-equipping an entire army, or even an entire branch of an army, is a daunting task not to be taken lightly, and of course because no one can see the future and what shape its wars will take. Compounding these issues for Britain was its vast empire and the varied needs of policing and protecting it. If the cavalry was conservative, then it was not necessarily more-so than the rest of the British Army in the Victorian Age.

2 Ibid., 189.
To dispel the image of a deeply conservative and immovable monolith, one must examine the British cavalry in action. Did it adapt itself to the varied situations in which it found itself, or did it fail to do so? The answer, generally speaking, is that it adapted well enough. Officers and individuals, often retired or former officers, raised irregular cavalry forces, and serving officers adopted the tactics and methods of such irregular forces as they needed to, which is perhaps most ably demonstrated during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. As mentioned previously, in the Sudan in the 1880s the cavalry formed a volunteer, camel-mounted force and used dismounted fire-action in place of mounted charges to engage its enemies. In South Africa it would discard its inferior carbines along with its lances and even sabers from time to time and would fight more-or-less as mounted infantry. While the cavalry organization as a whole may not have always been quick to adapt, the officers in the field became adept at it, and they began the process of opening up the entire organization to lasting changes and improvements, a process that would continue until the replacement of horses with armored fighting vehicles and tanks on the eve of World War II.

It is with these innovations and adaptations which we will concern ourselves. One or two instances do not by themselves mean much, but a pattern of adaptation and improvisation can be observed over the course of the biggest of Britain’s so-called “little wars.” By observing the cavalry in these conflicts, we can see this pattern in context, as a response to the pressures of colonial operations and the needs of each situation versus training for primarily Continental service against professional cavalry of its own type and unguarded but well-organized infantry. The officers involved displayed a flexibility of mind not commonly attributed to cavalry officers who were much maligned for their inflexibility in their day and since. By observing their operations, and in some cases their specific decisions and actions, we can reveal a more mentally active and adaptive group of men willing to take risks and develop new ways of dealing with old
problems and new. This is, almost by definition, the opposite of conservative thought and action. To serve as a baseline, however, it might be best to observe cavalry operations in the Crimean War of 1856, in which traditional cavalry and its techniques would be on full display on the British and French side, and whose cavalry actions, particularly the now-infamous Charge of the Light Brigade, are well known and exemplary of what was expected from the British cavalry.

It is important to remember that the British cavalry did not come into existence just prior to the Crimean War, however. Britain already had a long history of cavalry and indeed her cavalry took on an importance which was matched by few other nations in the nineteenth century. In part this was because of its far-reaching empire and the resultant needs of policing and administering it, and in part it seems to be an outgrowth of the many needs which cavalry seemed able to fill. At various times British cavalry would be deployed to the furthest reaches of the empire, to the Continent for combat, or at home to defend the coast as a mobile force and even to help quell riots among the civilian populace.

While some authors attribute the beginnings of Britain’s cavalry to the days of mounted knights, this is at best a romantic and mistaken attribution. Knights were, of course, individual warriors who may have ridden into battle together but fought largely as individuals. They never trained to fight as a unit and rarely attempted to do so.

It is more correct to say that Britain’s cavalry traditions began with Cromwell’s Ironsides during the English Civil War in the seventeenth century. These were armed very much as later nineteenth century heavy cavalry, although the quality of its weapons was less advanced and its firearms were obviously less technologically developed. Other types of cavalry were present on the battlefields of the seventeenth century, including a lighter type often armed with a brace of pistols. These engaged in the *caracole*, an action in which the riders would approach an enemy
formation, fire their weapons at the enemy, and then either charge or peel away to reform and reload in order to repeat the action if so ordered. The *caracole* was rather quickly abandoned for other techniques, such as artillery use to soften the formations of the enemy in preparation for the charge of the cavalry, largely because the *caracole* did not accomplish its function. Ultimately, the British decided on the heavier Swedish type of cavalry with less emphasis on firepower and more on the melee. Swords and ultimately lances became the primary weapon of British heavy cavalry, and lighter types of cavalry were developed for scouting and reconnaissance duties.

During the eighteenth century European cavalry grew in size and complexity, being separated into types of cavalry, heavy cavalry which in essence was larger men on very large mounts, light cavalry which was average-sized men on smaller mounts. Heavy cavalry was typically reserved for the charge while light cavalry was also used for scouting and screening the army on the march, as well as picket duty and pursuing a broken enemy on the field of battle. Further designations were experimented with, with lancers being armed primarily with the lance, dragoons functioning as mounted riflemen, hussars being armed primarily with the saber, and all carrying a carbine, although this was considered a backup weapon for all but the dragoons. Throughout the eighteenth century the British cavalry spread across the empire and was active everywhere, especially in India and during the American Revolution in the North America. It had followed the general cavalry trends of the day, particularly those of the Prussians, and so was organized and classified as previously described.

By the nineteenth century British cavalry had been deployed to all parts of the empire and were regularly sent into battle on the Continent or anywhere else that British forces saw combat. Early in the nineteenth century British cavalry went into action against Napoleon’s forces in Spain and Belgium, and while it earned a reputation for being overzealous and often
uncontrollable, it was also instrumental in defeating Napoleon’s armies and restoring order to the Continent.

It was also during the early part of the nineteenth century that the differences in cavalry types began to diminish. Dragoons, hussars, and lancers all began to place the emphasis on the charge and the *arme blanche*, or steel weapon, rather than fire action. More damaging to its performance, the cavalry began training for the charge and use of the melee weapon and little else, so that its ability to effectively use firearms, perform scouting duties, screen the army and perform as pickets eroded considerably. Light cavalry began to focus on the charge as its primary objective not just to scatter a broken enemy but as its primary role in the offense to break the enemy, which traditionally was the role of the heavy cavalry. Training manuals reflected this change in focus as did field exercises, largely in response to the influence of works such as Baron de Jomini’s *The Art of War* and Lieutenant Colonel North Ludlow Beamish’s *On the Uses and Application of Cavalry in War, From the Text of Bismark, With Practical Examples from Ancient and Modern History*, as well as the writings of Frederick the Great and Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz. One can see this emphasis taking hold in the discourses of various officers about whether to retain the lance as a weapon, the best design for the trooper’s saber, and the best regimen to train troopers to use these weapons in battle; the carbine is rarely mentioned during the early part of the century, and thereafter it is often mentioned as inferior although the lack of action to improve the weapon is itself telling in regards to the cavalry’s emphasis on tactics and weaponry.

During preparations for the Crimean War the cavalry was chosen to be among the first forces deployed to the war zone. The army itself, and by extension the cavalry, had not been engaged in a major war since the wars against Napoleon and carried many deficiencies which would only
become apparent in the field, when it was too late to easily correct them. For the cavalry the lack of remounts and transport for fodder and supplies would be paramount, but the light cavalry would also display poor scouting and screening skills along with a lack of initiative which can only be attributed to poor leadership and inexperience. Its training had failed to drill it in proper light cavalry duties and to instill a sense of flexibility and independence which was key to cavalry performance. The only cavalry to perform with dash and initiative would be the heavy cavalry whose duties and training had not changed and whose sole duty was to hit the enemy with weight of horse and man and drive him from the field.

This was the state of Britain’s cavalry as the Crimean War began, at least in Europe. In India matters would be quite different, but India was an unusual case and the environment was conducive to what is often called the “cavalry spirit,” the ability to adapt and respond to changes in the conditions of battle matched to a spirit of dash and esprit de corps. It is here that we join the cavalry and observe its failings and afterwards its ability to learn, adapt and respond to the changes in warfare and the conditions in which it was asked to fight into the early twentieth century. From its low point in the Crimean War the cavalry would recover and demonstrate an ability to conform itself to the various types of opponents and climates in which it served and as a result, it contributed to British victory time and time again. This adaptive quality was largely dependent upon leadership among the cavalry, although at times the troopers in the regiments demonstrated a similar quality, as the all-volunteer Camel Corps would demonstrate during the Gordon Relief Expedition to the Sudan. While never perfect and sometimes prone to recklessness and overconfidence, the cavalry shows a marked improvement over the course of the late nineteenth century, both from official reforms and its own ability to adapt to the conditions of the conflicts in which it found itself.
This adaptive ability was important for the survival of the cavalry on more than one occasion, but perhaps more salient is what this tells us about the British cavalry and the British Army more generally. Unlike most other European powers, the British had not only to defend their home country but to police, defend and patrol a vast empire which covered nearly every type of climate and geography on earth. The adaptation of the cavalry to fit these unique circumstances is a reflection of the needs of an imperial army, and points out the dichotomy at the heart of the British Army. Trained and organized for war against similarly armed and organized Continental armies across Europe, the British Army also had to find effective ways to engage and suppress natives in revolt, other European settlers fighting in unconventional ways, and to engage and conquer natives in lands to which Britain laid claim.

The British Cavalry, and indeed the British Army in general can thus tell us much about what it takes to build and maintain such a vast empire, especially when force of arms must be employed. Yet it also demonstrates some of the changes taking place within nineteenth century Britain herself, most notably the growing sense that people must act on their own responsibility and initiative. These feelings and undercurrents would find expression in organization such as the Boy Scouts, who of course embodied the ability of the individual to act on his own initiative, relying on himself and his own abilities, while still being a part of a larger whole. It is no accident that the Boy Scouts was formed by a former British officer, Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Baden-Powell, who had seen first-hand the need to cultivate these qualities in future leaders and military officers during the a number of conflicts.

Lastly, these improvisations and adaptations allow for an insider’s view of the greater debate taking place both within the cavalry and the army as a whole about the need for reforms and changes in approach to reflect the special nature of the British Army as not simply a Continental
army but an imperial one, with far-flung responsibilities and needs as varied as the conditions under which it would fight around the world.
Chapter 1: The Crimean War

At the time of the Crimean War (1853-1856) the British Army had not been involved in a Continental conflict since the Napoleonic Wars roughly forty years earlier. In that time the training of the British Army, and of course the cavalry, had changed very little. Because of this, the British cavalry actions in the Crimean War provide an excellent baseline for examining the British cavalry. In each of these actions, the cavalry would function as it was trained and as its doctrine demanded. It would perform as it was designed, one Continental army against a rival Continental army. Because of this, it was not necessary to make any significant improvisations or adaptations, and we can see clearly how the cavalry was intended to function as well as seeing the frequent adherence to orders without the exercise of personal initiative, even in the face of changing battlefield conditions and what must have appeared to be deeply flawed commands.

When the British and French armies deployed to the Turkish theater of war, the campaign looked to be much like any other. Few would have predicted that the Charge of the Light Brigade on 25 October 1854 would kill nearly half of the brigade and eliminate them as a factor in the future of the campaign. Indeed, for much of the conflict the cavalry, both heavy and light, sat on the sidelines and waited for its chance to enter the fray. At Alma, it watched the enemy fight and then slip away without ever being committed, and once the war devolved into an extended siege it became effectively inactive, although after the charge the Light Brigade was never of sufficient strength to have any significant effect on subsequent events in any case. The Charge of the Light Brigade, however storied and well-known, was not the only charge that day by the British cavalry forces; the heavy cavalry had made a far more successful and rewarding charge a short time before against the Russian cavalry, driving them from the field and bringing acclaim to the
leader of the heavy cavalry, Major-General Sir James Yorke Scarlett. Each of these cavalry actions, in its own way, exemplifies the methods of the British cavalry as seen by proponents of the cavalry arm. It formed in good order, it maintained good order until the moment of contact with the enemy, it performed a “knee-to-knee”\(^3\) charge against a determined foe, and each achieved its objective in some manner, although this would be disastrous for the light cavalry in losses of both horses and manpower. Because these charges were almost formulaic in their execution, or at least as much so as conditions on the ground allowed, they serve as an excellent baseline for comparison with other cavalry operations during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Before we turn to the cavalry actions at Balaclava, though, some background is in order.

Some have referred to the Crimean War as an unnecessary and senseless conflict, but it must be remembered that it was merely a single chapter in the Great Game, “the nineteenth-century contest for the mastery of Asia…[in which] some Victorians saw at stake nothing less than global supremacy.”\(^4\) It is easy to criticize imperial thinking and design from our perch in the future, but within the mindset of Victorian Britain, and much of Europe and Asia as well, the Great Game was an imperative and to lose it or fall behind would have been tantamount to surrendering their national prerogatives to another, likely hostile, power. Curiously the Crimean War was Great Britain’s only serious military confrontation with a major power during the

\(^3\) Troops in “good order” are considered to still be under the control of their officers and responsive to orders. After an attack, troops in good order reform as trained on their own or in response to bugle and/or flag signals. Cavalry using “knee-to-knee” tactics are in closed order, ideally touching knees but not pressing against one another or jostling other troopers. Such close order was considered necessary in order to take advantage of the mass of the horses grouped together and to ensure that the troopers drove home the attack together, increasing their physical impact. Since the “shock value” of the horses was generally viewed as residing in their mass and momentum, augmented by the lances or sabers of the troopers, closed order “knee-to-knee” charges were the standard training model for all types of British cavalry.

Victorian Age (1837-1901), most of her military actions being confrontations with various indigenous inhabitants of her colonies or with other colonists, such as the Boer War against Dutch settlers in South Africa. Because of this, it would also be the only time when the British Cavalry engaged other Continental cavalry using training-manual methods.

The Crimean War itself was fueled by a desire to curb Russian power and to prevent her from expanding her influence into the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea on the British and French side, and a desire for such access and perhaps naval bases in the region.

Figure 1

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5 [www.sheltonstate.edu](http://www.sheltonstate.edu)
Much as in the Cold War (1947-1991) nearly a hundred years later, the western powers saw such expansion of the Russian sphere as a danger to their own security. Russian movements in the area ultimately led to a war with Turkey, and this war allowed France and Britain (along with several lesser allies) the pretext they needed to mobilize their troops and send them to the region. Popular support for the war was high in Britain, at least initially, and the troops were sent to the area around Gallipoli and later closer to Varna, but they saw no action at first, languishing without orders or purpose. Ultimately the decision was made to take Sevastopol, a Russian port city on the Black Sea located on the western edge of the Crimean Peninsula, but organization and the chain of command between the armies was murky at best, and so as they went into battle against Russia, “The Crimean allies had no clear chain of command, but they did have a purpose: to take Sevastopol.”

The allied, and particularly the British, experience in the Crimea would be marked by inadequate supply, poor leadership at almost every level, a lack of logistical planning of any value prior to deploying troops, chronic shortages of transport, human suffering not just from combat but from inadequate food supplies and insufficient cold-weather clothing, which led to a significant number of deaths from exposure, and that bane of every army in the field during the Victorian Age: disease. Cholera and dysentery would ravage the British and later the French, as well as the Russians, and other diseases and sicknesses would also arise to bring misery to the men huddled in their trenches around Sevastopol or in their meager tents and shelters behind the lines. This would burden the cavalry no less than the other arms of the field army, although it had the added burdens of needing to find both sufficient fodder for the horses and suitable mounts to replace those lost to combat, accident, sickness, or maltreatment. The issue of horse wastage was

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nothing new to the British Cavalry, but the problem in the Crimea was chronic for a time and would reach levels only again seen during the Boer War near the end of the nineteenth century. While all the armies engaged in the conflict would suffer from these issues to a degree, the British seemed particularly unprepared for the hardships of campaign and suffered from them disproportionately.

In spite of the many obstacles faced by the allied armies, more than a few self-imposed through ignorance or negligence, the war ground on. The initial landings by the allies went as smoothly as could be expected, although some men and at least one ship were lost to poor weather, and the allied forces began to move inland and to the north, seeking to approach Sevastopol from its eastern side, which Lord Raglan believed would be less well defended.

The cavalry played very little role in the war initially, for which it drew some criticism from the rest of the army. It screened the army as it marched, although it rarely engaged in any real combat beyond the exchange of a few carbine shots, with one trooper of the 13th Light Dragoons remarking, “They hit none of us, a few of theirs got hit, which proved that bad as our carbines were, theirs were worse.” Lord Lucan decided, correctly as it turned out, that pursuit of the enemy on this occasion was dangerous and would leave the flank of the army unprotected. Although he acted properly, he earned the name Lord Look-on from his own men and earned the cavalry arm criticism for being idle when it should have taken aggressive action. Aside from this brief interlude just prior to the Battle of Alma (20 September 1854) the cavalry saw very little action and were instead, “kept busy screening the army’s advance, scouting and protecting the flanks – this was bread-and-butter cavalry work, though most officers and not a few of the men

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7 Julian Spilsbury, *The Thin Red Line: An Eyewitness History of the Crimean War* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2005), 44. Spilsbury quotes the trooper from his journal, which I do not have access to since my research was limited to sources accessible here in the U.S.
longed for that ultimate moment of a cavalryman’s life, the charge.” Though they did not know it, many would indeed receive their chance to charge the enemy, and for the Light Brigade under Lord Cardigan it would earn an immortal place in the history of warfare.

At Alma the British cavalry would sit its horses and look on as the battle raged without it. Unfavorable terrain and lack of opportunity would side-line it throughout, much to its mounting frustration. The cavalry continued its scouting duties, although its performance was indifferent at best, at one point on the approach to Balaclava entirely missing the enemy column to its front and nearly allowing the British commander-in-chief in the Crimea, Lord FitzRoy James Henry Sommerset, Baron Raglan, to blunder directly into the rear-guard troops of the Russian column with no knowledge of their presence. Chance saved Lord Raglan from embarrassment or disaster, but the criticism of idleness, which had already begun to circulate regarding the cavalry arm after its earlier lack of action, deepened after this incident. The cavalry was in a position of having something to prove to the army as a whole as well as to themselves, and it would take any chance to demonstrate its abilities. It would find its chance at Balaclava, the last real battle in the Crimea which would take place in the open before matters settled into static siege warfare and thus the last real opportunity for the cavalry to prove its worth in arms.

* * *

The Battle of Balaclava (25 October 1854) would witness the only significant cavalry actions during the whole of the Crimean War, and would be the only time British cavalry faced organized cavalry forces from another major power’s armed forces. In spite of largely inept

8 Ibid., 114.
leadership and an indifferent record so far in the conflict, the British Cavalry would rise to the occasion and perform the closest thing to textbook cavalry operations which conditions would allow.

British training manuals for the period stress the importance of the charge above all other cavalry operations, and training emphasized the use of saber and lance at the expense of marksmanship. The troops were drilled in maneuvering in what was called the “closed formation,” and the charge in closed formation was often referred to as the “knee-to-knee” charge. In his introduction to Louis Edward Nolan’s book, Jon Coulston states that, “The Napoleonic Wars were predictably very influential in forming and sustaining tactical doctrine for decades.” By most accounts this is largely true, although Captain Nolan himself wrote two influential books on the subject and advocated changes which would have greatly increased the performance of the British Cavalry as an institution. The British Army decided in part to maintain the lance in service because of its experiences in the Napoleonic Wars, and while some decried the use of the lance and the lance itself as archaic, a criticism echoed by some modern historians, the British adopted it in part because “The belief was that the lance was the most effective weapon in the charge against opposing cavalry, that it enabled horsemen to spear crouching or prone infantry, and that it gave cavalry the extra reach necessary to lean in and disrupt an infantry square.” In British service, the lance and saber were common to both the heavy and light cavalry, and the distinguishing characteristic between the two in the British Army was in fact a relatively simple and obvious one: heavy cavalry was essentially large men

9 Captain L.E. Nolan was present at Balaclava and would be the first casualty in the Light Brigade’s advance down the so-called Valley of Death.
11 Ibid., xviii.
on large horses and light cavalry was composed of smaller men on lighter horses. Each had once had separate functions, but, “in most European armies by mid-century the cavalry types were fulfilling the same close-order, heavy roles, in many cases to the detriment of the more mobile and flexible light mounted functions.”

Before this convergence of roles lighter types of cavalry had often functioned in a skirmishing role, as well as focusing on scouting enemy formations and positions, raiding enemy rear areas and chasing broken enemy formations in order to create a complete rout. Additionally, dragoons prior to the nineteenth century had functioned more as mounted infantry or irregular troops, riding to the point of contact and then dismounting to fight using their carbines. This role had been long abandoned by the time of the Crimean War and the Dragoons would ride into combat using sabers and knee-to-knee formations just like any other British cavalry formation.

This was the state of the British Cavalry as it prepared for combat at Balaclava on 25 October 1854. The British had taken up their position in and around Balaclava and assumed the defense of the right flank of the allied position but had too few troops to entirely cover their zone. The defenses erected by the British essentially formed two lines, the first a series of redoubts manned by their Ottoman-Turk allies. The second line was manned by British infantry in prepared positions, in this instance the Scottish 93rd Highland Regiment, backed by a few Turkish troops. The 93rd Highlanders would gain fame as the “thin Red Line” which withstood the Russian assault during the battle and allowed General Sir James Yorke Scarlett’s Heavy Brigade time to form up and make its charge, the first cavalry charge of the day by British forces. Seeing the relative weakness of the British position, Lieutenant-General Pavel Petrovich Liprandi, Chief of

\[12\] Ibid., xxi.
the 12th Infantry Division and Aide-de-camp to General Prince Menshikov, decided to go on the offensive and attack the British forces in front of him.

Liprandi initially attacked the redoubts held by the Turkish troops, who eventually gave way after fierce resistance. Having received no reinforcements they had virtually no choice, and fell back in some disarray to the British lines, where some were put back into the second line of defense, although these demoralized troops would have a very small effect on the later development of the battle.

![Battle of Balaclava Map](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Balaclava_(map_1).png)

**Figure 2**

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Once the Turks had fallen back General Liprandi sent in a portion of his cavalry against the British second line manned by the 93rd Scottish Highlanders. After a furious defense the Highlanders drove off the cavalry sent against them. These retreated back toward the Russian lines and across the Causeway Heights, where Russian infantry had taken up positions in and around the redoubts previously held by the Turkish troops.

It was between this attack and the second cavalry charge by the Russians that General Scarlett’s cavalry began to form up for a charge of its own against the advancing Russians. This was no small feat since the location of the battle forced the Heavy Brigade under Scarlett to form up in difficult terrain. This terrain was partly in the Light Brigade’s camp, and also included some rough terrain which caused the separate units in the brigade to begin with less-than-ideal breaks in its formations. Compounding these difficulties was the fact that Scarlett was forced to deploy from a somewhat strung-out marching column. Still, General Scarlett patiently but quickly formed his troopers up as best he could along as much frontage as he was able, although “there was no time to form a proper line.”

It is to Scarlett’s credit that he responded on his own initiative, deciding to “charge, uphill, straight into the hostile column; to do so at once with the three regiments at hand, and to lead the charge himself.” This was even more impressive, perhaps, because General Scarlett had never been in action before but managed to demonstrate some of the best qualities of a cavalry officer, qualities frequently found lacking in his fellow cavalry commanders on the field that day, Lords Cardigan, in charge of the Light Brigade, and Lucan, the overall cavalry commander. As one author puts it, General Scarlett, “was as destitute of military experience as Lord Lucan or Lord

15 Ibid., 209.
Cardigan. He had, however, two qualities which his colleagues conspicuously lacked: he possessed modesty and good sense.\textsuperscript{16}

Scarlett’s initial deployments were thus: the first squadron of the Inniskillings was to the far right; Scarlett had the second squadron of the Inniskillings as well as two squadrons of the Scotts Greys to the left of the first squadron; the 5\textsuperscript{th} Dragoon Guards\textsuperscript{17} were not in a position to prolong Scarlett’s line and formed separately to the left. As Scarlett was seeing to his dispositions, Lord Lucan rode up and appears to have begun issuing the same orders which Scarlett had already given as well as ordering his divisional trumpeter to sound, which Scarlett and his men ignored.\textsuperscript{18} By all accounts, Scarlett patiently sat his saddle and watched the oncoming Russian cavalry unperturbed as “behind him the troop officers dressed and re-dressed the line with as little sign of haste as if they had been on parade.”\textsuperscript{19} Once satisfied that all was as prepared as it could be, Scarlett finally had his trumpeter sound the charge. There is some disagreement about what occurred next. According to Woodham-Smith, Scarlett and his men advanced and then charged, picking their way through the camp and vineyard in which they had deployed before breaking into a gallop, with Scarlett and his staff riding about fifty yards ahead of the first line. The initial advance is described as measured, as would be normal in a charge, especially one in unfavorable terrain. Moyse-Bartlett, however, suggests that an anxious Scarlett “attempted to charge from a standstill” at a distance of roughly 400 yards.\textsuperscript{20} This would correspond to the “direct gallop


\textsuperscript{17} Spilsbury identifies the 5\textsuperscript{th} Dragoon Guards in this action, although Moyse-Bartlett identifies them as the 4\textsuperscript{th} Dragoon Guards. As Spilsbury’s is the more recent work, I have used his identification here.

\textsuperscript{18} There are differing accounts of this incident, but all agree that Lucan repeated Scarlett’s orders and generally interfered as Scarlett was deploying his troops. They all agree that Scarlett generally ignored Lord Lucan’s superfluous interference while discharging his duties quite professionally.

\textsuperscript{19} Woodham-Smith, 222.

\textsuperscript{20} Moyse-Bartlett, 210.
depart” which “demands an extraordinarily high degree of collection.”

Expecting his troops to follow, Scarlett charged off with his staff before his troopers were able to comply with the order to charge thus opening a gap of roughly fifty yards between him and his first line. In the event, the general and his staff would make contact with the Russian cavalry first, followed a few seconds later by the first line.

Some credence must be given to the suggestion that Scarlett acted in relative haste. Despite his measured patience prior to the charge, the Russian cavalry was dangerously close to his position and it had done something extraordinary and inexplicable. It had halted, apparently to receive the British charge. To this end, it had thrown out detachments to either side, in theory to wrap around and cut off the greatly outnumbered British troopers once they charged into the mass of the Russian cavalry. According to Woodham-Smith, “After the war Russian officers said that the extraordinary unhurried deliberation displayed in the movements of the tiny British force had done much to shake the Russian morale.”

This might account for such an unusual action as standing with cavalry to receive a charge, but even the most inexperienced of Russian officers must have known that cavalry is more effective against a charge while in motion, suffering less shock while delivering some of its own. This should have been especially clear to the Russians at Balaclava, since they also were facing downhill and thus would have had the extra impetus to possibly negate the force of the British charge, which of course began in difficult terrain and was of necessity uphill. Perhaps most damning for the Russians was the numerical superiority they possessed, roughly two-thousand Russian troopers to the British five hundred. While these troopers were qualitatively not the equal of the more professional British troopers, their sheer mass would likely have mitigated this to some degree. With all of the advantages on their side,

21 Ibid., 210.
22 Woodham-Smith, 223.
the Russians chose to hand over the initiative to the British, and Scarlett may well have felt the urgent need to act before the Russians changed their minds and came to their senses.

Whether motivated from inexperience or haste, and with or without a complete understanding of the difficulty his troopers were having clearing the difficult ground they had formed up in, Scarlett charged ahead of his men with his staff. His first line followed as quickly as possible while the second line struggled to clear the broken terrain and join the charge. The cavalry advanced in an extended line, knee-to-knee with small gaps between the squadrons, sabers and lances held extended and parallel to the ground as was standard practice. Scarlett and his staff quickly disappeared into the melee and were lost to the sight of those looking on. The first line crashed into the Russian line seconds later, sabers flashing and men cheering. There was a smattering of Russian gunfire from carbines and pistols before the charge came in, but then all was the clashing of steel and the hurly-burly of hand-to-hand fighting.

As the first line crashed into the Russian line, the wings earlier thrown out by the Russians closed like swinging doors behind the British troopers, cutting them off briefly from withdrawing if they should need to do so. It was at this point that rough terrain created an advantage which no one had foreseen, creating a longer than normal spacing between the advancing British lines. Once the Russians closed their lines behind the British first line, this unusual spacing allowed the second British line to crash into the Russian rear, throwing them into disorder and catching them at a serious disadvantage. The melee lasted a brief time before the Russian line wavered and then broke, retreating back over the Causeway Heights and up the valley to where the Russian guns had been emplaced. Scarlet’s cavalry retired to the British lines in good order and began to reform, initially too disordered to pursue the retreating Russians.
It was at this point that the Light Brigade should have intervened and pursued the Russian cavalry, turning a victory into a rout and possibly destroying Russian cohesion, removing their cavalry from the battle for the remainder of the day. The Light Brigade’s commander, Lord Cardigan, refused to do this on the grounds that he had been ordered to hold his position and defend it, but not to leave it. It seems that for Cardigan, “to act on his own initiative never occurred to him.” By all accounts the Light Brigade was chafing to get into the fight, including Lord Cardigan who reportedly said, “These damned Heavies will have the laugh of us this day,” but he obstinately refused to engage the enemy without new orders which would countermand his old ones, and so the Russian cavalry managed a withdrawal and fell back behind the guns which the Light Brigade would later mistakenly charge.

While unorthodox in that it was uphill and apparently a charge from a standstill rather than the more typical walk-trot-gallop over even or downhill terrain, Scarlett’s charge was in many ways the epitome of the nineteenth century cavalry charge. British as well as French and Prussian training and training manuals stressed the close-order “knee-to-knee” charge as the culmination of a battle and the cavalry’s raison d’être, with far less emphasis given to supporting roles such as flank protection and scouting, or raids into an enemy’s rear area. Indeed, it appears that an officer speaking to Lord Raglan, the commander-in-chief of British forces in the Crimea,

23 Woodham-Smith, 225.
24 Ibid., 225.
25 A typical cavalry charge began at a walk. After closing the distance by perhaps one-third, a bugle call or other signal would be given to increase the pace to a trot. After covering another third of the distance, the final portion of the charge would be taken at a gallop. This was necessary for several reasons, the most important being the retention of control over the force making the charge and preserving the horses’ strength and endurance so they could hit the enemy at full speed at the end of the charge. Horses forced to gallop from the beginning over any distance would be exhausted by the time they reached the enemy and would not be able to retreat properly, let alone mount another charge if necessary. Further, losing control of the charge early on by using the gallop too early would result in the loss of the closed formation. This formation was considered necessary for maximum impact since the weight of the horses and their collective momentum were just as important as the initial impact of the cavalry trooper’s weapons, if not more so.
suggested that “he [Raglan] should supplement his cavalry by enlisting a corps of irregulars for patrolling and reconnaissance, in the same way that the Russians employed Cossacks.” The largest failings, if they can truly be called that under the conditions in which the charge was mounted, were the disorder in which the charge originated and the lack of the two squadrons of the 4th Dragoons Guards and the Royals who had not managed to move forward in time to join the charge. Since in the event the terrain and the delay it brought actually created a more advantageous outcome, and because the missing squadrons of heavy horse were not decisive as Russians broke under the squadrons which did manage to advance in the charge, these factors do not diminish and in some ways enhance the British action.

The second charge, better known than the first through Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and to a more modern audience through the Errol Flynn/ Basil Rathbone film of the same name and Iron Maiden song *The Trooper*, was both a perfect example of a traditional charge and perhaps the biggest piece of folly in the entire Crimean War. The first known casualty in the charge, Captain Louis Edward Nolan, was a thirty-five year old cavalry officer serving as an *aide de camp* for Lord Raglan, the British commander-in-chief, and Nolan had already published two books on cavalry and its reform as well as designing a new type of cavalry saddle. He has been blamed by some, most famously Lord Cardigan himself, for the tragedy of the Light Brigade’s debacle at Balaclava but he was known by most as a thoroughly professional soldier and officer who understood better than most how cavalry worked and what it took to make it successful on the battlefield.

The impetus for the charge came, as was proper, from Lord Raglan himself. Captain Nolan was acknowledged as possibly the best horseman in the army and certainly in Raglan’s retinue,

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26 Moyse-Bartlett, 163.
and was given the task of delivering the order to Lord Lucan. It was, in fact, the fourth order sent
to Lord Lucan by Lord Raglan, and both Raglan and his messenger Captain Nolan were
understandably frustrated and concerned over Lord Lucan’s immobility. The intent of the order
was that the Light Brigade should move onto the Causeway Heights and prevent the Russians
from taking away the guns that had earlier in the day been abandoned there by the Turks in their
retreat. Unfortunately the substance of the order was somewhat unclear, saying simply, “Lord
Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns.
Troop Horse Artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate. (Sgd.)
Airey.”

While historians do not always agree on the details, all accounts agree that upon delivering
the order to Lord Lucan, whom he detested, Captain Nolan waited impatiently while Lucan read
and re-read the order. When he demanded of Nolan in exasperation which guns he was to take
and what enemy he was to attack, Nolan waved his arm in the general direction of the North
Valley, at the end of which the Russian artillery was emplaced and reportedly saying “There is
your enemy, sir! There are your guns!” Behind that artillery was the reforming cavalry driven
off by the heavy cavalry shortly before. Some sources suggest that Nolan’s gesture was intended
to direct Lucan’s attention to the North Valley and the Russian guns, while others state that he
was merely gesturing toward the Russians in a general way, believing that Lucan would take the
orders he had been given, now four in all, and puzzle out exactly what he was expected to do
rather than sitting idle while the battle moved on around him. It did not help that Nolan was

27 Woodham-Smith, 231. Woodham’s quoting of this note comes from the original note written by Lord Raglan
himself and viewed by the author. I did not have access to the note and so must rely on Cecil Woodham-Smith’s
account.
28 Woodham-Smith quotes this, as do almost all accounts, although the wording is sometimes slightly different.
“There, sir! There is your enemy! There are the guns!” However it is presented, the essence is always the same. I
have chosen Woodham-Smith’s version largely out of preference and for consistency’s sake.
known to be hostile to Lucan and Cardigan, who he saw as incompetent and ineffective cavalry officers lacking the qualities necessary to lead successfully mounted troops in combat. For his part, Lucan was aware of Nolan’s contempt and returned it in full measure, believing Nolan to be jealous and disrespectful of his rank both socially and militarily.  

In the event, Lucan did not take the four messages together and decided that Raglan’s order, as transmitted through Captain Nolan, meant a suicidal advance and charge in the North Valley against the massed Russian guns and cavalry. He approached Lord Cardigan and delivered the order, whereupon Cardigan rather respectfully suggested that such an attack was folly. Lucan agreed with him, perhaps for the first and only time since the two men had known each other, but said that the order came from Lord Raglan and could not be countermanded. Lord Cardigan then saluted with his saber and rode off to deliver the orders to his troopers and form them up for the most well-known action of the war.

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29 Woodham-Smith and Moyse-Bartlett agree on this, as do a number of other sources.
The Light Brigade was not hindered, as the Heavies had been, with poor ground upon which to deploy, nor was there the urgency of an immediate threat as had been the case with the Russian cavalry bearing down upon the Heavy Brigade’s position. Because of this, Lord Cardigan was able to deploy his troopers as advantageously as possible. In his first line with intervals between of only a few yards were the 13th Light Dragoons on the far right, the 17th Lancers in the center of the line, and on the far left the 11th Hussars. The second line consisted of the 4th Dragoons on the left and the 8th Hussars, minus one troop detached as a guard for Lord

30 http://www.britishbattles.com/crimean-war/balaclava.htm
Raglan, on the right. Each regiment was formed in the closed, or “knee-to-knee” formation. These dispositions were changed slightly and inexplicably at the last moment by the direct intervention of Lord Lucan, who “ordered the 11th Hussars to fall back in support of the first line, so that there were now three lines, with the 13th Light Dragoons and the 17th Lancers leading…the 11th was Cardigan’s own regiment, of which he was inordinately proud, and the 11th was taken out of the first line, while the 17th Lancers, Lucan’s old regiment, remained.”31 The brigade was oriented to the west with a slight southerly cant, and Lord Cardigan placed himself at the head of the brigade “quite alone, about two lengths in front of his staff and five lengths in advance of his front line.”32 Captain Nolan decided to take part in the charge, approached his friend Captain Morris in the 17th Lancers, and asked and received permission to ride with them.

The North Valley was roughly one and one quarter miles long and not quite a mile wide33, which is not a particularly great distance on horseback under normal circumstances. The Light Brigade would be facing anything but normal circumstances, however, with Russians commanding the heights on either side of the valley with infantry and some artillery. At the end of the valley was a heavy emplacement of artillery backed by the cavalry which had already been driven off. Cardigan had his bugler sound the advance and as the brigade set off “a sudden silence fell over the battlefield: by chance for a moment the gun- and rifle-fire ceased, and the watchers on the heights felt the pause was sinister.”34 Many onlookers reported that the hush was

31 Woodham-Smith, 237-238.
32 Ibid., 238.
33 William Howard Russell, a correspondent covering the war, put the length of the valley at one and one half miles, but more modern accounts agree that the distance to cover was closer one and one quarter miles.
34 Ibid., 239.
so complete that the jangle of bits and other equipment on the mounted soldiers and the hoof-beats of the horses could clearly be heard.

The silence did not last. “The Brigade advanced with beautiful precision, Lord Cardigan riding alone at their head, a brilliant and gallant figure...He wore the uniform of the 11th Hussars.” The precision of the advance would be maintained even after “the hush came to an end: the Russian guns crashed out and great clouds of smoke rose at the end of the valley.” ³⁵ It had not advanced more than fifty yards according to the reports of survivors and onlookers before the firing began, and it would not end until the Light Brigade had managed to return to its own lines roughly twenty minutes later and much reduced in number.

Seeing the disaster about to unfold, the French cavalry commander, whose troopers were stationed on the left of the Light Brigade’s starting point, decided to make a charge against the Russian guns and infantry on the Fedioukine Heights on the Light Brigade’s left flank. This briefly took some of the pressure off of the brigade’s flank, but the French cavalry could only do so much and it was unwilling to commit to what must have appeared a suicidal action against an unreachable Russian position.

The French may not have been the only ones to realize what was about to happen and to take measures to head off disaster. Captain Nolan broke away from the 17th Lancers and raced ahead of even Lord Cardigan, who became incensed at what he thought was a terrible breach of etiquette and military discipline. It is not certain what Captain Nolan intended, although it is unlikely he wanted to simply dart ahead of Cardigan and steal glory for himself. Many historians believe Nolan was attempting to redirect the advance onto the intended target and away from a suicidal advance into the valley proper. He turned toward the advancing troops and began

³⁵ Ibid., 239.
waving his arms and pointing toward the Causeway Heights while shouting unintelligibly. Unfortunately for both Captain Nolan and the Light Brigade, he was hit by a jagged metal splinter from an exploding shell and, emitting an unearthly screaming howl, rode back through the advancing troopers apparently quite out of control of his horse. He fell dead just behind the advancing troops near the entrance to the valley.

The advance itself was tense but disciplined, initially resembling a parade ground maneuver rather than an advance into combat. The brigade’s pace was steady, and by most accounts it held to its formations remarkably well despite what must have been an overwhelming urge to pass through the murderous fire coming from three sides and come to grips with the enemy it believed it had been ordered to attack. A squadron of the 17th Lancers seems to have quickened its pace, prompting Cardigan to react by “lowering his sword and laying it across Captain White’s breast, he told him sharply not to ride level with his commanding officer and not to force the pace.”

Indeed, “Lord Cardigan tightly restrained the pace of the Light Brigade: the line was to advance with parade-ground perfection,” and this seems to have been the case until the brigade had reached the half-way point to the Russian guns. By then, the withering fire, heavy casualties and sheer adrenaline had taken their toll: the leading elements finally broke into a gallop in a mad race to get to the guns and out of the cauldron of fire in the valley. This advance had taken roughly eight minutes, and a significant number of troopers never reached the guns at the end of the valley, although not all had been killed or even seriously wounded.

As the first line and Cardigan, who was still some yards in front of his troops, came upon the guns a last volley of canister was fired, the small lead balls taking a devastating toll on the

36 Woodham-Smith, 241.
cavalry as it leapt amongst the guns and their crews. William Howard Russell, a newspaper correspondent for the *Times of London*, described the scene thus:

The first line is broken – it is joined by the second – they never halt or check their speed an instant. With diminished ranks, thinned by those thirty guns, which the Russians had laid with the most deadly accuracy, with a halo of flashing steel above their heads, and with a cheer, which was many a noble fellow’s death-cry, they flew into the smoke of the batteries; but ere they were lost from view, the plain was strewed with their bodies, and with the carcasses of their horses…Through the clouds of smoke could be seen their sabres flashing as they rode up to the guns, and dashed between them, cutting down the gunners as they stood.37

After cutting down as many Russians as it could and damaging some of the guns, the remaining cavalry did its best to form up on the valley floor and ride back to its lines. This it did with varying degrees of success among the regiments, as Russians continued to fire on it from the high ground to either side and the Russian cavalry harassed it at every opportunity. Upon regaining its lines, the tally was tragic for the Light Brigade. Of the roughly 661 men who entered the North Valley, “the Light Brigade lost 113 officers and men killed, 134 wounded and 45 made prisoner…More damaging still was the loss of 362 horses.”38 Less than one-third of the Light Brigade could be mounted and mustered for duty which made them all but useless for combat.

A tragic blunder, and an inexcusable waste of men and mounts, the Light Brigade’s charge in the North Valley nevertheless provides a view of what was considered the ultimate goal of the cavalryman: the charge. Nolan joined the 17th Lancers simply to be a part of such an action, and Cardigan spent most of the day fuming at being, in his eyes at any rate, denied such an action.

38 Spilsbury, 185.
While dubious of the order to charge the guns at the end of the valley, Cardigan still led his men into the guns eagerly and then retired back to British lines satisfied with his and his men’s fulfillment of their duty. Moreover, the action highlighted the best qualities of the British Cavalry, particularly its courage under fire, its willingness to sacrifice, and most importantly its iron discipline.

The charges performed at Balaclava are the embodiment of mid-nineteenth century British cavalry doctrine. Specifically this was the use of the close-order “knee-to-knee” charge against enemy formations using weight of horse and steel weapons to break those formations and scatter them beyond the ability to have any further impact on the battle. This was to be followed by reformation and preparation to go into action again if possible or necessary. These charges were mirrored by similar charges in India during one of the several small uprisings prior to the Indian Mutiny in 1856, where some cavalry formations charged several times in a single action. The essential doctrine was not significantly different than during the Napoleonic Wars, although greater control was exercised over the cavalry to prevent it chasing a broken enemy sometimes miles from the battlefield, and by extension depriving the army of its services for the remainder of the battle and completely winding the horses in addition, rendering it incapable of further assaults.

With this as a template for what was considered the ideal cavalry action, at least in form if not in function (few commanders would purposely destroy their cavalry forces for little or no gain), it is possible to look at innovative and adaptive strategies deployed by other cavalry officers in other parts of the British Empire across the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By deviating from their training and official doctrine, many of these officers made an effective and important tool out of the cavalry under less-than-ideal conditions and in situations
where conventional cavalry tactics would not and often did not serve, such as India, the Sudan, and South Africa.

Presented with unconventional tactics and adversaries, the British cavalry often could not find a massed enemy to charge, or terrain suited to such an action. Its response, far from a refusal to adapt to a changing situation, was to rise to the occasion time and again. If it were sometimes slow to adapt it was not necessarily a sign of the deep conservatism which has often been attributed to it so much as perhaps an imperfect understanding of its enemy and how it could best cope with them. Other armies have been similarly slow to recognize what was necessary for success in unconventional circumstances, such as the United States in Vietnam where an army trained to fight in continental Europe, not unlike the British Army during the reign of Queen Victoria, would need to devise new ways of waging war in order to meet the challenges before it. Sometimes the process is a slow one, and a force designed and equipped to fight in one set of conditions takes time to adapt and develop new strategies for new conditions. For American forces in Vietnam, it was a slow, painful process which bore fruit too late and was at any rate subsumed by political developments which made their adaptation obsolete before it could produce meaningful results, if such could ever have been achieved. For the British, with their long history of empire-building and protection, such adaptations seemed to come more quickly and to produce more immediate results.

Yet even in this relatively stagnant period of cavalry development in Britain there were changes being discussed and even implemented. Young officers were advancing ideas which changed the cavalry, even in the face of resistance from a few disgruntled senior officers.

* * *
Two officers who represent this early movement toward reform and greater flexibility for the cavalry are Louis Edward Nolan and Valentine Baker. Each contributed to the conversation and debate surrounding the cavalry and its employment, as well as its training and equipage, although Nolan seems to have been more widely published and read. The response to the two men was not always positive, but they represent a rising chorus of voices suggesting that as times, weapons and war were changing, so too must Britain’s cavalry.

Louis Edward Nolan had significant experience when he arrived in the Crimea. Before entering service with the British Cavalry, he had spent time as a member of the 10th (Frederick William III, King of Prussia) Hussars on the Continent, starting as a cadet at the age of fourteen. He eventually found his way into the British service with the assistance of his father, who had also served in the British cavalry, and Louis Edward Nolan quickly began to build a reputation as a solid, enthusiastic and competent officer. Upon assuming his duties with them, Nolan:

…set out to change the equitation of the 15th Hussars, and with it the whole outlook of the regiment. During the next four years his reputation grew as the success of his methods was revealed. The propagation of meaningless traditions, the ruin of remounts by inept handling in early training, the inculcation of bad habits in men treated as squads rather than individuals, were objects of his constant attention. Louis’ reading was wide, and his practice continuously developed.39

This was during Nolan’s tenure in India, where many of the reform-minded officers served and from which many would emerge with new ideas and a more flexible approach to the employment of cavalry on deployment as well as on the training field. At the age of thirty-four Nolan took a position as the commander of the regimental troop depot under Colonel F.C.G.

Griffiths, “who had already introduced several ideas of his own, teaching recruits to leap on and off their horses without using stirrups and giving them mounted practice with the single stick. It seemed that under Griffiths innovation and experiment were likely to flourish.” It was during this time that Nolan published two books, *The Training of Cavalry Remount Horses: A New System* and *Cavalry: Its History and Tactics*.

Nolan was seeking to reach a broader audience with his new ideas about how cavalry should be handled, from the basics of training the horses for cavalry duty to the employment in combat of the mounted arm. His ideas do not, at first blush, seem particularly radical, but they essentially advocated the restructuring of the methods of an entire branch of the British army from top to bottom, and not everyone welcomed his ideas. Some felt that as a junior officer he should not be lecturing his superiors in the way things should be done, and worse he did so by publishing books which essentially made the disagreement public. Yet his books demonstrate the spirit of innovation and the recognition of the need for flexibility and adaptation in the cavalry that many others would later emulate.

His book on cavalry remounts and their training is an expansion and encapsulation of his methods from India, where he was allowed to experiment and prove the efficacy of his ideas. It expanded on this somewhat by way of a detailed discussion of selecting remounts and proper horse types for cavalry use. Less controversial than his second book, *The Training of Cavalry Remount Horses: A New System* is still indicative of embracing new ways of thinking about the role of cavalry at the most fundamental level, and it may well have played a part in his selection

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40 Single-stick practice refers to the use of a wooden, usually ash, stick roughly three feet in length which served as a proxy for the saber. In practice the cavalry troopers would use the same techniques as they would with a saber, but because the stick was merely a round piece of wood the wounds inflicted were sometimes painful but almost never fatal. This allowed for safe but realistic swordplay exercises, particularly on horseback where inexperienced horsemen or swordsmen ran the greatest risk for accidents.

41 Ibid., 126.
by Lord Raglan to send him ahead of the forces deploying to Turkey to find suitable remounts for the cavalry as well as to draw the many carts and wagons the army would need to move men and provisions.

Nolan’s second book, *Cavalry: Its History and Tactics*, was a bit more controversial in its day. Nolan suggests to his peers in his preface that “The tactics of cavalry are not capable of being reduced to rule, like the mechanical operations of the engineer, or even the slower and more methodical movements of infantry.” He goes on to suggest that a cavalry officer should be flexible, adaptable, and willing to act on his own initiative when the moment comes, relying on this rather than “the result of calculation and rule.” Nolan’s work goes into detailed analyses of the successes and failures of cavalry in the past, and what can be done to improve the cavalry to make it a war-winning weapon in the British Army from what he sees as its degraded state. It addresses everything from the load a trooper in the cavalry should carry to advocating a change in scabbards for the sabers from steel, which tends to blunt the blade and makes noise which would disrupt scouting missions, to leather and wood, which preserves the saber’s edge and makes significantly less noise during movement. Nolan suggests new formations and simplified movements in those formations in order to make the cavalry more flexible and responsive, and outlines training methods which would make this possible. In essence, Nolan envisioned a cavalry based upon the light cavalryman which could perform many tasks, not just a massed charge (although it would also be prepared to do this at the appropriate time) and which would be led by adaptable and independent-minded officers schooled in the methods of cavalry outlined in his book. Considering the performance of the cavalry just a few months later in the Crimean

War, the book was clearly advocating something relatively extraordinary in terms of the then-current status quo.

Nolan’s impact on cavalry and its use can be seen in the way military officers, both British and foreign, reacted his books, especially *Cavalry: Its History and Tactics*. Some British officers embraced it, and “Major-General A.G. Wetherall, the Deputy Chief of Staff, sent a copy to his friend Bonneau du Martray, an officer of the French Imperial Staff…Du Martray read the book with enthusiasm, and determined to make it available to his own countrymen.”\(^43\) Du Martray translated the book and added his own preface with comments to his countrymen encouraging them to read the book with an open mind and consider its ideas freely. Nolan’s work was also used by the U.S. Army during the American Civil War, with Major-General George McClellan citing Nolan’s books as the only ones in English worth noting, and cavalry instructor Dr. J. Roemer not only citing Nolan but basing much of his own work on Nolan’s, even using a very similar title, *Cavalry: Its History, Management and Uses in War*. That the book found such a wide audience suggests that it had some influence on the trajectory of cavalry, and its content further suggests that this was a move toward a more evolutionary mindset among the establishment of cavalry officers as well as cultivating the improvisational and adaptive nature of the best officers.\(^44\)

Louis Nolan also designed a new type of saddle for military use which found its way into service with the British Cavalry, although it had not yet entered service with the entire cavalry before it shipped to Turkey and then the Crimea for the impending war. This saddle was intended to save wear on both the horse and rider, and worked to distribute the weight of the rider and his gear more evenly while also encouraging the rider to conform to the Nolan method of sitting in

\(^{43}\) Moyse-Bartlett, 155.
\(^{44}\) Moyse-Bartlett, 149-153.
the saddle with a more natural posture, heels in front of the hips and shoulders rather than nearly in line with the shoulders. The new saddle, he said, allows the trooper to “be put in a proper seat, he will have greater control over his horse, and I do think that with them sore backs in the cavalry will be of rare occurrence.”

Clearly, Nolan was a forward-thinking officer of experience who had some effect on his peers and the cavalry as an institution, although he had his detractors. One criticism that would find him, and which had some merit, was that he placed too much emphasis on the arme blanche at the expense of using the cavalry’s firepower. A fair critique, it does overlook the rather poor model of carbine which British troopers at the time were issued and the impractical nature of arming them with the available rifles of the day, which were still somewhat heavy and cumbersome for cavalry use.

The carbine in question was likely the Pattern 1853 Enfield, which was essentially a shortened version of the Pattern 1853 Enfield rifled musket. This fired a .577 caliber conical Miné bullet. The infantry version had a much longer barrel and was sighted out to 1250 yards, although a soldier able to hit a target with seven shots out of twenty at 950 yards was considered a marksman. The carbine had considerably less range and, as a muzzle loading weapon could be difficult to load on horseback. It was also considered unreliable in wet weather, and “It seems that in the field when close to the enemy, they were kept loaded.”

Compared to the Prussian Dreyse Needle Gun which entered service in 1848, and of which a carbine version was produced for cavalry use, the British Pattern 1853 Enfield matched up somewhat unfavorably. Known in service as the Prussian Model 1848, the Needle Gun was a

45 Nolan, 207.
46 steel weapons, saber or lance
47 Anglesey, 418.
breech-loading firearm using a .61 inch bullet. Because it was a breech-loading weapon, its rate of fire was significantly better than the muzzle-loading British Enfield and it was much easier to load on horseback. The cartridges were also easier to work with as they were a single package which did not need to be torn open before being inserted into the carbine as the British rounds did. While the Needle Gun had some defects, most notably loss of pressure around the breech mechanism when fired which caused the range of the weapon to vary, its rate of fire and ease of loading seem to make it superior to the British Enfield.

The American Sharps carbine was another more efficient and reliable model of carbine in production by the 1850s. “Sharps’ system used a falling block actuated by the trigger guard as a lever, fully uncovering the breech end of the barrel so that the powder and bullet could be inserted directly from the rear. Through the Civil War, the powder and bullet were placed in a linen or paper cartridge and ignition was by the hammer coming down on a separate percussion cap (or tape or pellet primer).”48 Again, the rate of fire was significantly better than that of the muzzle-loading British Enfield and the loading procedure was easy enough to be performed from horseback with relatively little difficulty.

While these two examples are hardly the only instances of better carbinest in production and use by the 1850s, they are certainly two of the best. Other American manufacturers began to make similar weapons, and the French developed a breech-loading rifle and carbine as well, although somewhat more slowly than the Prussians. The Sharps carbine was superior enough that the British actually ordered “several thousand of the carbines for cavalry use.”49

Yet overall, Nolan’s ideas seem to form the nucleus of methods which would be employed elsewhere with some success, and the underlying principles were truly the important aspect of

48 Dean K. Boorman, Guns of the Old West: An Illustrated History (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2002), 44-45.
49 Ibid., 47.
his writing. Flexibility, adaptability, and a wider attention to the roles of cavalry in the modern battlefield would, in his eyes, create a more effective and powerful cavalry.

Captain Valentine Baker was one British officer who seems to have been influenced by Nolan and his work and to have produced his own book on the subject. Baker was an accomplished officer of many years’ service, including time in India, who felt that the Crimean War and recent experiences in India pointed the way to reform of the cavalry by way of a sort of trial-and-error approach. He asserted that in the field one could quickly determine which methods and ideas had worked well and which were outdated or of lesser value, and his book, *The British Cavalry: With Remarks on its Practical Organization*, is a collection of his ruminations on this subject. In it, Baker proposes a number of ideas, including creating three classifications of cavalry to perform different duties, “very heavy, medium, and very light.”

These would carry out different duties, with very heavy slated for massed charges, medium to perform the traditional roles of cavalry: scouting, screening, picket duty, and follow-up charges against a broken and fleeing enemy unit, and very light to perform harassing attacks and raids not unlike cavalry in the American Civil War (1861-1865), targeting supplies, communications, and routes of travel such as railways.

Baker echoes Nolan in calling for a more serviceable and utilitarian uniform devoid of encumbrances such as sabretaches and other ornamental but largely functionless pieces of clothing. He also laments the easily destroyed nature of British cavalry uniforms which eliminates any sort of uniformity between the troops and makes them appear as “a mob.”

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51 Baker, 41.
He further advocates, much earlier than those who would make such suggestions during and after the Boer War, that the carbine should be carried on the back and not attached to the saddle, and that newer breech-loading carbines should be issued to the troopers so that their ability to engage in fire actions would be greatly enhanced.\(^{52}\) His motivation for carrying the carbine on the back is twofold: it protects the trooper’s vulnerable back from saber slashes while also ensuring that the carbine remains attached to the trooper should he fall from his horse or lose it to enemy fire. Previously the sabre was carried on the trooper’s hip while his carbine was attached to the saddle in a leather sheath. On foot, a trooper armed simply with a saber is at a disadvantage, while a trooper who retains his carbine can still engage in combat effectively through fire action.

In the same section he voices doubt that the newer carbines will hold up well in the field, and then advocates the use of a long pistol fitted with a removable stock or even Colt pistols from the United States, although again he seems uncertain of the reliability of the weapons and the ability of troopers to use and maintain them properly.

Complimentary to this he asserts that “Every dragoon should be an expert swordsman. Yet strange to say, swordsmanship has hitherto been entirely neglected in our army.”\(^{53}\) Baker is advocating several changes at once here, upgrading and improving not only the firearm but the ability to use it, and increasing the capability of the British trooper to use what was still seen as the primary weapon of the cavalry, the saber. Placed in context with the need for different cavalry types, Baker seems to be advocating a fairly aggressive reform of the cavalry and the way in which it functioned in the field.

\(^{52}\) Baker, 43-44. The idea that fire actions are proper work for a trooper was not necessarily a widely accepted one, and in itself this is somewhat forward thinking. Many cavalry officers treated the carbine as a weapon of last resort, and training with the weapon was generally minimal at best. Previous centuries had seen fire action as a regular part of cavalry activities, but by the nineteenth century this was no longer the case.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 58.
These are not the only points Baker makes, of course. In his relatively short work he also advises on improving the interplay between cavalry, infantry and artillery in battle. New methods for maneuver are also discussed, along with better means of shipping and loading or unloading horses from ships and new or modified formations which would, in his opinion, work better in the field than current practice. Baker certainly does not repeat all of Nolan’s ideas, nor does he endorse everything Nolan had to say, but the two were certainly in tune when it came to making changes and improving the efficacy of the cavalry. Taken together, they are two of the strongest voices of the 1850s for reform, change, and innovation within the cavalry.

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While the Crimean War serves as a showcase for the “ideal” cavalry action of the day, at least in terms of form and function if not outcome, the forces of change were already at work. From this baseline, we can now observe how other cavalry actions during the latter half of the nineteenth century differed, often because of the need to adapt to local conditions and the exigencies of battle in theaters other than continental Europe. These adaptations were not always without opposition, and many commanders remained convinced that the close-order charge was the pinnacle of the cavalry’s battlefield role. In spite of such officers the cavalry managed time and again to rise to the occasion and frequently succeeded in turning matters to its advantage from the deserts of the Sudan to the rocky terrain and mountains of South Africa.
Chapter 2: The Indian Mutiny

In India, the British capacity to adapt and to act without orders was a necessity. The distance from the British homeland was significant and meant that delays in both sending and receiving communications and deploying troops were virtually guaranteed, and that even when action was decided upon at home it would take weeks for regiments on home service to be redeployed to the Indian subcontinent. Since telegraph lines were susceptible to natural wear, sabotage and natural disaster, military forces and civilians in India had to cultivate a greater sense of independence, particularly in terms of when and how to act in an emergency. This is evident in the study of the cavalry in India during the Indian Mutiny (1857-58).

British involvement in India predated the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 by more than a hundred years. The Honourable East India Company had established trade with India as far back as 1612, and a British military presence was not long in arriving to protect the interests of both the company and the Crown. During this extended period of interaction there had been a number of mutinies, but these “had been relatively minor affairs, mostly springing from financial grievances, and at separate times involved officers as much as men and Europeans as much as Indians.”

Things changed with the mutiny of Indian soldiers in 1806, in what has been described as a dress-rehearsal for the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58. The proximate cause of the revolt in 1806 was a new issue of equipment, in this case leather spats to be worn in the collars of uniforms in order to keep the soldiers’ heads more upright and military in bearing. A rumor quickly spread that these were made from the hides of both cattle and pigs which would offend the religious

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54 T.A. Heathcote, Mutiny & Insurgency in India 1857-58 (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2007), 16.  
55 Ibid., 6.
sensibilities of both Hindus and Muslims. Added to this was a new regulation forbidding the wearing of caste marks on the face or excessive facial hair or beards. Many believed the rumor and saw in this an attempt to destroy Indian caste distinctions and ultimately force conversion to Christianity on the native soldiery, especially when added to the new regulations regarding facial hair since Muslims especially wore beards as a sign of religious fidelity.
The soldiers refused to comply with the new regulations and to wear the new spats, and for this they were arrested and court martialed. The punishments were harsh, as was often the case when British officers dealt with insubordinate native soldiers or functionaries, and a plot was hatched by the convicted and their men to revolt against their officers and rid themselves of what they saw as an oppressive and threatening presence in the British. The plot was initially successful since the British civilian administration ignored warnings of unrest and British officers unwisely did the same. After a bloody day of fighting, word went out to outlying British forces that the Indian soldiers at Vellore had revolted and cavalry troops of the 19th Light Dragoons and the 5th Madras Light Cavalry led by Lieutenant Colonel Rollo Gillespie rode to the rescue. Taking light casualties, the cavalry troopers managed to put down the insurgency, but officials and officers in the British service were held to account for the incident and the restrictive and offensive regulations were rescinded. The articles of clothing were also withdrawn in order to ensure continued order and peace within India.

The Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 followed essentially the same course, except that it would ultimately be far more widespread and violent, with innocent civilians on both sides becoming victims of vengeful officers and soldiers. In 1857 the cause was not a new uniform or regulation, but new ammunition for the Pattern 1853 Enfield rifled musket:

A novel feature of the new rifle was that its bullet, an elongated form of the ball previously used expanded with the heat of firing so as to fit into the rifling (the spiral grooves cut in to the bore to impart rotation to the projectile). However, to prevent the products of combustion and the hot lead of the bullets from fouling these grooves, the cartridge paper had to have some kind of lubricant…For training purposes, it was not necessary to wait for the arrival of the new rifles, but only to use the new cartridges, which would fit the existing smooth-bores.56

56 Heathcote, 38-39.
The trouble began with rumors at Meerut, where the only unit in the Indian service which had received its entire allotment of the new Enfields was stationed. A rumor had started among the Indian soldiers that the cartridges were lubricated with the fat of pigs and cattle. Many historians dismiss this as only a rumor, although others point to the change in how the ammunition was made after the Mutiny to suggest that perhaps there was some truth to the rumor. In fact there was, with beef tallow being used in the manufacture of cartridges for the Pattern 1853 Enfield rifled-musket then in use. In the event, many of the Indian soldiers believed the story and began to spread it. While the commanders assured the men that the lubricant was composed of fat taken from sheep mixed with wax, many of the Indian soldiers, known as sepoys, still mistrusted the cartridges and refused to use or handle them. Unlike the first incident in 1806, the army took note and followed a suggestion by the Indian soldiers that they be allowed to make and apply their own lubricant to the cartridges, and orders to that effect were issued within days. The rumor had already spread across India by this time however, and trouble soon began in the Bengal Army’s area roughly a hundred miles to the north.

Here several sepoys refused to use the cartridges and even threatened physical resistance and violence against the British. Two, Mangal Pande and Iswari Pande, were convicted of mutiny, violence against their officers, and refusing the orders of their superiors and sentenced to death. These executions added to the rumors spreading through towns and villages where the sepoys lived and had returned when the British disarmed many of them in the mutinous areas and turned them out. A sort of snowballing began to take place, and events seemed to reach a head when Brevet Colonel G.M. Carmichael, commander of the 3rd Light Cavalry, ordered his men to be the first in the Bengal Army to use the new cartridges while performing on parade. The troopers refused to do this and were severely punished, being given ten years hard labor and taken away
from their courts martial in irons. Other units who had been implicated in planning or supporting violent actions against the British had merely been disarmed and sent home, but now a unit guilty of far less serious insubordination had suffered imprisonment. The other sepoys must have viewed this as an escalation of sorts, and they believed that they might be next. The stage was now set for mutiny on a large scale, and supported by the Indian people in the villages and towns from which the sepoys came.
When the Mutiny began, it took the British largely by surprise not because there had not been signs of impending trouble but because it happened so suddenly and was so widespread. Previous mutinies had been relatively limited in scope, even in 1806, and most had been in response to lack of pay or other extraneous conditions. This time religious and cultural issues were the impetus, as they had been in 1806, and the violence would take on a vicious character which was foreshadowed in 1806 but would become shocking not just to the British but the world. Indian forces in central and northern India would rise up *en masse*, laying siege to several large towns and cities and their garrisons where British resistance would be fierce but not always successful.

The two major sieges of the Mutiny at Lucknow and Cawnpore, by way of example, turned out very differently. British forces in Lucknow, bottled up in a relatively small portion of the city, held out until British and loyal Indian forces could drive the mutineers out of the city and relieve the beleaguered British residents and soldiers. Their heroic defense of the Residence and its surrounding buildings became the talk of British citizens at home as well as in India, and their relief by rescues forces was heralded as a triumph of epic proportions, sometimes couched as the victory of civilization over barbarity. At Cawnpore, on the other hand, a great many white men, women and children were massacred on the first day. Survivors fled to the army barracks and training grounds where they were besieged for days in a mostly exposed position. Pounded day and night by artillery in the hands of the mutineers and subjected to frequent attacks by infantry they held out until food and ammunition began to run out. With no ability to break out of the

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siege, particularly with civilians in train, the military officers arranged to give up their position in exchange for safe passage to boats waiting on the river to carry them to British-held territory. On the way to the boats the survivors were heckled and jeered at by the crowd, and once they reached the river they were attacked and slaughtered by the mutineers at the command of the local rebel leader, “Dhondu Pant, known as Nana Sahib, the Maharajah of Bithur and an heir of the Marathas, who had been dispossessed of most of their lands by the [British East India] Company earlier in the century.”

Very few British soldiers or civilians managed to escape Cawnpore alive, a mere handful out of the nearly eight hundred in Cawnpore at the outbreak of the Mutiny, and the leadership of the mutiny revealed itself to be both duplicitous and shockingly violent during this incident, although they tried to distance themselves from any responsibility for it by suggesting it was a spontaneous event and not planned.

Further, the involvement of civilian leaders in the Mutiny effectively turned a revolt by a relatively small number of military units into a wider revolt against British rule generally. Other factors were in place within Indian society which prompted this wider popular uprising:

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59 Heathcote suggests it may have been spontaneous as was claimed at the time, but the exhaustive account of the Cawnpore Massacre by Andrew Ward certainly argues strongly and convincingly that it was planned in advance and executed at the orders of the heads of the mutiny at Cawnpore.
60 Heathcote, 17.
This resentment and popular unrest accounts for much of the hostility and brutality on the Indian side, and British officers and soldiers quickly returned tit-for-tat these atrocities, committing massacres of their own and hanging accused mutineers or those offering assistance to the mutineers from trees along well-travelled roads as a warning to others. The Mutiny was eventually put down by the British and their loyal Indian allies, but a wave of reforms would follow in the wake of the uprising and the carnage and chaos it brought.

Throughout this conflict, confused and unpredictable as insurgencies typically are, the cavalry played a key role. At times, it would form up and perform the usual role of cavalry charging enemy troops “knee-to-knee” and pursuing broken enemy formations to capture or disperse them. At other times it would roam the countryside seeking enemy forces or hostile villages and raiding or ambushing mutineers unexpectedly in the field. It would perform using dismounted fire actions, it would act like irregular cavalry raiding rear areas and disrupting supplies and reinforcements, and it would maintain flexibility in the face of changing events and conditions. Some of these would be native cavalry, some regular British cavalry, and a few units would be irregular cavalry of mixed composition raised by British officers for service in the conflict which was, in itself, a useful adaptation to local circumstances. In all cases the cavalry would be led by British officers, and while not all of the cavalry discussed here will be regular British cavalry the British leadership is the key element which bound it all together and upon which its flexibility and performance relied.

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Although there were a number of actions in the countryside the Indian Mutiny can almost be characterized as a series of sieges and counter-sieges. During much of the conflict the British “had a preponderance in cavalry, although this arm is not of great use in sieges.” That said, the cavalry managed to find ways to be active and useful throughout and frequently in ways for which its manuals failed to prepare them.

A prime example of this took place during the siege of Delhi as the British forces began their final assault on the city. After weeks of fighting Sir Hugh Gough planned a massive assault utilizing all of the available forces under his command, including reinforcements sent from other parts of India and loyal native units which had joined the army. The British forces had maintained a partial cordon of Delhi for over a month but did not have the resources to enact a complete encirclement of the city, thus allowing enemy forces access to their compatriots for reinforcement and resupply. Gough, a veteran with some experience in warfare, was reluctant to engage a dug-in force with ample supplies until he felt he had amassed a sufficient force of his own with which to take the city and drive out or destroy the mutineers.

He finally attacked on 14 September 1857, organizing his troops into several columns and attacking the city from several directions. This came on the heels of several days bombardment to reduce large portions of the city’s outer masonry walls to rubble around the gates which opened into the city, each name for the cities around Delhi toward which the gates faced. On the evening of 13 September, prior to the attacks, parties of soldiers and natives cleared as much rubble as possible to allow the forces about to storm the city as much freedom of movement as was practicable. The attackers were issued “ominous orders to take no prisoners,” and the attack was confirmed for first light.

61 Heathcote, 106.
62 Freemont-Barnes, 42.
The columns went in as planned against heavy resistance, and casualties mounted quickly on both sides, although the toll was heavier, at least initially, for the British. This was expected and even normal when attacking a fortified position, and doubly so in an urban setting like Delhi with narrow streets and alleys and close-built buildings of varying heights. The British infantry fought well, frequently using bayonets to clear streets and buildings of enemy forces and using skirmish formations in order to counter the irregular tactics of the sepoys. Columns One and Two made headway and achieved their initial objectives in good time, but Column Four, which was supposed to join with them in the city center and continue the advance with them, was repulsed in its initial advance at the Lahore Gate. This opened the possibility of the sepoys either moving against the base camp outside the Lahore Gate or reversing back into the city through the Lahore Gate and adding strength to the resistance for Columns One and Two. To prevent either scenario, Lieutenant Colonel James Hope Grant decided to engage the enemy with his cavalry brigade which had heretofore been stationed on the ridge above the camp guarding both the camp and the guns on the ridge.

This brigade consisted of “his own 9th Lancers, a part of the 6th Carabiniers, and various Sikh and Punjabi cavalry – of six hundred horsemen, only a third of whom were British.”63 This *ad hoc* and mixed force was not unusual under the conditions prevalent in the Indian Mutiny. The breakdown of native units, the confusion of the initial days of the uprising, the need to post garrison troops and to break up some units for other duties practically made it a necessity for mixed forces to exist, and improvisation of armies and regiments was often the only way to create a force powerful and balanced enough to be effective. It could also make command and

control problematic, as many cavalry troopers and other soldiers were forced to serve under commanders with whom they were unfamiliar.

In spite of this potential confusion of command and the need to leave the guns and camp along the ridge almost unguarded, Hope Grant went ahead with what he saw as a necessary attack. Since the terrain was unsuited to a cavalry charge, Hope Grant led the men forward and sent his horse artillery ahead to blast the sepoys with grape shot\textsuperscript{64} at close range. His troopers then moved forward under fire from the sepoy artillery and infantry inside Delhi and occupied the ground from which the infantry had been driven until the disordered foot troops could reassemble and renew their offensive. While this did not happen until the following day, the cavalry were relieved after more than an hour of simply holding off any organized push by the mutineers from within the Lahore gate. Elements of the Guides Infantry and Baluch battalion, whose timely arrival saved the cavalry from even higher casualties than it had already sustained and allowed the cavalry to fall back and assess its losses, which were as high as fifty percent killed or wounded in the horse artillery and thirty percent among the regular and irregular cavalry.

At first blush this may not seem exceedingly remarkable, but when one reflects on the training and purpose of the cavalry one can see a remarkable willingness to engage in duties which almost never fell on the cavalry. At heart the cavalry, regular and irregular alike, was meant to be a mobile force using weight and momentum to smash its opponents and send them retreating in disarray, or running down disordered enemy troops broken by the infantry or artillery. Its doctrine stressed the charge and no less a personage than the highly influential Baron

\textsuperscript{64} Grape shot was essentially a canvas bag or canister full of musket balls, smaller ball bearings and smaller bits of metal. Its sole use was as anti-personnel ordnance at close range, a role for which it was developed and well-suited.
de Jomini, one of the nineteenth century’s most widely read experts on strategy and tactics, said in his *The Art of War* “The principal value of cavalry is derived from its rapidity and ease of motion…cavalry can never defend a position without the support of infantry. Its chief duty is to open the way for gaining victory.” Immobility was considered death to the regular cavalry trooper, and even the irregulars who were used to fighting under different circumstances were used to doing so with mobility as a part of their tactics, engaging in hit-and-run firefights as often as using lance or sword.

For the cavalry to occupy ground would have flown in the face of all previous training and experience, yet it stood its ground and prepared to engage in close combat against infantry while standing still, surrendering all the usual advantages of the cavalry trooper except of course for being mounted, and many of the troopers had their mounts shot from under them. Had they been forced to fight, many would have done so using saber and pistol or carbines against rifle and bayonet armed sepoy infantry and perhaps fresh sepoy cavalry. In all it was a remarkable feat, and the discipline and courage shown by the troopers in taking withering fire from rifle and artillery alone makes the action noteworthy. Moreover, the action the cavalry was prepared to take suggests a degree of flexibility tactically and individually which one would have been hard-pressed to find among the officers and troopers fighting in the Crimean War.

On another occasion, the men of the Military Train supplying the garrison at Alambagh were converted by the garrison’s commander, Lieutenant-General Sir James Outram, into makeshift cavalry to serve as a supplement to the 7th Hussars. This emergency measure was taken on 25 February 1858 in response to repeated sepoy attacks on the invested garrison. Outram was suffering from chronic manpower shortages, “receiving reinforcements sufficient only to keep

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his numbers up”⁶⁶ throughout the siege. These approximately 220 men were mounted on the horses of the 8th Madras Light Cavalry and “soon became ‘thoroughly efficient’” at acting as cavalry troopers. Indeed, they ultimately made up “well over half Outram’s cavalry.”⁶⁷

Hodson’s Horse was also present on 25 February and made the initial sally against the sepoy mutineers. At first this irregular regiment managed to drive back the attackers and even to capture their rear-most cannon before it became scattered and began to lose cohesion. In danger now of themselves being driven back into the fortifications or worse, the 7th Hussars and the men of the Military Train charged and drove away the attackers once more, managing to maintain good order and to extricate both Hodson’s Horse and the captured gun from the potential disaster. That the 7th Hussars had managed to bring the Military Train personnel up to a decent standard in such a short time, days at best, and that those men performed so remarkably under such trying circumstances speaks highly of not only the adaptive qualities of each but also the overall discipline of the army and its components. It is worth noting that the Military Train members were not even slated for service in India but had been diverted on their way to China in order to help repair the fragile and dangerous situation in India. While their time as cavalry was brief, essentially the time they had to train and this one action during the siege, they managed to distinguish themselves and earn combat accolades despite the fact that their only real purpose was to supply and move the army rather than to fight alongside it.

An exemplar of this tactical and individual flexibility is A.R.D. Mackenzie, who served in the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry, the Guides, and the Sikh Irregular Cavalry during the Indian Mutiny. The first of these, the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry, was a regular cavalry regiment trained along

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⁶⁷ Ibid., 170-171.
European lines and equipped and uniformed as such. While composed of native troopers the regiment was led by British officers and employed standard British military discipline, tactics, weapons and supplies. The second, the Guides, was a native regiment formed and garrisoned along the Northwest Frontier and composed of a mix of six companies of infantry and three of cavalry. It was the first British formation to wear the khaki uniform which would eventually become standard issue for British soldiers in hot climates and it earned a reputation as an elite force which could fight using regular or irregular tactics. The third, the Sikh Irregular Cavalry, was primarily an Indian regiment which retained its Indian manner of dress except for the few British officers who led them, who retained their regular officer’s uniforms, and it provided its own horses and sometimes weapons. It could fight as a regular cavalry force or function somewhat differently using open-order formation and mounted infantry tactics.

Mackenzie’s association with the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry ended with the coming of the Indian Mutiny, as it became one of the first regiments to go over to the mutineers in one of the better known incidents of the early Mutiny. Forced to parade by its commander, Colonel Carmichael Smith, and slated to be the first of the garrison to use the new and suspect cartridges, the troopers refused the order to do so. Mackenzie recalls it this way:

Colonel Carmichael Smith, Commanding the 3rd Light Cavalry, with a view to test the willingness or otherwise of the carabineers of his regiment to use the new cartridges, held a special parade for the purpose on the 24th of April, 1857; and, after an explanatory speech, pointing out to the men the groundlessness of their fears, ordered them to use the cartridges. Eighty-five of them refused to do so. A court of inquiry was subsequently held on their conduct, followed, by the inevitable court martial. Only one finding was possible; and the sentence pronounced on all the culprits was one of ten years’ imprisonment.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ A.R.D. Mackenzie, *A Cavalry Officer During the Sepoy Revolt: Experiences With the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry, the Guides, and Sikh Irregular Cavalry from the Outbreak of the Indian Mutiny to Delhi and Lucknow* (London: Leonaur Ltd., 2005), 13-14.
The sepoys revolted within a day and Mackenzie found himself with only the remnants of the regiment which had remained loyal. Cooling his heels at Meerut for a time and engaging in small skirmishes with his few remaining troops, he finally managed to secure a transfer to Delhi and the cavalry of the Guides. From the Guides he transferred to the Sikh Irregular Cavalry, and in all three he managed to function both effectively and flexibly, engaging in actions which can be described as uncommon for a British cavalry officer and bearing more resemblance to actions during the American Civil War than anything in British drill manuals and doctrine of the time.

What Mackenzie describes are small raising parties, some sanctioned and some taken on the authority of an unnamed captain “well-known for his eccentricity, almost verging on insanity, his fearlessness, and his unsparing thirst for vengeance against the mutineers,” and a few actions taken on the spur of the moment in reaction to local conditions and intelligence which had to be acted upon immediately. Of his time with the Guides and the Sikh Irregulars Mackenzie says:

During the suppression of the Mutiny, a campaign which was unique and unlike any other, the iron bands of discipline were, in some respects, not so tightly drawn as usual, and many things happened which would now be impossible. For instance, it was not at all unheard of for an enterprising officer, with no other sanction than that of his commanding officer, to take a small party of mounted men and start off on the prowl in search of adventures. Very frequently he found them, and took good care, in view of the irregularity of his proceedings, that no report reached the General.69

Mackenzie’s short but action-packed memoir is full of tales of his participation in such events, typically riding out with small groups of troopers, perhaps fifteen to twenty-five men in all, to attempt to capture or destroy important leaders of the Mutiny or to try and wipe out or scatter

69 Ibid., 67.
70 Ibid., 66-67.
small bands of mutineers in the area where his detachment was stationed. In one example he is
contacted by his immediate superior, Captain Stanford, and told:

…that I need not expect to enjoy that night a very long rest; for he had planned a little
expedition on which I was to accompany him.
“He had got information from a spy of the whereabouts of a small body of the enemy at a
village about twelve miles from our camp. He had already given orders for fifty of our men
who had been separately and secretly told to arm themselves and mount their horses as
quietly as possible soon after midnight, and sneak out of camp one by one, through a
picquet which had been warned to let them pass…At the stroke of midnight we arose,
dressed and armed ourselves, fortified our stomachs with a cup of hot tea, crammed into
our holsters a cold roast fowl apiece and some chapatties, mounted our horses and stole out
of camp to the rendezvous, where we found our party and guide waiting for us.71

After sneaking out of their own camp and riding until dawn was just about to break, their
native guide told them they had arrived at the village where the mutineers had taken refuge.
Finding a handful of sepoys in the field through which they were quietly approaching, they
dispatched them as quickly and quietly as possible before advancing again. A shot rang out from
a picquet which had gone unseen, which then promptly rode off toward the village. Wasting no
time, Captain Sanford led his men after them until they reached the edge of the village. Seeing
that their arrival had created a stir, possibly a panic among the mutineers, Sanford detailed two
flanking detachments to circle the village and prevent escape while “he led the main party at a
gallop straight up the main street, and through the village, into the fields beyond, which were
already full of fugitives.” Mackenzie describes them as “three or four times our number…[but]
so completely demoralized by terror that they did not make the slightest attempt to rally but fled
in all directions, each man for himself, and each trying to make the fastest time on record…soon
was the plain strewn with the bodies [of the mutineers].”72

71 Ibid., 69.
72 Ibid., 70-71.
There are several striking qualities to this action which, by Mackenzie’s own admission, fall well outside the doctrine and regular employment of the cavalry. The use of a very loose formation, which would be typical of cavalry in the American Civil War but was almost never seen in cavalry actions among the British, is one. The fact that the British officers were not only able to employ it, but seem quite comfortable doing so, suggests their flexibility and their adaptation to the conditions in India which differed so much from warfare in Europe. The willingness of the junior officers to take action on their own initiative and on short notice is certainly a significant departure from men like Lords Lucan and Cardigan who refused to move without orders or to act promptly when ordered to do anything at all.

Indeed if one looks at the works which influenced doctrine among the British and other European powers in the nineteenth century, one finds an emphasis on the massed charge, but most other types of operation are either given short shrift or not mentioned at all. In Baron de Jomini’s *The Art of War*, cavalry are to be held back ready to charge at the decisive moment, against shaken infantry, or to drive the opponent’s cavalry from the field. He does mention the potential of light cavalry to work in behind the opposing force where it could disrupt the enemy’s lines of communication, or even employing them as skirmishers to keep sentries occupied, but almost the entire section on cavalry related to the charge and the correct circumstances in which to launch such a charge. Lieutenant-Colonel North Ludlow Beamish’s treatise on cavalry, based in very large part on his translation of Frederick the Great’s discourses on warfare, places even more emphasis on these tactics, saying “In a regular battle the cavalry must be placed in reserve…The time for cavalry to produce the great effects, is when the line of battle wavers…This is the moment to attack infantry with advantage, and the cavalry must then
suddenly advance and attack in masses." Even Mackenzie himself admits, as quoted earlier, that the sort of action he was engaging in was unusual and not in keeping with regular doctrine or employment of cavalry. We see here again the ability of the junior officers to adapt themselves and their operations to unusual circumstances. Moreover, we see the troopers themselves, both British and Indian, able to do what is asked of them in these unusual conditions and operations.

This was not Mackenzie’s only unusual foray, of course. He was involved in a series of ambushes which culminated in an extended-line charge against an unprepared enemy force. This was facilitated by a series of random movements over the preceding days in order to throw off anyone observing his position and movements. During this action Mackenzie killed a sepoy who had, apparently, killed a European at some point and had loot from him on his person. This Mackenzie confiscated but lost during the course of the pursuit and taking of prisoners.

On yet another occasion, Mackenzie decided to take action on his own initiative, quite probably contra to his orders, and found a creative way of defending the action:

When we arrived at the rendezvous there were no signs of Colonel Macdonell or his rifles; but a letter from him was put into my hands by a native messenger, who said that the Colonel, after starting from Unao [their present base of operations], had gone back there on hearing that at nightfall the rebels had raised the siege of the [unnamed] village and retired to another some miles away. This after our long journey to Cawnpore and back was a terrible disappointment.

“Possibly, however, the Colonel might have thought it undesirable to follow the enemy so great a distance with infantry, and might wish me to do so with my troop. The thought no sooner struck me. Than its ‘sweet reasonableness’ began to grow on me; and I had very soon persuaded myself that the yet unopened missive contained instructions which chimed with my wishes. Unfortunately; however, it was too dark to read the letter without a light, and I had no matches! Neither, very curiously, had [Lieutenant Sir Robert] Sandeman! At any rate, we did not find any in our pockets: so we held a short council of war; and decided that in the absence of instructions, we felt it our duty to proceed…”


74 Mackenzie, 87-88.
Mackenzie and his force of roughly fifty troopers from the Sikh Irregulars, along with one other white officer, Lieutenant Sandeman, headed to the beleaguered village to find it free of enemy forces and held by local native police forces. These police he mounted on horseback along with some armed villagers and took with him to the nearby camp of the mutineers, which he planned to attack. He arranged his troopers in two wings, right and left and assigned an unnamed native officer to lead one flank and Lieutenant Sandeman the other, placing the police and villagers in the middle of the line and “impressing on them that if they could keep that formation [in line] till we came in contact with the enemy, they would certainly be mistaken for a company of the dreaded *gora logue* (white troops), which would be a heavy score in our favor.”

Mackenzie planned to have his line advance until he gave a signal, at which time the police and armed villagers were to fire off a volley into the enemy camp and then let forth a loud yell, while the wings or actual cavalry charged into the camp also bellowing as loudly as possible, which he felt would “freeze the marrow in the bones of a lot of sleepy Pandies.”

Placing a line of trees to its back to prevent its silhouette from being seen by the sepoys in camp, the force crept forward until it encountered a sentry at close range. Mackenzie gave the signal and the Sikh Irregulars and other members of the party swarmed into the camp at a gallop, cutting down many of the sepoys as they staggered from their tents and blankets, still groggy from sleep and completely taken by surprise.

Upon the successful completion of the night raid, Mackenzie finally read his orders from Colonel Macdonell, and found that “its contents were not exactly what we had persuaded

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75 Ibid., 88.
76 Ibid., 89. The term “Pandies” was derived from the common last name “Pande” which was shared by at least two of the early and prominent mutineers, and thus became attached to the entire group of mutineers as a sort of slang or derogatory term.
ourselves they might be.” They had, in fact, been ordered back to Cawnpore for assignment to some other duty, but as Mackenzie says “to use a homely phrase, there is no help for spilt milk…what we had done could not be undone, so we decided to finish the job in a workmanlike manner.” They proceeded to burn the remains of the camp on a large pyre, and to also burn the nearby village which had harbored the fugitives before returning their newly recruited allies to their village and returning to Cawnpore, where he was at first rebuked and then, apparently, congratulated by his commanding officer “off the record.”

Mackenzie was able to operate in all three types of cavalry effectively, and was engaged in combat and counter-insurgency actions with each which suggests a degree of flexibility and adaptability of style and personality which belies the oft-repeated meme of the foppish or deeply conservative British officer, mired in his own world of tradition and inflexible adherence to orthodox methods and training. In his own words, Mackenzie says of regular tactics “Such mechanical regularity of movement might be all very well for the parade ground; but in real soldiering, such as this, ‘individual initiative’ must take its place.” While this was said partly tongue-in-cheek, as he was giving a rendition of a retreat by enemy forces, his adventures suggest that he also believed it firmly. This may be in part because he was relatively young at the time of his service in India, although his later writings seem to reflect a continuation of his earlier attitudes, but perhaps also owes much to conditions in India and the nature of Indian service.

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77 Ibid., 91.
78 Ibid., 91.
79 Ibid., 111.
A part of this tactical flexibility came from the unique conditions of the Indian subcontinent, which one author has called “The centre of cavalry development in the nineteenth century.” This was to be true both before and after the Indian Mutiny, which Indian sources sometimes refer to as the First War for Indian Independence. Nowhere was experimentation more widespread in the British Empire, nor more accepted.

This may well have been because of the mixture of the East India Company forces with the British regulars and indigenous forces recruited to support both, but it seems a part of it was merely practical. India was, after all, no short trip from England or mainland Europe, and British forces often had to deal with problems and conditions which could not be alleviated by quick reinforcements from home, and forces new to India often had to undergo long periods of acclimatization before they were truly effective. This was equally true for horses and men, and so for the cavalry replacements were sometimes slow to join the larger forces. So far removed from rapid assistance and dealing with an often hostile population in a vast expanse of territory, it is only natural that measures would be developed to deal with the exigencies of events as they happened.

Aside from these adaptive measures, structural changes also took place in India around the time of the Mutiny. When the 8th Lancers arrived in India it was issued with new Sharps breech-loading carbines which were generally superior to the carbines used previously in the cavalry. These carbines were put to use against rebels in the last stages of the war, when a troop of the 8th Lancers engaged mutineers who had “got themselves so far into the bushes that not even the

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lances of the 1st Bombay Lancers, who were with the 8th, could reach them.\textsuperscript{81} They were deemed quite useful and superior to the previous carbines by the troopers who used them.

It also received new saddles, possibly of the pattern advocated and created by Captain Nolan, although they may have been of another pattern since several were then in use. Both were measures meant to improve the combat capability of the 8th Lancers in the field, and the need for a new type of carbine had finally been addressed. Other regiments would later get their issue of new weapons and equipment, but the upgrades began at this time, late in the Mutiny.

In February 1859, with the Mutiny all but over, a column of entirely mounted men was sent into action and managed to “march 145 miles in four days.”\textsuperscript{82} This column was unique not only in that it was entirely mounted, but in that it included infantry mounted on camels. Each of these foreshadows later adaptations for the mounted arm, including the use of “mounted infantry,” which were in effect the Dragoons of old without sabers, and the Camel Corps of volunteers which would be formed in the Sudan later in the century.

Among the many irregular regiments raised by British officers for use in the suppression of the Mutiny was Beatson’s Horse. Recruited entirely from Hyderabad and composed of Hindus and Muslims, these troopers saw a great deal of service and were trained to load and fire their carbines from horseback, demonstrating that such tactics were both useful and possible, although the example seems to have had little lasting effect on the cavalry as a whole.\textsuperscript{83}

After the Mutiny was fully suppressed and these late mopping-up operations had come to a close, further changes would come to the Indian army and its cavalry. Most importantly, perhaps,

\textsuperscript{81} Anglesey, 216.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{83} Specific information on the armaments of Hodson’s Horse appears to be scarce at best, but it may well have been issued with the Sharps carbine which had been purchased from the United States. If so, then this feat makes more sense than it would with the older, muzzle-loading carbines such as those used in the Crimean War.
was the method of promotion of officers. While “Promotion of officers at home was still to be by purchase…It was laid down that ‘the system of purchase, as practiced in the Queen’s army, is not to be introduced into [any regiments of the new Indian Army]. They will be seniority corps; but, in the promotion to field officers, the fitness and efficiency of the officers will be taken into account.”84 This meant that officers in the cavalry service in India would now be promoted according, at least in part, according to their effectiveness. This could have had no other effect but to stimulate their search for better methods and greater initiative. As with other experiments previously mentioned, this foreshadowed later developments, particularly the Cardwell Reforms of 1860s and ‘70s.

This was especially true for the abolition of the practice of purchasing commissions for officers in the British Army, although he Cardwell Reforms also eliminated flogging and other harsh punishments for soldiers, ended the practice of issuing bounty money for recruits, created guidelines for removing the worst elements from the army through a variety of dischargeable offenses, and instituted the “short service” terms of enlistment, in which soldiers enlisted for twelve years, a portion of which could be spent in the reserves while drawing a minimal stipend. Cardwell also instituted the system of localization, in which regiments were associated with various districts across England. Each of these regiments would have one battalion serving at home and one overseas, with the local militia serving as a third battalion in times of war.

Another transformation after the Mutiny was the conversion of Indian cavalry to entirely irregulars. A part of this transformation which was revolutionary and ahead of its time was Brigadier-General John Jacob’s reorganization of the transport and supply system. Jacob had formed and led an irregular regiment during the Mutiny and was viewed as “perhaps the greatest

84 Ibid., 233.
British cavalry commander of the century… Certainly no cavalry officer in India approached him in intellect or influence.”85 He decided that mobility and independence of action were key to troops, cavalry or otherwise. “In the organization of supply Jacob taught and practiced that each unit – infantry and cavalry – should be equipped with its own transport…In all modern armies the essence of his organization – ‘independence and mobility’ – has become axiomatic.”86

Certainly these changes and reforms improved the cavalry as a whole, and once the Indian regiments were, at least in part, absorbed into the regular establishment of the British Army these flexible and able officers began to have a greater influence on the course of cavalry tactics and reforms, and they used their experiences and the field-tested methods they already knew to meet new challenges on new battlefields. They would also begin to pass their ideas on to a new generation of cavalry troopers and officers, many of whom had finally earned rather than purchased their positions and thus were better able in many cases to make use of the lessons and experiences of those who had come before or with whom they had served as troopers and junior officers. Irregular tactics, unusual mounts, mounted infantry, novel supply arrangements, and room to experiment make India perhaps the most important font of innovation for cavalry in the nineteenth century, and certainly the impact of the Mutiny and its necessities would drive further innovative approaches and adaptive measures in future conflicts.

85 Ibid., 243.
86 Ibid., 244.
Chapter 3: The Anglo-Zulu War

The Anglo-Zulu War was a very brief affair, but cavalry was everywhere present for much of the conflict. Here the cavalry would perform acts for which it had never trained and adapt itself to the nature of both the conflict and the terrain in ways it had not previously. Innovative cavalry tactics in this conflict demonstrate the need for adaptation to local colonial conditions and the nature of the enemy to be fought, as well as demonstrating the trend toward more independence among officers in the field. These officers often eschewed doctrine in favor of locally specialized approaches to fighting in the various theaters of the empire.

Irregulars and regulars each took part in the war, and each played an important role in bringing the war to a swift close. Indeed, the irregular cavalry, an institution which had largely evolved in the Indian wars, conquests and suppressions earlier in the century, had by the Anglo-Zulu War become almost a full adjunct to the regular cavalry, absorbing the role that previously had been assigned to light cavalry until their role more or less merged with that of the heavies. For much of the middle and late nineteenth century, in fact, irregular cavalry raised in the colonies would become a regular feature of British colonial wars and would fall under the command of the general in charge of operations in whichever colony was in peril. This would be true of the brief but bloody Anglo-Zulu War no less than any other colonial war of the period.

The Anglo-Zulu War came about largely because of the Dutch Boer settlers who had become de facto citizens of the British Empire after 1806, when Britain annexed South Africa and began to impose their own laws upon the fiercely independent Boer people. A group of these became unhappy enough that they began to advocate for a mass exodus to areas to the north of South Africa, so far largely unsettled by whites although not unpopulated by native peoples. The Boer settlers, called Voortrekkers, clashed with the Zulu in several bloody conflicts during their
exodus. The Zulu people lived in and controlled the land the Voortrekkers wished to settle, and they eventually managed to make arrangements with the Zulus while becoming numerous enough to effectively defend themselves. By the mid-1850s Britain acknowledged the establishment of the South African Republic, also called the Transvaal, and the Orange Free State, the new territories settled by the Voortrekkers closer to the eastern coast of Africa and hard against the lands of the warlike Zulus. The British had initially been reluctant to grant recognition to these states, but they finally consented in what has been called a “shrewd political gamble to protect the valuable British coastal colony of Natal from the incessant conflicts of the African interior.

“After the 1850s and 1860s, Boer farmers has steadily encroached on Zulu-owned land in ever-increasing numbers…their settlements had continued to spread progressively towards the heartland of Zululand.”87 Despite repeated protests, first by King Mpande and then by his son, King Cetshwayo, were dismissed by the British and nothing was done to slow or stop the Boer intrusions into Zululand. “The Boers announced on 25 May 1875, in the name of the Boer Republic, that large areas of Zululand were their territory. Following this announcement, which seriously irritated King Cetshwayo, Boer settlers again began moving into Zululand and these new incursions were opposed by the Zulus with increasing vigour.”88 What began as angry rhetoric soon evolved into a series of armed clashes between the Boer settlers and the angry Zulus. “By 1878 the problem of white incursion [into Zulu territories] had grown out of control, and the British would be forced to act.”89

87 Ibid., 71.
88 Ibid., 72.
89 Adrian Greaves, Crossing the Buffalo: The Zulu War of 1879 (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2005), 48.
As the British began assembling their forces on the Natal border with Zululand, few on the British side “expected the Zulus to be a match for the British forces being assembled.” Still, they prepared a sizeable force and even recruited among the white settlers in Natal, the British colony adjacent to both the Voortrekker states and Zululand, in order to provide auxiliary forces and transport services for the army.

Having raised and assembled his forces, mainly British regulars augmented by colonial forces, Lieutenant General Lord Chelmsford, commander in chief of all forces in Natal, decided on his overall strategy. He divided his forces into five columns which would invade at different points and advance through Zulu territory before converging on the Zulu leader “Cetshwayo’s principle homestead of oNdini (Ulundi).” Forced by supply and transport issues to modify this plan, Lord Chelmsford decided on three invading columns with two held in reserve, with stockpiles of supplies near the border crossings in case they should be needed.

Lord Chelmsford believed the fight would be relatively brief and a British victory quick and assured. He took into the field a well-trained force with good guides, weapons, and knowledge of the terrain and conditions of the South African territories. “Colonel Pearson’s Coastal Column consisting of 1,800 Europeans and 2,000 auxiliaries and Colonel Wood’s Northern Column with 1,700 Europeans and 300 black auxiliaries” were to coordinate with “the main attacking Centre Column, commanded by Colonel Glyn with 1,600 Europeans and 2,500 auxiliaries” in moving toward their objective while dealing with any Zulu forces encountered along the way. The two smaller reserve columns were to remain inside Natal and guard the border from both Zulu

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90 Ibid., 49.
92 Greaves, 95.
incursions and to prevent Boers from crossing into Zululand and creating problems for the British campaign.93

The Zulu forces, according to British intelligence of the time, amounted to about 50,000 male warriors who could take the field, many not terribly experienced in warfare, particularly against Europeans. In spite of this, they had formidable numbers, although they employed no cavalry or mounted troops of their own and were essentially an all-infantry force. Some had firearms, although this was not common and in previous encounters with the Boers their marksmanship had been deficient. Most were armed with the *iklwa*, a sort of short spear, a shield made of tanned and hardened hide, and a wooden club called an *iwisa* or knob-kerrie. Chelmsford felt that these were primitive warriors and that British arms would have little trouble in bringing the conflict to a swift close, after which British terms could be imposed upon the Zulus.

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The Centre Column moved across the frontier on 11 January 1879 at Rorke’s Drift, headed more or less directly for Ulundi. On 20 January it stopped to make a temporary camp at Isandlwana. This camp may have been born of Chelmsford’s uncertainty regarding Zulu movements in his area, and a lack of intelligence generally regarding Zulu movements, and “Chelmsford chose to rely on extensive scouting and adequate warning of any attack. He reconnoitered in person, dissatisfied with his information on Zulu movements.”94 To this end Chelmsford sent away a large portion of his mounted strength, sending “Dartnell to the Nkandla

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93 The Boers were unhappy with the British plans and equally unhappy with the stance of the British and Natal governments that the Boers had precipitated the entire conflict through their improper actions and illegal annexation of Zulu lands.

Hills with mounted volunteers, and Londsdale south-east to the Inhlazatsche Hills with nearly all of the N.N.C. (16 companies).” These forces ultimately met and did indeed find a large body of enemy forces, perhaps fifteen hundred Zulus, whereupon they attacked but were driven off. Chelmsford was asked for reinforcements by messenger but refused to send these, in part because he suspected that the main portion of the Zulu impi, or attacking force, was close to his own position.

He was correct in this belief:

The main impi was indeed approaching, and on the morning of the 21st it had only just moved from where Chelmsford imagined it to be. It had moved slowly – on Cetshwayo’s orders – and was in need of supplies; the small detachments seen by the British were engaged in searching for cattle. Meanwhile the Zulu were resting, only too willing to wait for the forthcoming new moon of the 23rd which would signal an auspicious time for an attack.96

Unfortunately for Chelmsford’s command, he decided that the main Zulu force might be in the neighborhood where his mounted forces were encountering resistance. He decided to set off for what he believed to be the center of enemy activity and further divided his command, taking along with himself more mounted troops, a portion of the artillery and a contingent of infantry to assist the embattled mounted troops and sending the mounted infantry to reconnoiter Iziphezi Hill. This left at the base camp at Isandlwana “5 companies of the 1st/24th and 1 company of the 2nd/24th under Col. Pulleine, two guns under Brevet-Major Stuart-Smith, 100 Natal Mounted Police and Volunteers, and 600 Natal Natives.”97

95 Ibid., 16.
96 Ibid., 16-17.
97 Ibid., 17.
Troops arrived from the reserves at Rorke’s Drift but moved out immediately for Chelmsford’s position, believing incorrectly that he was about to be outflanked by the Zulu. These took along a small force of the Natal Natives and the rocket artillery which had been left behind at Isandlwana, further stripping the available forces in the camp. Shortly after their departure the main body of Zulus took position “At the one point Chelmsford had not scouted, near the edge of the Nquthu Plateau at the north east corner of the plain.” There it spent the night and was discovered by a small scouting party the next day which stumbled into its midst and then escaped rapidly. Thus discovered the Zulus launched their attack, and using their time-

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99 Ibid., 17.
honored method of the “bull-horn” formation the main body headed straight into the British camp while two wings of smaller size, the “bull-horns,” enveloped the British on either side, backing them up against the plateau to their rear and trapping them in place.

What followed next was chaotic and bloody. The British made their stand sometimes inside their camp amongst their tents and baggage, loading and firing in unison as they had been trained. As more and more of them fell to the spears and occasional gunshots of the Zulus the remainder fought on to the last, some being found after the battle laying in small piles of four or five men where they had fought and died. The Zulus had come in overwhelming numbers and even though the British fought hard enough to take a high toll on their killers, in the end the outcome was never in question. The British had failed to dig in or make any fighting positions, in part because the camp was meant to be temporary and in part because the ground was rough and rocky, making trenches or fighting positions of any kind impractical at best and impossible at worst. The British were also unprepared for the attack and in some cases were unable to form up properly. The volunteer forces lacked much of the discipline that was the hallmark of the British regular and so their fire tended to be less effective and controlled. Mounted forces were scarce in the camp, most being assigned elsewhere, and so the weight of a counter-charge by mounted troops and the mobile firepower of the irregulars and mounted infantry was sorely missed in the battle. After a hard-fought battle, the British forces were killed almost to the man and the Zulus took the field.

The impi then moved on, a large contingent of it descending on Rorke’s Drift and briefly investing the troops left behind there as a garrison along with the sick and injured from early in the campaign. Others turned to taking trophies and weapons from their defeated enemies on the battlefield, and eventually they all moved on. Chelmsford, returning to the scene of the battle too
late to have any effect on its outcome or to chase down the Zulus, was horrified by what he saw and the decimation of his forces.

The other columns did not go unscathed, although neither was to suffer the near-annihilation of the Centre Column. Pearson’s column moving on Eshowe encountered a strong Zulu force sometime on or just after 22 January 1879, estimated at some six thousand Zulu warriors. Instead of walking into the trap which the Zulu had planned, Pearson’s scouts prematurely sprung the Zulu plan and Pearson had time to form up his troops and bring both his artillery and the gatling gun he had with his force into play. Inflicting heavy casualties on the attacking Zulu impi, Pearson was able to move on to Eshowe where, after receiving word from Chelmsford of what had happened and that the main force of Zulus may be approaching his position, Pearson decided to dig in and build fortifications around Eshowe until he could be relieved, which would take almost two months.

The left column under Sir Evelyn Wood continued to be active, in part to take pressure off of the remnants of the Centre Column and Pearson’s column while one dug in and the other fell back and reorganized after being nearly wiped out. Moving against a small independent tribe at Hlobane, Wood’s men were confronted and driven away by a force of Zulus estimated at twenty thousand. Falling back to a position at Kambula, Wood’s forces faced the Zulus from a prepared position using the full weight of their artillery, including at least one rocket tube as well as cannon fire, and after more than four hours of battle the Zulus were forced to fall back having taken close to two thousand casualties in the exchange compared to a relatively small loss on the British side.

Chelmsford led a relief party to free up Pearson’s column in April and managed to drive off a Zulu impi of ten thousand once more using massed firepower including the Pearson column’s
gatling guns. Once relieved both the rescue column and Pearson’s column fell back to Natal to prepare for another invasion of Zululand. In the meantime Cetshwayo sent word through the Dutch that he was open to negotiation, but Chelmsford’s demands were beyond what Cetshwayo could concede, “…the return of the guns taken from the field at Isandlwana, together with the army’s stores and cattle, and the token surrender of a Zulu regiment in order to break the morale of the rest.”  

For Cetshwayo this was impossible:

Cetshwayo could not comply with these demands, however much he may have wished to do so. His army was not what Chelmsford thought it to be. Despite many of the regiments being shattered, their morale was still high, their ignorance of their enemy’s strength was almost total, and there were entire regiments of young men whose brand-new spears had not yet been ‘washed’ in blood.  

Backed into a corner, Cetshwayo had no choice but to fight on. Chelmsford decided this time on a direct advance into Zululand to confront his enemy at Ulundi, and upon his entry into enemy territory adopted a marching formation unique at the time for a British army on the move. It was essentially a square with cavalry at its front and arrayed in formation inside the square. Along the hollow square’s sides and rear were infantry in column of twos, and inside the square were wagons with supplies enough to last ten days as well as cavalry and native volunteers. The entire force maintained this formation on the march so that the entire square could be halted and prepared to go into action with little notice. Buller’s irregular cavalry served as scouts for the army, ranging ahead and to the sides in search of the Zulu forces.

100 Ibid., 28.
101 Ibid., 28.
Battle was joined after Buller’s irregulars made contact with the Zulus and retreated to the square where Chelmsford deployed his troops for battle. The Zulu attack fell on the square with a vengeance, but the Zulus had not had time to fully learn the use of the Martini-Henry rifles they had captured, so their fire was ineffective with only a few rounds landing home in the midst of the square. Firearms availing them little, the Zulus threw themselves at the square and were bloodily repulsed by rifle, cannon and Gatling gun fire. Once the Zulus had been thoroughly broken, even their reserves fleeing after incurring heavy casualties, the 17th Lancers made a sortie from within the square formation to run down and further scatter the shattered Zulus. This action stands as the only time a traditional cavalry charge would be carried off during the six

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Figure 6

[Image of a map showing the Battle of Ulundi]
month war, and it has been called “little more than a sop to their cavalryman’s vanity,” although in fairness to the 17th Lancers this was in fact a part of their job, to exploit a broken enemy and send them from the field in total panic, riding down as many as possible and setting the rest to flight from which it would be difficult to rally them. Completely defeated, Cetshwayo now had no recourse but to accede to Lord Chelmsford’s demands. For the British Army the war was now over and the politicians would decide the fate of the Zulu nation.

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Despite the brevity of the Anglo-Zulu War cavalry had a significant part to play. In every battle and encounter British cavalry played a role, whether irregulars and volunteers or the regular troopers of the 17th Lancers, British troopers were ubiquitous on the battlefields of Zululand.

Perhaps one of the most innovative and adaptive features of the cavalry in the colonies was the system by which it was recruited and trained. In Natal, and indeed the rest of South Africa in 1879, there were no regular British cavalry regiments available with the outbreak of war. To make up for this deficiency, and to keep a ready reserve of mounted troops for use in conflict, the British administration developed a system not unlike the yeomanry system in the British Isles.

In Britain, the Corps of Yeomanry Cavalry, or Volunteer Cavalry, were “raised in various counties. In war their chief object was to assist in repelling invasion. In peace it became ‘the suppression of Riots and Tumults within the County.’” Until 1855 the Yeomanry fell under

103 McBride, 30.
control of the Home Department, but after 1855 it was subsumed by the War Office and became more an adjunct of the regular cavalry in policing and riot suppression. These regiments often varied in size and quality of both equipment and training until in the 1860 a higher degree of standardization was introduced. These bodies also served in times of emergency as a source of ready and at least partially trained replacements for cavalry regiments later in the nineteenth century. After the 1850s their police role was reduced but they continued to serve in the latter role as a source of ready replacement or as a cadre for filling out existing regiments to established strength.

While the Yeomanry was gradually reduced in importance at home, in the colonies such troops were becoming more important. In India such groups were not unknown, even though regular cavalry existed and was relatively plentiful. In other, smaller colonies where regular cavalry were rarely stationed outside of an impending crisis, such a system was exceedingly useful. If hostilities erupted it could take months for regulars to make an appearance, and in extreme climates such as Africa and India it could take man and especially horses a long time to acclimate to the conditions. Locally raised forces using either local mounts or well-acclimatized horses from home could serve to fill in the when regular cavalry might be a long time entering service or even shipping to the theater of conflict.

In Natal prior to the invasion of Zululand such forces were abundant. Only one was established in the mold of a regular cavalry regiment, the Natal Hussars, although its numbers were small and it was a volunteer force. It also forsook the typical sabers as the weapon of the hussar for carbines and bandoliers of ammunition. It amounted to roughly forty officers and men serving during the Anglo-Zulu War, but it came closest perhaps in spirit to regular British

cavalry forces. It was supplemented by a plethora of other such units raised in Natal for use against hostiles as well as to police the frontiers and towns. These included: the Natal Carbineers, Buffalo Border Guard, Newcastle Mounted Rifles, Victoria Mounted Rifles, Stanger Mounted Rifles, Durban Mounted Rifles, Alexandra Mounted Rifles, Isipingo Mounted Rifles, and various mounted police units. These forces represented what amounted to the colonial yeomanry, many bearing more resemblance to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the United States Cavalry forces deployed against the Native Americans in North America than the regular British cavalry they would be called upon to supplement in times of war. Yet they were also far better adapted to combat and life in a frontier setting, adapted to their environment and well-versed in fighting under the colonial conditions than the 17th Lancers who would be deployed from home to take part in the war.

In its way this was a tremendous adaptation of both the yeomanry system to colonial conditions, for which it was well-suited, as well as a colonial evolution of the cavalry which foreshadowed later events. These men fell back on firepower and marksmanship rather than weight of horse in the charge and steel weapons in the melee. Only officers and NCOs regularly carried a saber, and even they did not necessarily carry them on campaign. Every man wore at least one bandolier of ammunition and a carbine or rifle, usually the government-supplied Swinburn-Henry carbine which fired the same round as the Martini-Henry rifle issued to the infantry forces. There were no lancers among the colonial forces and no such training ever seems to have taken place.

As a supplement to these volunteer forces were irregular cavalry, also raised in the colonies. The African irregulars resembled even more closely the Indian model of irregular cavalry, although they also left behind the saber and lance in favor of the carbine or rifle. As with other
such units elsewhere in the empire, the irregulars were led by British officers, usually but not always from the cavalry although typically with at least some cavalry experience, and were composed of troopers who signed on for tours of duty for a set period, as with the regular British trooper or soldier. These terms were, however, generally of much lesser duration than among the British regulars. Irregulars in Natal were provided with their horses and saddles, unlike the Indian levies, and each was issued a Martini-Henry carbine, although shortages sometimes meant other types, such as the Snyder carbine, were issued to recruits. The irregulars included: the Natal Light Horse, the Frontier Light Horse, Baker’s Horse, Lonsdale’s Horse, the Natal Horse, Carbutt’s Border Rangers, the Kaffrarian Riflemen or Vangiard, Raaff’s Transvaal Rangers, Weatherly’s Border Horse, and the Transvaal Burgher Force.

The real innovation in the Anglo-Zulu War was the combination of the raising of irregulars in much the same way as in India with the yeomanry system from Britain. By turning both into a tool to keep mounted forces ready and available in times of need, and maintaining them as both a supplement to the regulars when they arrived in theater as well as using them as proper forces in their own right, Chelmsford was able to field more mounted troopers than could have been shipped in time to fight in the six month war. The combination of the two systems meant that reliable and well-trained cavalry and mounted infantry were immediately available to the small colony, which lacked a strong presence in terms of regular troops of the British Army. Indeed:

There is no doubt that the service of Colonial troops in the Zulu War was invaluable to Lord Chelmsford’s army. The Irregulars – white and black – and Natal Volunteers, along with Imperial Mounted Infantry, provided the only viable mounted force in the field for much of the war. Without them the invasion could not have taken place; and their importance did not diminish later when two regiments of regular cavalry arrived. The European cavalry horses found conditions of climate and forage difficult, and were unable

106 Ibid., 35.
to undertake the constant and far ranging patrols and other exhausting duties carried out so effectively by these frontiersmen.¹⁰⁷

These troops, notably Buller’s command which included elements of the Transvaal Rangers, Baker’s Horse, and Kaffrarian Vanguards, also used unorthodox methods to fight the Zulus in the field. On at least two occasions Buller’s men placed themselves in harm’s way as a sort of bait to the enemy. The first, at Kambula after Wood’s column was forced to retreat from Hlobane, saw Wood ordering Buller and his mounted troopers to attack the right “horn” of the Zulu formation in order to provoke them into a premature attack in advance of the “chest” and “left horn” of the Zulu formation. This seems to have worked remarkably well, and after Buller’s men rode out and fired at close range into the masses Zulu formation “a move that brought an instant response. Buller’s men only just regained the laager in time.”¹⁰⁸ No mere raid, this action was undertaken by men who were “well practiced in the tactic of provocation” and who were willing and able to ride “within 100 yards of the Zulus” before opening fire and bloodying their noses sufficiently to provoke a chase.¹⁰⁹ This chase caused the Zulus to break their formation and to run piecemeal upon the British artillery which immediately began firing case shot into the massed swarm of Zulu warriors.

On the second occasion during the second invasion by Chelmsford at the climactic battle near Ulundi, Buller’s men were ranging ahead of the mobile square when they managed to prematurely trip the ambush which the Zulus had set for them. They then “engaged in a running fight all the way back to the square which grudgingly opened to let the horsemen in.”¹¹⁰ Buller’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 43.
¹⁰⁸ McBride, 26.
¹⁰⁹ Greaves, 283.
¹¹⁰ McBride, 29.
men had once again managed to provoke a chase and disrupt the plans of the Zulus, drawing them into the massed fire of artillery, Gatling guns, and rifle fire of the British square. Some have suggested that this was an accidental provocation, but as the incoming mass of Zulus slowed, Buller’s men rode out once more “using Buller’s proven tactic of provocation, rode to within 100 yards of the Zulu force and raked its leading ranks with several volleys of rifle fire. This blatant and bloody taunt enraged the Zulus, who charged.”

Buller had hit upon a tactic that seemed never to fail against the Zulus, and he put it into effective use on more than one occasion. It is difficult to imagine a regular British cavalry force performing these kinds of attacks, but the officers leading irregulars were free to develop effective and creative methods for employing cavalry. By taking advantage of the different organization and armament of the volunteers and irregulars, cavalry officers like Buller could seek alternatives to the mounted charge which would prove more effective against the colonial enemies and opponents of the British Army and administrations. They also took advantage of the flexibility and utility of the rifle or carbine armed cavalry, engaging in massed hit-and-run style attacks meant to draw in the enemy and disrupt his plans and formations as well as eating at his flanks and driving off his scouts while gaining valuable intelligence for the British forces.

In form and function these troopers have much in common with the United States cavalry during the American Civil War and the Plains Wars against the Indians, and in each case the cavalry formed as it did in response to the needs of the army and the conditions in which it was to serve. In many ways this short war would anticipate developments during the Boer War in 1899, where regular cavalry would learn to fight in the same way and to carry rifles while leaving behind the lance.

111 Greaves, 309.
Another adaptation to conditions in this war which foreshadowed the Boer War was the employment of mounted infantry, essentially Dragoons. While nearly all of the cavalry in this conflict functioned as such, this is an early example of previously all-infantry forces either partially or completely mounting on horses in order to get them into battle more quickly and to allow them to shift positions and even retreat with more expediency. The Kafrarian Vanguard is an example of this type of trooper, initially infantry in organization but mounted in order to increase their flexibility and the weight of mounted troops, which proved to be more useful on the open stretches of veldt in South Africa.

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The Anglo-Boer War is one of the shortest of the colonial wars fought by Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria, but it provides a valuable foreshadowing of future events in Africa as well as cavalry developments, both official and improvised. While the highest levels of the army’s command structure continued to advocate cavalry built on the Continental and largely Prussian model, events elsewhere forced the cavalry to conform itself to circumstances. In the war against the Zulus every type of cavalry was employed, as well as mounted infantry, yet the doctrinal uses of cavalry were rare and came only as the closing act in a larger series of events. Even when the regular cavalry did make its charge it did it under unusual circumstances, not waiting at the corner of the battlefield to swoop down at the right moment but rather waiting inside Chelmsford’s mobile square formation behind a wall of infantry until it was time to act, and then surging forth from the parted ranks of infantry to sweep a broken enemy from the field and ride down its warriors as they fled for their lives. Certainly we can see in the Anglo-Zulu
War a flexibility of both officers and the cavalry, and we can observe the seeds of future developments which would change the way in which the British cavalry forces went to war on a more permanent basis.
In the Sudan, British forces were not so far removed from their homeland as in some other parts of the Empire, yet the distances to be travelled and the harsh desert terrain meant significant obstacles to transportation and communication. The harsh climate and vast desert also called for adaptive strategies; horses were unsuited to the desert and could not operate on little or no water on a daily basis. The wide-open spaces afforded by the desert meant that firearms would be greatly advantageous to the British, especially since the Mahdist forces they opposed were deficient in modern rifles and had virtually no artillery to speak of. Here again we see the British force commanders and individual soldiers rising to the occasion and adapting themselves to the situation, sidestepping doctrine formulated for Continental warfare in favor of innovative approaches to their problems. Personal initiative played a significant role as well, as the Camel Corps was composed of volunteers from picked regiments and once in the desert the Camel Corps had little hope of regular or meaningful communications with other elements of the British forces and thus had to achieve their objectives on their own.

Britain’s involvement in the Sudan began when British forces entered Egypt to put down the nationalist revolt led by Colonel Ahmed Arabi Bey, “the son of a small village sheikh. The revolt was backed by the army and swept through the whole country.\textsuperscript{112} The French also had vested interests in Egypt and joined the British in a joint action against the revolt. Indeed, French involvement prompted the British to act, with Gladstone fearing that the French might “go in alone to restore order. Were that to happen France would gain command of the Suez Canal

which was of paramount importance to Britain’s communications with India.”

Prime Minister Gladstone was further pushed to action by members of his cabinet and public opinion.

The War Office had been preparing for an Egyptian expedition for some months, and transport was arranged for a force that would ultimately number nearly 35,000. After a series of battles in which Arabi’s forces were defeated, sometimes quite rapidly, Arabi was forced to surrender at Cairo and he and other leaders of the revolt were sent into exile to Ceylon.

The British now occupied Egypt along with their French allies, and began maneuvering to eject the French from Egypt. Once they accomplished this, the British began reforming and training the Egyptian Army as well as rebuilding the Egyptian government. The return of the Khedive Ismail to Egypt so that he could lead his people, however, did not develop as the British had hoped, and the Khedive “retained no authority but that which British power could lend him.”

Having hoped for a speedy withdrawal from Egypt, the British found themselves instead supporting an unpopular regime and protecting yet another far-flung part of the world in which they had a strong interest. “When Britain conquered Egypt, no one quite realized that she had also acquired all of Egypt’s problems, nor did anyone quite understand the full extent of Egypt’s responsibilities. There was, for example, the Sudan: Egypt’s pride, and one of her major problems.”

The Sudan was a million square miles of desert, swamp, rock, thorn and scrub where, under its blistering, baking sun, lived a medley of savage and uncongenial tribes, fierce, though and uncompromising. Since 1822 Egypt had ruled there after her own fashion – which was badly – and had tried to exploit this land and its peoples. There was, however, little to exploit. The Sudan’s principal export was slaves, Blacks caught in the primitive south and of the country and used as soldiers or sold as slaves throughout the Arab world. But Egypt was under great pressure from the European powers, particularly Britain, to suppress the slave trade. The vast country proved extremely difficult to govern; even when Europeans

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113 Ibid., 270.
114 Ibid., 308.
115 Byron Farwell, Queen Victoria’s Little Wars (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972), 270.
were employed to rule, it proved an almost impossible task to establish and maintain order among the wild and turbulent tribes in the north and the primitive and fearful tribes in the south.\textsuperscript{116}

Aggravating matters was a growing unrest in the Sudan, “that vast territory to the south over which since 1820 Egypt had held shaky sway.”\textsuperscript{117} Led by Mahdi Mahommed Ahmed, and supported by commoners and merchants, the growing insurrection in the Sudan was “an attempt to supplant Cairo’s fragile foreign rule, sometimes oppressive, often inefficient, by a religious regime.”\textsuperscript{118} Major-General Charles George Gordon’s efforts, as the governor-general of the Sudan, to eliminate the slave trade in the region created resentment among the powerful merchant class, and further inflamed the Sudanese against the government in Egypt and its British allies. By 1882, the entire Sudan south of Khartoum was in open revolt. With the threat against Egypt’s southern border growing, British and Egyptian forces were dispatched to the region. Initially victorious, the large army led by Colonel William Hicks was annihilated at Kashgil. “Faced with this major catastrophe, Gladstone’s government realized that the Sudan must either be reconquered at unacceptable expense, or be evacuated. Evacuation was therefore chosen.”\textsuperscript{119}

The Gordon Relief Mission became necessary when Major-General Gordon became trapped at Khartoum in the Sudan by the forces of the Mahdi Mahommed Ahmed. Gordon had entered Khartoum as part of a mission to evacuate British and Egyptian troops and civilians as part of a more general withdrawal from the Sudan, which Britain had decided to abandon as part of its

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 270.
\textsuperscript{117} Anglesey, 308.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 308.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 308.
Egyptian territories. Gordon and his forces became surrounded and besieged in the city and sent messengers at great peril to request assistance.

The British had decided to evacuate and abandon the Sudan because the time and cost required to reconquer the region from the Mahdist forces were believed to be prohibitive by the government in England. The Mahdi and his chief lieutenant, Osman Digna, had taken advantage of a revolt further north which had distracted the British and drawn off their army in order to begin their own insurrection. Gordon had taken some British and Egyptian troops south to evacuate and after being attacked repeatedly had holed up in Khartoum.

Forces were dispatched from Britain under Major-General Sir Garnet Wolseley, along with Voyageurs from Canada to man the boats which Wolseley planned to use to move a significant portion of his forces and all assembled “at Korti, where the Nile ends its great north-eastward loop.”120 The nature of these forces would be relatively standard for a British field force in the nineteenth century, composed mainly of infantry with a complimentary force of cavalry and support personnel. The cavalry in this campaign would, however, be asked to perform in a way which was quite foreign to it, and it would rise to the occasion in spite of the unusual nature of its service.

* * *

The cavalry in this campaign would be placed under command of Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart, as would the entire Desert Column, the force sent to ride through the desert.

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120 Anglesey, 320.
“The mainstay of Stewart’s force would be the highly innovative Camel Corps…it consisted of four composite regiments, two from the infantry and two from the cavalry, which together amounted to 94 officers and 1,600 men.”121 The Camel Corps represents an interesting tactical adaptation of the cavalry for the specific conditions of desert warfare, one which the cavalry troopers seem to have taken to quite well. Desert conditions are notoriously difficult for horses to acclimate to, and horses generally require more water than is readily available or easily transported, and the desert sand creates footing which is hard going for horses causing them to be worn out quickly. Camels, on the other hand, are adapted for such conditions and require a good deal less water. They also require it less frequently, and camels tend to be capable of carrying a greater load than horses, particularly in a sandy and arid environment.

Wolseley’s plan was to create a desert column mounted almost entirely on camels and using camels for transport. This Camel Corps could traverse the desert and seize wells as well as secure the landing area for the River Column. If conditions necessitated a further move against Khartoum, the Camel Corps could push ahead of the River Column and relieve some of the pressure being levied against Gordon and his defenders.

In many ways this was in keeping with typical cavalry doctrine. The Camel Corps would use its mobility and speed to steal a march on the enemy and push them out while they were disorganized and unprepared. This would be the rough equivalent of a reconnaissance in force, with action taken only when the opportunity presented itself or, as it would unfold, if action were unavoidable. Their projected actions against the Mahdist forces investing Khartoum would amount to raids against the enemy’s rear areas and supply lines, which would also be typical cavalry functions, particularly light cavalry. Once the Camel Corps and its various adjuncts,

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121 Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Snook, Into the Jaws of Death: British Military Blunders, 1879-1900 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 260.
collectively known as the Desert Column, joined forces with Wolseley’s River Column around Khartoum, it would revert to regular cavalry operations as part of the larger army.

What was not typical was the composition of the Camel Corps and the way in which it was expected to fight. Wolseley envisioned the formation of “‘a small flying column’ to act as mounted infantry.”\textsuperscript{122} This was a great departure from the doctrine prevalent in the middle and late nineteenth century, which of course stressed the need to come to grips with the enemy through the charge. Instead of weight of horse and the psychological impact of being attacked with saber and lance, these cavalry men would be relying on the weight of their firearms and their ability to fight dismounted. Only one contingent of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Hussars would serve as regular cavalry, mounted on horses and relying on their sabers. Even these would make concessions to the terrain, however, trading in their English mounts for Arabian horses better suited to the climate though smaller than their regular mounts.

The majority of the Camel Corps would be drawn from the cavalry regiments either already in theater or in transit when Wolseley began formulating his plans. The Heavy Camel Regiment, for example, drew ten detachments, and:

These were found from the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Life Guards, the Royal Horse Guards (Blues), the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Dragoon Guards (Bays), the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} Dragoon Guards, the 1\textsuperscript{st} Dragoons (Royals), the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Dragoons (Scots Greys), and the 5\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} Lancers. From each came two officers, two sergeants (or, in the case of the Household Cavalry, one corporal-major and two corporals of horse), two corporals, one bugler or trumpeter and thirty-eight men, a total of twenty-three officers and 431 men.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{122} Anglesey, 320.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 321.
There was also a Light Camel Regiment, consisting of “twenty-one officers and 388 men from the 3rd, 4th, 7th, 10th, 11th, 15th, 18th, 20th, and 21st Hussars.” The remainder of the men were drawn from the Foot Guards, Royal Marines Light Infantry and the Mounted Infantry Camel Corps “whose personnel came from the mounted infantry companies of battalions either already serving in Egypt or at home and elsewhere.”

While such a composition was unusual for British cavalry, which tended to operate alone as an independent arm, more unusual was the fact that it was an all-volunteer force of men, with none under the age of twenty-two years allowed. This, taken with the unusual composition of the force described above, suggests a certain flexibility and adaptability on the part of the regular cavalry trooper as well as his officers. Here were volunteers willing to forsake the main thrust of their training and resort to fire action as their primary function, on foot and supported by infantry in the same role. Indeed, those recruited were “to be marksmen or first-class shots,” an unusual requirement for a British cavalry trooper in the nineteenth century, and “these regiments were drawn exclusively from the Guards and the Cavalry, the ‘smartest’ regiments in the land.”

Not everyone was pleased with Wolseley’s decision to employ cavalry in this way, particularly the Duke of Cambridge, the Commander-in-Chief and cousin to the queen. Long a conservative voice stressing the cavalry traditions and doctrine over innovative and unusual approaches, the duke is said to have found these dispositions “outrageous” and to have possibly brought them to the attention of the queen herself.

124 Ibid., 321-322.
125 Ibid., 322.
126 Ibid., 322.
127 Snook, 261.
128 Anglesey, 322.
The Camel Corps faced a number of problems in the field, the Duke of Cambridge’s objections notwithstanding. Notably there was a shortage of both proper riding camels, riding harness for the camels already procured, and perhaps most telling a general ignorance on the part of officers and troopers regarding the camels themselves. There are a number of accounts of camels wandering or running off with their riders attempting to control them and failing, sometimes hanging by an arm or leg in a nearly face down position, working hard to prevent themselves from falling head first into the sand.\textsuperscript{129}

Everything that could be done to find more camels and harness was enacted, but the Camel Corps would go into action short of such animals and would need to employ the supply camels it could procure in a series of processions back and forth across the desert to keep the Desert Column fed and supplied. In the little time allowed to them before operations commenced, the men would practice riding the new mounts as much as possible, many finding the camels far less favorable than their horses, though stolid and unlikely to bolt or spook easily. These problems were not atypical when improvisational methods were employed, since improvisation tends to belie advanced planning by its very nature and in the event they were overcome well enough that the Camel Corps was able to perform its mission admirably.

A more pressing need was to educate the mounted troopers in the correct methods of infantry drill, especially as it pertained to the mobile square formation which was to be used. Cavalry troopers had, of course, participated in such formations and seen the infantry at their work, but their task was generally either to operate outside the square, as the 19\textsuperscript{th} Hussars would during this campaign, or to wait inside for the opportunity to charge out against a disordered enemy as it fell back from the square. This would be the first time many of these troopers, if not all of them, \textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 327. There are accounts in the personal writing of troopers and officers who served as well, some quite amusing.
participated as a part of the square itself, and it was essential that they be able to maintain the integrity and cohesion of the formation. Without such, the formation would fall apart and the individuals in it would be vulnerable to attack from the flanks and rear.

To counteract this possibility, the so-called Camel Drill was enacted. This was basically a crash course in infantry drill in which the cavalry participated along with the infantry and mounted infantry contingents. It practiced the maneuvers of the square and the implementation of the infantry fire drill. There was, not unsurprisingly, some resistance to learning infantry drill from the officers of the cavalry, but they came around in part because the “Cavalry dismounted drill is too loose a formation for working in a square, also when mixed up with infantry one drill is advisable, and that must necessarily be the one practiced by infantry.”\(^\text{130}\) While some of this resistance was almost certainly caused by conservatism on the part of the officers, they likely objected at least in part to having to learn an entirely new mode of drill in what amounted to a few weeks while also learning to ride, handle and care for new mounts which were wholly unfamiliar to them. This was a practical concern, since the officers and men were essentially being asked to assimilate two new methods of operation in a relatively short time, and to do these with proficiency which would allow them to ward off hostile forces in potentially large numbers. Such a large change in any military formation in any age typically takes months to perform and even longer to perfect, and it seems only natural that some officers and men would be dubious at best, and that outright resistance would form if some felt they were being asked to do the impossible in a very limited span of time.

In spite of this limited resistance to such an overwhelming task, the Camel Corps seems to have integrated quite well, and to have reached a surprising degree of proficiency in the new drill

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 327.
and with the new mounts. This is borne out not only by their performance in the field, particularly in combat, but by the reports of the officers and men involved in the training. Within the two weeks spent training at Korti, “Considerable proficiency in camel drill was gained,”\textsuperscript{131} and on parade near the end of that time the Camel Corps demonstrated proficiency at deploying from column to square with rapidity while successfully hobbling and controlling the camels in the center of the formation. Its problems were by no means over, however, and “When Wolseley inspected the Corps at least ten men fell off [their camels] at the trot.”\textsuperscript{132} Still, it persevered and managed, when the time came, to form up and repulse the attacks of the Mahdists.

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Wolseley assembled his troops at Korti. His plan was to form his force into two components. The first, main body of troops, called the River Column, would embark aboard the large boats he had brought from England, which would be manned by the Canadians. These boats would be maneuvered through the cataracts in the Nile which lay between the starting point at Korti and Berber, Wolseley’s initial destination. From there he would advance on Khartoum, if this proved necessary, and recover Gordon from his besieged position.

The second component of Wolseley’s force would be the Camel Corps, a picked force of volunteer cavalry which would “act as mounted infantry.”\textsuperscript{133} These oddly mounted cavalry

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 327.  
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 328.  
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 320.}
troopers would take “the short-cut across the 176 miles of desert from Korti to Metemmeh. It was to capture that place, having rendezvoused with the four armed steamers which Gordon was believed to have sent there, and if necessary push forward a small advance party to Khartoum 100 miles further on.” If Khartoum was perceived as being on the cusp of falling to the Mahdist forces, the Camel Corps would attack and attempt to relieve the siege. If not, it would coordinate in a larger assault with the River Column on the besieging Mahdists.

Figure 7

134 Ibid., 320-321.
135 http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol066sm.html
Wolseley’s plan seemed sound initially but quickly ran into problems. The river route seemed faster but maneuvering through the cataracts was much more difficult than originally thought and on at least one occasion the boats had to be removed from the water and hauled overland around a cataract rather than maneuvered through it. Supplies were difficult to procure and even more difficult to transport since there were not enough camels for both the camel force and its supply as well as for the River Column’s needs.

The Camel Corps advanced as far as Gakdul, roughly forty miles from Abu Klea, where it was forced to stop and build up supplies while also taking advantage of the wells to water both men and mounts before moving on again some days later.

With sufficient force built up, the Camel Corps moved toward Abu Klea where it encountered a significant force of Mahdists and gave battle. The Camel Corps employed the square formation first adopted in the Anglo-Zulu War and now a standard tactic for armies operating in open, hostile country.
On this occasion the formation did not work precisely as it should, in part because the left rear of the square kept falling out of position because of the camels’ reluctance to advance into gunfire. The rear of the square had similar issues with straggling and thus eroding the square’s integrity and usefulness. Since the strength of the square lay in its close-knit formation and mutual support from adjacent units, any disruption such as straggling created difficulty in maintaining such mutual support as well as opening gaps through which the enemy could enter the formation, placing them in effect behind the other formations in the square.

\[136\] \url{http://alamosports.proboards.com/thread/698}
The 19th Lancers were also not in the formation, reconnaissance being “in the hands of a two-troop squadron of horsed cavalry, eight officers and 127 men” from this regiment. On this occasion it had been detailed to intercept and drive off a force of mixed Mahdist infantry and cavalry on the square’s right flank. This had the effect of removing it from both the formation and the battle, although some accounts record them as assisting with dismounted carbine fire. If so, its assistance would not have been terribly important nor effective, since it were outside the formation and would have had to keep from firing at its fellow British soldiers while firing at the enemy. Since the square had been overlapped and briefly breached, it could only have been firing at the rearmost Mahdists or those retreating.

In spite of their difficulties, the square managed to drive off the attacking Mahdist forces with relatively few losses. As the Mahdists surrounded the formation the British troops kept up a withering fire aided by their few artillery pieces. Many Mahdists were killed in the initial attack, but the skirmishers to the left rear of the square had not yet come in and were “concentrated upon the enemy sharp-shooters, with whom they were exchanging shots, [and] they did not soon enough perceive the attack upon the main body.” Finally seeing the danger the skirmishers retreated toward the square, impeding the ability of their comrades in formation to bring their rifles and carbines to bear on the pursuing Mahdists. The square was also forced to open its formation in order to allow the skirmishers to re-enter the formation, compromising its integrity further.

“Running…the Arabs now hurled themselves…into the opening of the square,” wreaking havoc among the wounded sheltered in the center of the formation along with the baggage

137 Snook, 262.
138 Anglesey, 335-336.
139 Ibid., 337.
camels and support personnel. The fighting became hand-to-hand, swords, sabers and spears
taking the place of carbine and rifle in the center and left of the square, with a few officers
engaging the enemy at close range with buckshot-loaded shotguns. While the mass of camels
made the melee confusing and difficult, “it was the camels who largely saved the situation. But
for their solid, impassive mass, over and around which the action now raged, there would have
been nothing to stop the enemy penetrating straight through and speedily to the inside faces of
the square.”

Fortunately for the British, the troopers to either side of the breach extended themselves in
order close the breach, and the mounted infantry and troopers on the inside face of the square
turned inward to deal with the now trapped Mahdists. As they turned and attempted to retreat
they were gunned down _en masse_, with none believed to have escaped. The Mahdist forces
outside the square, thrown back by the fire of the British and demoralized by the fate of their
brethren inside the British formation, retreated slowly while maintaining a desultory fire. The
brutality of the fighting and slaughter inside the square remained with the Mahdists, and “It
became firmly established in the minds of the Mahdi’s men that the square had been deliberately
opened so as to let them in, and then closed so as to facilitate the killing of every one of them.
Certain it is that not one who entered remained alive in it.”

The Camel Corps pushed ahead into Abu Klea and then finally managed to connect with
Wolseley’s delayed River Column. By the time they rendezvoused it was too late; Khartoum had
fallen and Gordon was dead along with thousands of soldiers and citizens of the city which had
held out for months awaiting relief and rescue. The campaign was a failure, in part because of
the delays from the government in London which was reluctant to engage in any empire-building

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140 Ibid., 338.
141 Ibid., 338-339.
activities. The Queen ultimately intervened and the mission was launched, but the delay was costly to Britain’s Egyptian venture in money, prestige and manpower.

The mission was a failure and the campaign for naught, and the Camel Corps shouldered some of the responsibility. Wolseley criticized the unit, saying he was:

…very sorry about this Heavy Cavalry Camel Regiment. The men and officers were magnificent, but not being drilled as infantry, they did not have the confidence in their rifles that an infantry regiment would have had. It is a dangerous experiment, using cavalry as foot soldiers under such a trial, but being picked men they ought to have done better. I confess I am somewhat disappointed in them.¹⁴²

This seems unfair upon a second look, considering the hardships faced by the Camel Corps and the overall excellent performance of the unit in the face of the enemy. It drove off the Mahdists without taking inordinate casualties, maintained a formation to which it was, as cavalry, unaccustomed, and it levelled effective and controlled fire into the enemy ranks which served to halt their attacks and finally send them from the field. This was done with fewer than the established number of troops and without sufficient water for the men or mounts until Abu Klea was taken and the wells accessed therein. Although the skirmishers made a critical error and disrupted the square at a critical moment, the troopers and mounted infantry quickly recovered and mitigated the mistake with brutal hand-to-hand fighting and effective fire action combined. It was also the only portion of the entire British force that actually achieved its objectives in spite of inadequate supplies and camels to carry it. Until the later fighting against the Mahdist forces it was the only British formation to deliver a defeat to the Mahdi’s forces in the Sudan.

¹⁴² Ibid., 340-341. As quoted in Anglesey.
The Camel Corps represents one of the clearest examples of the adaptability and flexibility of the British cavalry during the nineteenth century. Entirely a tactical adaptation, it was carried out by a group of volunteers in just over two weeks and encompassed learning new drill, new riding techniques for new mounts, and caring for the new mounts. Had this been a small group of volunteers it might be possible to say that it was merely an isolated incident, but the Camel Corps was composed of over a thousand men, mostly drawn from the cavalry and mounted infantry, and chosen from across a broad range of cavalry regiments. This suggests something at an institutional level amongst the cavalry which made them flexible and willing to adapt to new situations and methods and moreover able to do so successfully and with a degree of enthusiasm which one would not expect from deeply conservative officers and men.
Chapter Five: The Anglo-Boer War

By the time the British went to war against the Dutch Boer settlers in South Africa, the cavalry had established an ability to conform itself to local conditions and to do what was necessary in order to prevail under some of the most trying conditions in the world. Their handling of the Boers would be no different. The initial stages of the war allowed for a Continental approach, but as the war progressed and the battles between opposing armies gave way to battles between isolated detachments the cavalry, and the army in general, had to develop new ways of waging war to counter the irregular tactics of the Boers. As the war became one of smaller and smaller units fighting in unusual circumstances, the personal initiative of the junior officers and NCOs became more and more important. This is one of the few wars in which the British cavalry would use both regular doctrine and adaptive tactics together, and some of the adaptations from this conflict would find their way into the official doctrine of the British cavalry, especially the adoption of the rifle for the mounted trooper.

The Boers of South Africa are the descendants of Dutch settlers who came to the region in the 1600s. They established trading and replenishing stations along the South African coast for their vast fleet, which travelled trade routes along the African coast and beyond to India and Asia. When the British decided to annex the Dutch territories to deny the Dutch access to Asian trade and to remove their bases, which the British viewed as a threat, the stage was set for conflict.

Boer resistance to British rule was light at first, but as the decades progressed resentment grew as the Boers came to view British imperial rule as unlawful power exercised by those with
no vested interest in the colonies. Many Boers eventually chose to leave the British-controlled areas and move further inland and to the north, creating the Orange Free State and Transvaal, moves which would eventually cause friction with the Zulu tribes and bring about the Anglo-Zulu War. Increasing pressure from the British, who continued to annex territories surrounding the Boer states, led to a conflict in the 1880s which went poorly for the British and ended in a diplomatic compromise while setting the stage for the final conflict between the British and the Boers.

When the Boers rebelled against British rule in South Africa, the British did not anticipate a long or costly war. Indeed, “When hostilities began in October 1899, easy victory appeared a foregone conclusion” for most British citizens and as in other wars before and since, a number forecast the end of fighting by Christmas of 1899. The Boers were dismissed as farmers, undisciplined and disorganized, and lacking any military training or structure, while the British saw their forces as the epitome of the professional army and a force which had managed to overcome all challenges throughout the nineteenth century.

Yet the Boers would force the British to fight them for three years, even though they could not field more than 60,000 men at their height against a British force that would eventually number nearly 450,000. The British would quickly find their efforts to bring the Boers to heel inhibited by their immobility; the British forces were initially mainly infantry while every Boer was a mounted irregular cavalryman who would ride close, fire several volleys onto the British, and then ride away. British cavalry was limited in number, encumbered by a heavier load than any Boer would carry, and used imported horses which took time to acclimate to the harsher conditions of South Africa. The Boers travelled light, lived off the land as much as possible as

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144 Ibid., 7.
well as gear taken from the British, and they used the indigenous ponies which thrived on the South African *veldt*.

The initial stages of the war saw the Boers meeting the British in at least somewhat traditional battles. The Boers generally fought from defensive positions, forcing the British to come to them and take fire during the advance, then melted away on horseback rather than allow the British to advance too close. Using German manufactured artillery and rifles, the Boers managed to inflict casualties on the British at generally lower cost to themselves and then retreat just as the British were coming into their ideal range for rapid advance and the charge to carry the Boer positions.

As the British learned to counter these tactics and inflict defeats on the Boers, the Boers switched to hit-and-run style tactics and engaged in what might be best described as insurgent warfare. Their mobility allowed them to mount raids against vulnerable supply convoys while avoiding the heavily armed patrols and base areas of the British, as well as to ambush small British patrols or isolated garrison troops and rail lines. This change in warfare forced the British to once again adapt their tactics to the new realities of South African warfare.

Some of the changes adopted by the British, particularly the cavalry, would outlast the war and constitute doctrinal and equipment reforms. Others would be mere adaptations to the exigencies of the Anglo-Boer War and would be dropped with the end of the war. As the last significant conflict in which Britain would be involved before World War I, the lasting changes carry particular importance as they seem to signal an evolving role for the cavalry on the battlefield, but the adaptive nature of the cavalry remains significant as well, since one would expect to see this pattern continue into World War I. Instead the cavalry was largely confined in its role on the Continent, the commanders bowing to the realities of the trenches and the massively destructive power of new artillery types and the machine gun.
Still, the British cavalry did manage to learn lessons from the Anglo-Boer War and did carry them forward into the years preceding World War I. Their failings in the World War were not entirely caused by their conservatism, and in the years prior to World War I the debate among current and former cavalry officers and troopers regarding the role and armament of cavalry was ongoing and frequently heated. Cavalry leaders who would be generals in World War I such as Douglas Haig and John French often argued for maintaining the traditional role for cavalry. Others such as Erskine Childers argued in heated polemics against the stubborn conservatism of some officers in favor of a changed and more flexible role for the cavalry, to be reflected in new doctrine and training. What is often overlooked in this debate is that while the leaders of the day, such as French and Haig, were not in favor of making big changes to the cavalry, the cavalry had evolved in the half century since the Crimean War. Adaptation in the field led to changes in doctrine and equipment for the cavalry over those years and continued through the Anglo-Boer War and beyond. Rifles replaced carbines, and the saber moved from the cavalry trooper’s hip to the saddle, while the rifle would be worn across the back rather than carried on the saddle. Open order maneuvers would replace close order charges in many operations, particularly in the face of the machine gun and rifles with a higher rate of fire and greater accuracy.

In order to remain relevant, the cavalry had to change, and in spite of what its critics may say it did manage to do so. To suggest that it should have known what awaited it on the battlefields of Europe in World War I is certainly overstating the case for the cavalry’s conservatism. No branch of the British service was prepared for the war, and when General French led his troops onto the Continent he did so with too few artillery pieces of too small a caliber, too few men for the type of fighting which awaited them, and with an inadequate communications system for command and control of a force spread over such an extended front. The cavalry was no more or
less prepared for the war than any other branch of the service, and should be viewed in such a context. In that way its relative adaptations and reforms can be judged properly.

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The Anglo-Boer War began in October 1899, but trouble had been brewing for some time. Tensions between the British home government and the South African colonies had, in the preceding years, begun to multiply as the Afrikaners, or Dutch South Africans, raised restrictions on what they called uitlanders, or non-African born whites including British, Canadians, Germans, and Australians among others. The length of time before they could become citizens was raised from one year to five years in 1882, and then to fourteen years in 1890 as a response to “fear of the uitlander vote.”145 The government of the Transvaal granted a native monopoly on dynamite which was much-needed by the uitlander miners in the mountainous regions, and this monopoly led to sometimes outrageous prices. Taxes paid by uitlanders were always higher than for the Boers, and went up as tensions increased. British citizens and other uitlanders could be arrested by the Boer police forces, which were universally viewed as corrupt by both natives and uitlanders.

The suppression of the uitlanders was due in part to the massive influx of such outsiders after the discovery of gold in addition to the diamonds already in abundance in the mountain regions of the Transvaal. This discovery led to a gold rush not unlike that in California in the 1850s and generated much anxiety on the part of the Boers.146 They feared that allowing so many foreigners franchise rights after a short period would allow them to have a disproportionate effect

on Transvaal politics just as they were having on its society, where “Rapid industrialization came to South Africa, imposing on a traditional, largely rural, conservative and religious society altogether new ideas brought in by the massive influx of foreigners.”\textsuperscript{147}

Further fueling Boer concerns was the slow encirclement of the Transvaal and Orange Free State by the British. Over the decades between 1880 and 1899, Britain annexed lands bordering the Boer states, particularly along the coastline in what appeared to be a purposeful attempt to cut off Boer access to the sea.\textsuperscript{148} In addition to the British colonies of Natal and Cape Colony the British added Zululand in 1887, Bechuanaland, and Basutoland. Many in the Transvaal feared that, as it had done before, Britain would attempt to annex the Transvaal and Orange Free State. A small but vocal group of British expatriates was certainly in favor of this, which simply added more impetus to the move toward war.

The general impression in Britain was massive and systematic oppression of their citizens by the Boers as well as the maltreatment and enslavement of the native black population. This impression was constantly reinforced by a stream of correspondence and news reports painting a grim picture of the treatment of British citizens at the hands of the Boers, and eventually the British government felt compelled to take action. For their part, the Boers felt as if the British were encroaching on their sovereign territory and becoming a threat to their way of life and freedom. An exchange of official telegrams and even state visits merely reinforced the impression each had of the other until war became a certainty.

A last important factor which helped push Britain and the Boers into conflict was their view of one another from a military standpoint. Neither held much respect for the other. The Boers had attempted to declare themselves independent of the British in the Transvaal in December

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 18-19.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 15-16.
1880 and took up arms to that effect, where the British “suffered first a minor defeat at Laing’s Nek, and then utter disaster at Majuba Hill on 27 February 1881.”\(^{149}\) This led to a negotiated political settlement to the conflict which was a compromise, with Britain maintaining suzerainty over the colony but allowing it to govern itself except in the realm of foreign relations and the legal status of black natives in the colony. To the Boers the settlement coupled with the poor military performance of the British suggested that the reputation of the British Army and the British Empire were overrated, and that in the face of stiff resistance the British could be forced to negotiate and to ultimately back down militarily if resistance was formidable and sustained. They did not respect British force of arms based directly on their experience, and so decided that resistance was reasonable and possible, as well as profitable if handled correctly.

As for the British, they saw the Boers as “mere yokels waiting to be swept aside by British bayonets.”\(^{150}\) They had, throughout the previous five decades, fought a series of hard-won colonial conflicts as well as the Crimean War. They saw themselves as professional, well-trained, and prepared for whatever conflict might next arise. If these colonial conflicts had not always begun with a sterling showing by the British, they had adapted and overcome their opponents in every case. They felt confident in their weapons, their training, and their leaders while feeling something bordering on contempt for these attributes in their newest adversaries, the Boers. They had reason to be confident, although there were deficiencies in their military structure that would not become apparent until the outbreak of hostilities. Most notably, the liberal government in London had much reduced the size of the British Army as well as slowing the process of reequipping their regiments with newer and more modern firearms. There was an underlying insufficiency in remounts for the cavalry which would generate problems which

\(^{149}\) Ibid., 15.  
\(^{150}\) Ibid., 24.
would not be sufficiently overcome during the course of the war and which would greatly reduce the efficiency of the cavalry and to a lesser degree the mounted infantry.

Each side, then, was guilty of underestimation of their foes and to varying degrees overconfidence in their own ability to wage war. Neither of the belligerents saw the other as an insurmountable challenge to their power or their control of the colonies in South Africa, and both sides were quite confident in their ability to be victorious without undue destruction or loss of life. Yet the war would drag on for three years and cause more suffering than either side had anticipated, and while the British would not succeed in bringing the war to a speedy conclusion neither would the Boers find the British so easy to dissuade as they had during their first insurrection.

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The Anglo-Boer War can be roughly divided into two phases. The first phase consisted of the type of set-piece battles for which the British had long trained. While these did not necessarily go as the British would have liked, in large part because of the highly mobile nature of the Boer forces, the battles generally favored the British in terms of attrition and allowed the British to weed out those commanders unsuited for work in the field. Much of the initial trouble on the British side stemmed from insufficient forces available and the slow reinforcement from the British home and colonial forces.

The Boers began the war willing to engage in fixed battles for a number of reasons. They believed they could win, particularly after their previous experience fighting the Boers when they essentially outfought and outlasted their British opponents. They received encouragement from
Europe, particularly Germany, and may have believed that they could count on intervention if it became necessary. Perhaps most important was their supply of modern weapons from Germany, including large caliber artillery and new Mauser rifles which used smokeless powder. A great supply of ammunition was initially on hand for these weapons, but British control of shipping routes and the desire of Germany to avoid open conflict with Britain dried up the supply fairly quickly.

With the loss of replacement weapons and regular supply of ammunition, the Boers went over to irregular warfare techniques. Thus began the second phase of the war, marked by an insurgent style of warfare on the part of the Boers and the need to adapt to the new style of warfare by the British. The Boers began using captured weapons taken from British columns which had been either ambushed or defeated and then looted. Instead of fixed battles of large troop formations, the Boers began a series of hit-and-run attacks against isolated garrisons, supply columns, and small patrols. It also led to the executions of a number of Boers for wearing captured uniforms, which was considered by the British to be a violation of the rules of warfare. 151 Although the Boers often needed the clothing:

…there was no excuse for not removing the badges and insignia, and there was no excuse for not discarding the uniforms altogether when the commando entered the Midlands and supplies of other clothing became available…Although the Boers claimed that in the last days of the war they had no clothes other than the uniforms they had stripped from prisoners – and this was certainly true in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State – the British were justly indignant at the use of their uniform to deceive them. 153

151 This was a generally accepted rule of warfare, in fact. Wearing the uniform of the enemy was considered tantamount to espionage and as such carried a death sentence in most European armies’ codes of conduct. For the Boers in the later portion of the war it was generally more a practical concern than a question of spying, however. Supplies of clothing were as scarce as ammunition or food.

152 Commando was the term used by the Boers to describe their military units. The size and composition varied widely, particularly in the later stages of the war. While each commando had a leader, the members were generally free to come and go as they pleased, and many would leave one commando to join another if they were dissatisfied or felt like fighting closer to their homes and families.

153 Farwell, 342-343.
On more than one occasion the Boers used the uniforms to deceive the British, although much of the deception was not for spying but escaping capture or ambushing British soldiers or patrols. One Boer commando leader, Denys Reitz, “admitted that at least twice he was saved from death or capture by posing as a British soldier.” Two of commando leader Jan Smut’s men “were out scouting one day when they unexpectedly encountered a British patrol. One of the burghers, an English-speaking boy from Johannesburg, called out: ‘Don’t fire! We are 17th Lancers!’ Captain Watson, in charge of the patrol, hesitated for a fatal moment; both burghers fired, killing Watson and one of his men.”

Each of these incidents demonstrates the very different nature of warfare after the end of the Napoleonic-style battles, in which opponents formed up their armies in close order and advanced upon one another over open ground, and illustrate new challenges faced by the British in quelling the insurrection of the Boers throughout South Africa. This was a type of colonial warfare which the British had not truly faced in the previous small wars. Although the Indian forces during the Indian Mutiny wore the same uniform as their British counterpart, for the most part, it was much easier to tell a native from a regular British soldier or cavalry trooper. True, a mutineer could try to hide amongst the Indian troops who remained loyal, but they were unlikely to be welcomed by the loyal Indian troops and would have found such hiding difficult and dangerous, if not impossible. The Chinese, the Zulus, and other indigenous people across the empire could likewise not use such tactics, but the white settlers of the South African states could, particularly if they spoke English well enough.

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154 Burgher is another name for a member of a commando in the Boers’ military structure.
155 Farwell, 343.
The early battles were fought by a British Army which had already implemented some important changes. Perhaps most notable was the uniform in which it would fight. “No longer did the army take to the field in the scarlet, blue or green of that time but in universal khaki drill, the only splashes of color being regimental flashes on the khaki helmets and the kilts and hose of the Highlanders.”\textsuperscript{156} The initial uniform allotment proved insufficiently hardy or warm for South African conditions and was eventually replaced with a heavier serge pattern. The boots the troops wore also tended to disintegrate under South African conditions and had to be redesigned and reissued to the troops in the field, most urgently among the infantry who had to march everywhere. In spite of these problems, the new uniform was less obtrusive and allowed British troops to take advantage of the terrain in order to conceal themselves and present a less obvious target than men dressed in bright colors. For the first time the entire British Army would fight in uniforms which allowed them to conceal themselves and which were, theoretically at first, suited to the conditions of the campaign. This marks a significant advance in military doctrine across the entire army, including the cavalry.

Initial deployments to South Africa with the outbreak of war were mainly infantry, which was in keeping with the composition and doctrine of the British Army at the time. “The majority of the troops had been trained in England in accordance with the current manuals, which were drawn up with a European enemy in mind, that is, one that would fight in a broadly similar manner to the British. The brunt of any battle would be borne by infantry, though cavalry, artillery and engineers would be necessary for the former’s success.”\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 53.
This deficiency in mounted forces would initially put the British at a major disadvantage against the all-mounted Boer forces. The British began the war with “a cavalry division of two brigades each of four regiments: under 6,000 cavalrymen in all.”\textsuperscript{158} It would take time to offset this deficiency, and this problem would be exacerbated by the difficulty of acclimatizing the horses for mounted troops arriving in the South African theater of operations. Horse wastage would be a major problem throughout the war, as the need for mounted men and horses was always urgent and the horses tended to wither in the demanding conditions of the South African veldt. In addition, even though “in the regular cavalry…every man had a carbine, chief reliance was placed on shock action with sword or lance. Though obviously all were trained to ride, few were as good horsemen as the Boers, whose horses were an extension of themselves.”\textsuperscript{159} The cavalry would thus find it difficult to come to grips with the Boers using saber and lance, and it would be equally difficult for them to outshoot the Boers, who were known to be excellent shots and to prize accuracy in both hunting and battle.

This somewhat meagre cavalry force would be augmented by the Natal Volunteer units, many of whom were mounted and good shots with their rifles and carbines. These were further supported by “the Imperial Light Horse, recently formed from refugee Uitlanders.”\textsuperscript{160} The Imperial Light Horse was also organized as a group of mounted rifles. These supplementary forces amounted to only a few hundred men, and the need for more cavalry and mounted infantry very quickly became apparent. The regular cavalry forces all boasted their own battery of artillery from the Royal Horse Artillery, in which all the men were mounted individually, and were further supported by one mule-drawn Maxim machine gun per cavalry regiment.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 52.
The Boer forces invaded Natal on 12 October 1899 and engaged with British forces at Dundee, 45 miles north of the fortified city of Ladysmith where the British commander, General Sir George White, had intended to make a stand. His subordinate, Major-General Penn Symons, had already taken a portion of the force north to Dundee and would thus face the Boers in the first action of the war with a relatively small force. Caught unawares on 20 October, Symons led the defense and was mortally wounded during the confused fighting. While the initial action was “hailed by the British Press as a victory…Symons’ successor, Major-General Yule, was the next day to find his command almost surrounded. On the 22nd he received orders from White to retreat to Ladysmith by a circuitous route to the south-east.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 56.
Figure 9\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{162} http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~niloc/vanVuren/BoerWar.html
At the same time to the south a Boer commando under J.M. Kock attacked and captured a British supply train at the Elandslaagte train station. White immediately dispatched “Buller’s Cavalry Division commander, the squat and energetic John French, accompanied by one of his staff, a clever cavalryman named Major Douglas Haig.”163 On 21 October French managed to push Kock out of Elandslaagte’s station using the Imperial Light Horse and the Natal Artillery battery he was assigned, but found his position untenable and had to go to ground to await reinforcement. White quickly sent the 1st Devons, 1st Manchesters, and 2nd Gordons by train, as they were infantry regiments, as well as the 5th Dragoon Guards and 5th Lancers by road.

Managing to flank the Boers outside the station along a horse shoe shaped ridge, the infantry first pinned and then drove out the defending Boer commando. Driven out at bayonet point, the Boers became disordered very quickly and ran for their horses to escape. Unknown to them, a squadron each of the 5th Lancers and 5th Dragoon Guards had been dispatched for just such an occurrence behind the Boer position. For almost the only time during the war, the cavalry would perform its traditional role of the charge against a disordered and retreating enemy force. The British cavalry crashed into the left flank of the Boers, who were unused to such close combat and were, by all accounts, greatly intimidated by the lances and sabers wielded by the cavalrymen.164 The Boers panicked and attempted to scatter but were repeatedly charged by the cavalry, who reformed and charged several times before the remnants of the Boer force finally managed to escape the killing field. Kock’s force was reduced by about half its original number while the British lost about 260 in killed and wounded, mostly among the infantry. On the Boer

163 Ibid., 56.
164 Most of the available sources stress the Boers’ aversion to the saber and lance, including those written by Boers themselves. The psychological impact of using and being attacked with such weapons must have been great, largely because of the personal nature of such close combat as well as the often gory effects of the weapons on the human body.
side the most important casualty was Kock himself, who was dying of his wounds as he retreated with his men.

The war quickly settled down into multiple sieges around Ladysmith, Mafeking, and Kimberly as well as a few raids against other British settlements in Natal. A relief expedition was soon launched under Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen which bogged down after some initial success. Methuen would ultimately be defeated in the field, as would Lieutenant-General Gatacre engaging Boer forces in Cape Colony. These defeats came “as a profound shock in Britain…[that] the cream of the British army, had been severely bested by armed farmers was hard to accept.”¹⁶⁵ There followed a period known as Black Week in December 1899, in which British forces, poorly led and too far extended, suffered a series of setbacks and defeats which “was the signal for changes in the prosecution of the war. Britain now realized it was facing more than a colonial punitive expedition and, after a week of total dejection, a patriotic sense of purpose and determination gripped the country and the Empire.”¹⁶⁶ Reinforcements were already on the way, but more were dispatched. These included Yeomanry from home, equipped not as regular cavalry but as mounted infantry as well as mounted troops from Australia and Canada. General Sir Redvers Buller, in command of the British forces in South Africa, also began to institute new measures, such as converting parts of existing infantry divisions into mounted infantry. Buller also found himself relegated to a secondary position. He was left in charge in Natal, but overall command of British forces went to Field Marshall Lord Frederick Roberts.

The war continued as British reinforcements arrived and the tide gradually turned in favor of the British. While this was not entirely because of British leadership, which often led to unduly high casualties and the occasional disaster, overall the leadership did improve and new ideas

¹⁶⁵ Barthorp, 80.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.
began to be employed to meet the Boer threat. Among these, officers were frequently ordered to
discard their sabers and to carry rifles so that they were less visible to enemy sharp-shooters, the
men were sent into combat in open order exclusively so that they no longer presented a massed
and easy target for the Boer riflemen, and mounts were imported into South Africa from all parts
of the Empire as well as India and the United States so that remounts would be available and so
that infantry could be converted to mounted infantry.

By the end of 1900 the war was becoming increasingly one of smaller engagements with
bands of Boers ranging the countryside rather than one of front lines and battles involving entire
armies. The Boers were losing ground rapidly, in part because they no longer were able to
receive supplies of weapons and ammunition and in part because the British had finally arrived
in the numbers necessary to effectively combat the Boers. The greater concentration of mounted
troops in the British forces allowed them to finally maneuver effectively against the highly
mobile Boers, and their adaptation in terms of tactics meant that Boer marksmanship was less
telling than it had been early on.

With their major cities occupied and their supply bases dried up, the Boers began what can
best be described as a guerilla war. “By this time there were perhaps only 25,000 Boers still
offering resistance, but they were well mounted and elusive, with up to 400,000 sq. km. (about
150,000 square miles) in which to operate.”167 While the British remained tied to cities, towns,
and railroad lines the Boers lived off the land and whatever they could scavenge or steal from the
British. The British could never hope to truly control the entire countryside, nor to effectively
patrol it even with their greatly enhanced mounted forces, so they turned to a new plan.

167 Fremont-Barnes, 60.
Repeated attempts to bring the remaining Boer forces to battle proved largely fruitless, so Major-General Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener, now commander-in-chief of all British forces in South Africa, “inaugurated a new, bitter phase in the conflict, meant to wear down the Boers through attrition. His strategy contained three elements: scorched earth, internment, and containment.” 168 A limited scorched-earth policy had been instituted by Kitchener’s predecessor, Lord Roberts, but Kitchener expanded this a great deal. No longer merely engaging in the “burning of farms known to be the property of Boers still on commando,” Kitchener carried forward this program of destruction “on a much larger scale, employing a full-scale scorched earth policy intended to lay waste to all Boer farmsteads within the reach of his forces.” 169 The Orange Free State and the Transvaal “experienced wholesale devastation, with entire towns and thousands of farmsteads set aflame or otherwise rendered uninhabitable…livestock were slaughtered or seized in their tens of thousands, and fields once containing grain were laid waste by fire.” 170

This mass destruction assisted in Kitchener’s second line of attack. Put simply, these refugees, composed mainly of women and children, were rounded up and shipped to concentration camps. “These British concentration camps were unsanitary, short of food and overcrowded: ideal conditions in which disease and malnutrition could prey on the unfortunate detainees.” 171 These camps were not meant explicitly to make hostages of the Boers’ families, nor were they meant to be truly miserable in terms of living conditions, but they quickly filled to beyond their initial capacities and in reality the women and children imprisoned in these camps

168 Ibid., 62.
169 Ibid., 62-63.
170 Ibid., 63-64.
171 Ibid., 64-65.
were largely, by the nature of the scorched earth policy, the close relatives of the Boers still fighting or killed in action and thus absent from their homesteads.

The third line of attack against the Boer insurgency involved direct military action coupled with fixed defensive works. A series of heavily fortified block houses with barbed wire entanglements strung between them carved up the countryside and were meant to reduce the mobility and effective range of the Boer forces. Huge sweeps by primarily mounted forces were then initiated to drive the corralled Boers into the lines of block houses where they could be destroyed or forced to surrender. By war’s end the system of blockhouses “extended for over 6,000 km (3,700 miles) and effectively hampered the previously unrestricted movements of the commandos.”

Kitchener’s harsh tactics at first seemed to work against him. The great resentment over the destruction of property and the imprisonment of women and children created a fervor to fight on in the angry Boers, and the imprisonment and destruction also served to free the Boers from the need to protect their homes and families. Reality soon asserted itself for the Boers, however, and they found themselves without any meaningful support, restricted in movement and hunted constantly by the British. Many Boers fought to the bitter end, but the constant pressure of the British sweeps, the approach of winter, the lack of supplies, ammunition and food and the number of South Africans joining the British to help hunt down their former comrades finally put an end to Boer resistance in South Africa in April 1902.

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172 Ibid., 65.
Throughout the Anglo-Boer War the British cavalry troopers and their auxiliaries played an important role. The vast distances to be covered and the all-mounted nature of the enemy made a large mounted contingent an absolute necessity. The British would have to adapt to the very different nature of warfare in South Africa and the unusual nature of their enemy, however, before their cavalry and mounted troops would be effective against the agile and determined Boer forces.

One of the most important changes for the cavalry was its conversion to the rifle over the carbine and the abandonment of the saber and lance.\textsuperscript{173} This change was found to be necessary when regular cavalry tactics simply failed to work against the Boers. Aside from one or two effective charges, it was found that the Boers simply would not stand and receive a cavalry charge, and when the Boers managed to retreat in any sort of order they travelled too fast to be caught by the more heavily-laden British cavalry trooper.

The conversion to the rifle was essential in the conditions of South Africa. The carbine carried by the British cavalry was adequate for shorter range firing but “The rare combination of the altitude, clear air and open spaces of the high veldt made it possible to see and shoot for well over 2,000 yards, up to the maximum ranges of the new magazine rifles, but even in the hills of northern Natal the longer range and greater accuracy of these new weapons was deadly, and with smokeless powder concealment amid the rocks and gullies was easy.”\textsuperscript{174}

The British cavalry carbine, issued in 1897, was the .303 caliber Lee-Enfield Mark I. This was a magazine-fed weapon with a bolt action which was quite superior to the previous carbines, such as the Martini-Henry. The .450 caliber Martini-Henry carbine used an “Outmoded falling-

\textsuperscript{173} Units under command of General French retained their sabers, but all others were ordered to turn them in October 1900.
block action (this was a simple breech-block that was raised or lowered by means of a lever beneath the trigger – strong, reliable but slow to operate).”

The Martini-Henry also used coarse black powder in its cartridge which gave off a cloud of smoke that was easily seen from a distance and gave away the position of the man firing the weapon. Finally, the Martini-Henry was a single-shot weapon, each round being loaded individually, by hand, between each firing. This meant a weapon which fired more slowly than the magazine-fed rifles and carbines then coming into use around the world, as well as a weapon which used inferior powder.

The Lee-Metford carbine was a leap forward for the British cavalry. It was magazine-fed, using cordite instead of black powder, holding six rounds in its magazine and being “optimistically graduated to [a range of] 2,000 yards.” Roughly 13,000 of these carbines were built and issued before they were phased out for the Lee-Enfield Mark I. Instead of a falling-block breech, the Lee-Metford was given a bolt-action breech. This coupled with the magazine allowed the cavalry trooper to maintain a much higher rate of fire than previously, and reloading of the carbine was made easier through the use of clips which held five rounds and could be quickly inserted into the magazine through the breech. Once inserted, the clip, called a charger, could be stripped back out of the carbine’s breech and the weapon was ready to fire once more. This meant that five rounds could be loaded into the Lee-Metford nearly as quickly as a single round could be loaded into the Martini-Henry.

The Lee-Enfield Mark I was an excellent carbine, combining better range, smokeless powder, and a magazine-fed action which could, if necessary, be used in a single-shot capacity. Unfortunately, it was out-ranged by the Mauser rifle used by the Boers in the war. Because of this, the carbines of all types then in service, and some of the older types remained in use for

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176 Ibid., 16.
some cavalry units, were supplanted by the Lee-Enfield Mark I rifle. This rifle could match the
range of the Mauser and thus gave the British cavalryman a weapon which could be used to
counter and even emulate the Boer tactics. The rifle was also chambered in .303 caliber and used
ball (non-pointed) ammunition with cordite propellant. It could be loaded in the same way as the
Lee-Metford and it held ten rounds in its magazine. This was more firepower than any British
trooper had carried into action throughout the nineteenth century, and it would have a profound
effect on the way in which the cavalry was employed in South Africa.

When French went into action near Colesberg in December 1899 and January 1900 against
one of the four invading columns of Boers, mounted troops made up less than half his total
strength. With these he managed to stop the column from doing any significant damage, instead
creating “a screen, both protective and aggressive in character,” which utilized the mounted
troops for aggressive action, although “in each encounter, it should be noted, the rifle and
carbine, not the arme blanche, governed the tactics. For all the use he made of swords and
lances, his cavalry might as well have left them store.” 177

The traditional cavalry tactics were so ineffective that, in October 1900,

…the process of making the cavalry nearly indistinguishable from the mounted infantry
was begun. The arme blanche was to be disavowed and abjured. First, carbines and lances
were withdrawn. Then all regular regiments, other than those under French’s command,
soon also lost their swords, though, for some unknown reason, the 16th Lancers seem to
have been divested of theirs even before the march to Kimberly, and the 5th Lancers not
until June, 1901. The infantry pattern Lee-Enfield rifle of .303 calibre, with bayonet, was
issued in their place. It was carried in a short bucket, was heavier than the carbine and much
nearer to being a match for the Boer Mauser. It was sighted up to 2,800 yards, whereas the
extreme range of most carbines was only about 1,200 yards. ‘The rifle,’ stated the order
from headquarters, ‘will henceforth be considered the cavalry soldier’s principle
weapon.’ 178

Cooper, 1986), 109-110.
178 Ibid., 236.
While this removal of the *arme blanche* was temporary and all regiments would be reequipped with lance and saber in the years after the Anglo-Boer War, one change was permanent. All cavalry would retain the rifle as a weapon on a permanent basis. It would also be carried on the trooper’s back instead of on the saddle to protect from sword strokes and to allow the trooper to retain his ability to fight should he be unhorsed. What began as a field expedient measure to adapt to the needs of the Anglo-Boer War was found to be valuable enough to be retained as a part of cavalry doctrine on a permanent basis.

With this change in weaponry came, necessarily, a change in tactics. Most obviously, of course, the charge to initiate hand-to-hand combat was no longer a factor in the fighting. This did not mean an end to the charge, however, although it would assume a very different character. More importantly, mounted cavalry troopers and their locally raised auxiliaries such as the Imperial Light Horse and the Natal irregulars would serve as a fast, mobile source of firepower which could be brought to bear on any part of the battlefield quickly, and shifted almost as quickly to another location.

Even before the removal of their close combat weapons, the cavalry had adopted new tactics to deal with the realities of battle in South Africa. Operating and even charging in open order, with significant spaces between troopers in a line and with almost double the normal distance between successive lines had become an operational norm. The machine gun and the rapid firing magazine rifles dictated that troops, infantry or cavalry, no longer clump together or function in closed, close-order lines. Such formations made it all too easy for the enemy to simply mow
down their opponents, especially since such formations could only really be used in open terrain where cover was scarce at best and could not be well utilized in such formations.

Such an operation occurred during the first attempt to relieve the siege around Kimberley. Seeking to break through a Boer position at Klip Drift, French decided, based upon his orders to reach Kimberley at any cost to prevent its imminent loss to the enemy, to perform a “charge” through the Boer position and beyond. This “charge” was, in actuality, a break-through operation carried out at high speed and in open order, and supported by the Royal Horse Artillery. “One unique aspect of the ‘charge’ is that it was not launched against an enemy already engaged or retiring in disorder. It was no instance of shock tactics…the minimal casualties were due to the open order adopted, to the prodigious amount of dust and to the scale of the horse artillery’s covering fire.”

Lord Roberts added “French’s admirable movement at Klip Drift was essentially a rapid advance of fighting men carried out at extended intervals. It was a rapid advance of warriors who possessed the ability, by means of horses and rifles (not swords or lances), to place their enemy hors de combat. It was an ideal Cavalry operation, but it was not a ‘Cavalry Charge,’ as this term is understood, and the arme blanche had nothing to say to it.”

New ways to charge an enemy were also developed alongside maneuvers such as French’s. The cavalry, irregular and regular as well as mounted infantry, began to use the firearm as a part of the charge. In this it essentially adopted the tactics of their enemy, even going so far as to fire from the saddle. In an incident at a place called Springhaan’s Nek, a Major G.W. Forbes of the Montgomery Yeomanry “learned from a Kaffir scout that the men of one of [Jan] De Wet’s

\[\text{179} \text{ In the event, Kimberley was not in any imminent danger and French’s charge managed to render most of his horses useless for riding and certainly for combat, depriving him of mobility until follow-on forces drove off the Boers besieging Kimberley. French of course carried out his orders to the best of his ability and had no idea that the situation was different than what was reflected in his orders.} \]
\[\text{180} \text{ Anglesey, 136.} \]
\[\text{181} \text{ Ibid., 136.} \]
commandos were ‘off-saddled and cooking their evening meal some four or five miles away.’”

He immediately took elements of the 16th Lancers and the 9th Battalion of the Imperial Yeomanry to attack the Boer encampment, sending the Yeomen onto a kopje183 overlooking the camp “…’while the 16th’s squadron…charged right into the middle of the enemy, shooting off their horses and scattering the Boers in all directions.’ The Times History states that the troopers laid about them ‘with clubbed rifles.’ Whichever version is true – and probably both are – the charge met with a surprisingly great measure of success.”184 The British killed or wounded over forty of the burghers and took at least seventeen captive and they did so not using the shock action with sword, lance and weight of horse but using speed and firepower to overwhelm and confuse the enemy after managing apparently complete surprise. This is more reminiscent of attacks against the Plains Indians of North America by the U.S. Cavalry than anything the British cavalry typically engaged in, and demonstrates a distinct change in the tactical employment of the mounted arm of the British Army. Interestingly, while the British would revert to the use of the sword and lance, greater emphasis would be placed on rifle training for the cavalry and this sort of action would become a part of the cavalry’s role in war, albeit a secondary one to the mounted charge.

Another sign that tactics were shifting was the increasing emphasis on marksmanship for cavalry troopers, a heretofore rather neglected practice. As early as the late summer of 1900 some cavalry formations had begun marksmanship practice in earnest. The 5th Dragoon Guards engaged frequently in this practice, according to their commander Lieutenant-Colonel Sir St John Gore:

182 Ibid., 245.
183 A kopje is a low or medium sized hill with a generally flat top.
184 Anglesey, 246.
We had some useful *practical musketry* (such as my soul loveth),’ wrote Gore in September, ‘and *not* as taught Hythe. The men shoot wonderfully well now at any object you like to point out to them *in the field*. My “words of command” are most unorthodox! I say to a man, “Do you see so-and-so?” “Yes.” “Then hit it for me.” And it is wonderful how they judge distance, adjust their sights, fire, “observe” the strike, alter their sights again, and *hit* the mark! They didn’t do this at first, though; they have never been taught to think for themselves.185

This training spread throughout the cavalry, and many troopers became excellent shots. Firing from the saddle was initially frowned upon, although troopers soon began to practice it and some became quite adept at it. As a rule, the overall performance of the cavalry’s musketry improved and more and more the troopers came to rely on their rifles and the effect of fire upon the enemy.

In many ways the British cavalry was being altered in order to use the same tactics as its enemies, the Boers. While it still had much larger and less hardy horses than the Boers, the cavalry in many other ways adopted the methods and tactics of the burghers it fought. In addition to its conversion to rifles and its training to fire from the saddle or on foot, the British cavalry was reorganized into smaller operational units which mirrored the organization, such as it was, of the Boer commandos.

Field Marshall Douglas Haig wrote in October 1900 of the need to free the cavalry columns of their long supply trains and heavy artillery detachments in order to move toward the type of mobility being shown by the Boers. This was assisted by an important official reform which took place just before the outbreak of hostilities in which the squadron supplanted the troop as the basic unit in the cavalry system. This gave more direct control over the troopers in a squadron to its officers and fostered a greater sense of independence in action on the smaller units. While

185 Ibid., 190.
they were still trained as part of a whole troop and regiment, the individual squadrons were better prepared to assume small-unit operations than they otherwise would have been, and the breaking down of the regiments and troops into their component parts was more easily accomplished by squadron leaders than would previously have been possible.

The British cavalry also recognized the need to lighten the load carried by its already overloaded cavalry horses. The Boers carried little beyond trail rations and their weapons and ammunition, along with a blanket and perhaps a heavy coat. The British trooper, on the other hand, was weighted with a good deal of equipment. Much of this was of little use in South Africa, particularly the lance. The rations for man and horse sufficient for at least three days were another encumbrance which could almost certainly have been eliminated. Yet the British never quite managed to adopt the Boer practice of living off the land and their horses were rarely given time to adapt to grazing on the native grasses and plants so that the rations were almost a necessity, although they increased the weight of the trooper and horse while limiting their speed and ability to maneuver. Of this one trooper said “We had come a good distance at a good pace, and, equipped in full marching order, carrying rations for horse and man, we could barely raise a good gallop. With cool effrontery, the Boers mounted, and riding back some distance, dismounted and fired several rounds each, and once more repeated this performance. Eventually our best mounted reached a few of their stragglers, who paid the penalty of their temerity.”

This was the typical Boer tactic against an attempted charge, this example taking place on 4 May 1900, and the only way to counter it was to adopt something like the Boer tactics and to rely upon firepower and speed of horse.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{186}}\] Ibid., 170-171.
The British mounted infantry managed to ably demonstrate this as, “On at least two occasions Hutton’s mounted infantry showed themselves to possess mobility superior to the cavalry’s.” On the first occasion it engaged in a reconnaissance mission which resulted in the overtaking of Boer forces and the taking of prisoners, including some Boer commando leaders. On the second, while the cavalry was preparing to move out in pursuit of Boer forces retreating from Johannesburg toward Pretoria, Hutton’s mounted infantry set out and quickly managed to cut off the retreating Boers, capturing a few officers, over fifty men, supply wagons and a large artillery piece. With both the Boers and their own mounted infantry demonstrating that new tactics were in order, the British cavalry had little choice but to follow suit in order to remain effective.

This it ultimately did, adopting the rifle in order to augment its firepower and range while leaving behind the lance and lightening the load in other ways. While it never really managed to sufficiently lighten the horses’ load, it was reduced to 17 stone from as much as 22 stone. Still, problems persisted. “Despite the efforts of the previous decades, British horses were still overladen; it took two men to lift a saddle with all its accoutrements onto the horse, and the regulation bit and breast-strap made it impossible for the horse to graze properly unless it was unsaddled.” Still, the British cavalry was moving in the right direction and did recognize the problem, even if it had not yet worked out the solution to it. These attempts to reduce the trooper’s load in the field would continue after the Anglo-Boer War up until the conversion of horsed units into armored, mechanized or motorized units, just as they had been a concern as far back as Captain Nolan’s writings on the subject before the Crimean War.

Horse wastage was also a huge issue for the British cavalry, and it would not be entirely resolved by the end of the conflict. As previously mentioned, the cavalry’s horses came from

187 Ibid., 172-173.
188 Badsey, 90.
every part of the empire as well as the United States and elsewhere. Few of these horses were used to the harsh conditions normal for the South African theater of war. Most were brought on ships and the voyage could take weeks, a period during which the horses could not exercise or even move more than a few feet. Under these conditions they became weak and their muscle tone degraded significantly, and sicknesses spread quickly among the horses crowded into the holds of the cargo ships. It was typical to allow time for the horses to recover, for the sick mounts to be quarantined, and for them to acclimate to local conditions before they went into action. Unfortunately this was not possible in the Anglo-Boer War, in part because of the regular loss of horses in combat and in part because of the need to mount infantry as well as cavalry. Horses were being lost quickly enough that new arrivals were sent, sometimes by train, directly from the ships to the line regiments. This practice led to even greater wastage of horses as weak or sick horses were ridden to exhaustion before they could acclimate to the harsh conditions and sparse grazing on the South African veldt. As more horses were lost and replaced with inadequate remounts, the remounts began to die even more quickly creating a cycle from which it was difficult to recover. Worse, since veterinary care was almost non-existent at first, the practice evolved in the cavalry and mounted infantry of shooting horses which could not be left behind. The purpose for shooting the horses was twofold; horses left behind could possibly be taken and used by the enemy if they recovered and it was considered inhumane to leave behind a suffering or wounded mount to die slowly. Many horses which were shot could have recovered given proper care and time, as well as sufficient food, so their loss was particularly problematic for the cavalry.

To combat these unnecessary and unacceptable losses the cavalry improvised several solutions. One way of managing horse losses was to finally begin trading for or commandeering
the smaller native horses. These had initially been shunned by the cavalry because it believed them to be inadequate for carrying a trooper’s load and for the charge, which was still believed to be the primary function of the cavalry in the field. It is perhaps correct that the Boer horses could not have carried the load of a British trooper; certainly the British horses had trouble doing so, but the Boer horses could certainly have been used for a massed charge if such an action had been called for regardless of their size. It was “halfway through the war, when at last the value of small native South African horses was beginning to be fully appreciated.” By January 1901, arriving units from overseas found their mounts confiscated and replaced with native horses. Their performance was touted by many of the officers and men, and the durability of these mounts reduced the rate of horse wastage noticeably. Concurrent with this was an order to purchasing agents overseas to begin buying smaller mounts which required less food and were generally more survivable in the conditions of South Africa.

A second measure was the establishment of more adequate veterinary care throughout the army. A first step in this process was the formation of the Live Stock Recovery Department. It “was charged with the duty of collecting strayed and abandoned animals from all sources and of forming depots for their reception and re-issue,” thus putting an end to the practice of shooting or otherwise destroying animals in the field, with the exception of the badly wounded animals which still had to be destroyed. It reflects poorly on the British that they would wait almost fifteen months before officially creating a body to carry out this practice, while “What little stock recovery there had been during the first fifteen months of the war had been effected by the occasional employment of natives,” particularly because of the scope of the remount problem.

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189 Anglesey, 341-343.
190 Ibid., 307.
191 Ibid., 292.
Still, once British authorities turned their attention to the problem, they did move with purpose and resolve to alleviate the drain on mounts and draught animals.

A third measure, perhaps the most important, was also the least official and most improvisational in nature. “The idea of mobile veterinary hospitals or detachments with each considerable column was occasionally adopted by individual commanders,” although this was never adopted as official British cavalry policy. Instead it remained accepted practice within the various detachments. These mobile hospitals often functioned as the one with General Bindon Blood’s column in 1901, which “received the sick which were no longer under regimental care. These were quietly driven along in mobs of fifty, each with a white superintendent and three natives. The animals grazed as they travelled. Each day the hospital moved with the supply column, thus lessening the difficulty of feeding. From time to time the sick were evacuated to the base hospital at Middleburg.” An order two years into the war was issued that these mobile veterinary field hospitals should become official policy, but it was never enacted. Instead, all veterinary personnel were withdrawn from the columns and placed in stationary veterinary depots along the lines of communication and close to the system of block houses which were used in the latter part of the war. Still, they served well as a stop-gap measure and helped alleviate the chronic shortage of horses remarkably well, and many horses which would have been abandoned or destroyed were instead rehabilitated and returned to active service.

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192 Ibid., 338.
193 Ibid., 338.
All of these measures taken together demonstrate an ability to improvise and to adapt in the face of difficult and frequently almost insurmountable problems, particularly in regard to the horse shortages which plagued the British throughout the war. In very few cases did the cavalry object or resist these changes, most notably in the case of General French and his refusal to surrender his men’s sabers. Still, he and his fellow commanders at all levels recognized the need for adaptation to the realities of the Anglo-Boer War. The cavalry adopted the rifle and learned its use, in some cases learning to shoot just as well as any British infantryman, if perhaps not quite as well as his Boer opponent.

Faced with a variety of hardships and difficulties, the cavalry managed to meet the challenges before it, often not with official doctrine nor even direct orders, but with improvised measures which in some cases remained cavalry practice after the war. The cavalry was frequently criticized during the war and after for its failures and its slowness in meeting the challenges of the Anglo-Boer War, yet within the first year fire action began to supplant the mounted charge, troopers sought ways to lighten their load in order to be more effective against the Boer horsemen, and commanders sought ways to free themselves from their cumbersome supply columns. The cavalry can hardly be blamed for the lack of adequate mounts, and can only be held partially responsible for the horse wastage which remained a chronic problem until war’s end.

If the cavalry were slow to change, and arguably it adapted as fast as any other part of the British Army to the conditions of South Africa, it was not alone. Infantry did not immediately convert to mounted infantry any more than the cavalry immediately adopted the infantry weapon over its traditional ones, and the early battles and cavalry successes did not suggest an urgent need for change. Yet as the war progressed the army and its cavalry adapted themselves as
quickly as they were able, or at least as quickly as the need for change was recognized. In cases
where such recognition lagged behind conditions in the field, many commanders simply
improvised until official policy was introduced. Some problems were beyond the cavalry’s
ability to control, such as the importation of remounts and the poor condition of the mounts it
was issued, as well as the general unsuitability of its regular cavalry mounts to South African
conditions. Still, it evolved with the conditions until it was ultimately able to overcome its Boer
adversaries, and as was so often the case the British managed to achieve victory under adverse
conditions. If they sometimes exacerbated such conditions, they also learned to overcome them
and succeed in the field against their enemies.
Conclusion

The British Army faced a variety of opponents during the latter half of the nineteenth century, from tribal societies such as the Zulus to European colonists such as the Boers. It took its cavalry with it into every war, where it sometimes fought in its traditional role, such as in the Crimean War or the Afghan War, and where it sometimes had to reshape itself in order to meet the needs of the campaign and the conditions under which it was forced to fight. Sometimes these changes became permanent while other times the adaptations were temporary, lasting only as long as the campaign in which they were needed.

As the nineteenth century came to a close and the twentieth century began, the British were still engaged with the Boers in the struggle for South Africa. New weapons and technologies were making themselves felt on the battlefield, including the machine gun and newer and larger caliber artillery. The effects of these weapons were never fully realized in the Anglo-Boer War, although they did have an immediate impact on the tactical level. No longer would infantry or cavalry march and maneuver in close order, shoulder to shoulder or in the cavalry knee to knee. Instead the open order advance and attack became the most common, and troops of all kinds were admonished not to bunch up or congregate into groups, which were of course easy targets for machine guns and high explosive or shrapnel artillery rounds.

In the years following the Anglo-Boer War a vigorous and sometimes antagonistic conversation took place about the future role of cavalry in the British Army, as well as in other armies. Many advocated the use of cavalry as it had been employed in South Africa as the proper use of the mounted arm on the modern battlefield, while others advocated for a return to the traditional role of the charge with the arme blanche, although most of these at least admitted the utility of the rifle as the cavalryman’s auxiliary weapon.
In some cases official doctrine was acknowledged but not completely adhered to. In India especially the emphasis on the rifle began to show. Competitions for marksmanship had generally been the province of the infantryman, but after the Boer War “Again and again during the next decade, members of cavalry regiments in India were to run off with the top musketry prizes.”\textsuperscript{194} Up until the 1890s cavalry troopers were issued only 40 rounds a year for musketry practice and many found it to be tedious and even degrading work\textsuperscript{195} for a cavalryman. After the Anglo-Boer War, however, the ration of rounds was tripled to 120 and the efficacy of the rifle as a cavalry weapon was well known enough that:

…there grew up far greater interest in its skillful use. Regimental rifle clubs and bodies such as the Southern India Rifle Association sprang into being. Annual musketry courses were held in regiments and the Schools of Musketry at Lydd in Hampshire were and at Pachmari in India were patronized by cavalry regiments as never before. In 1904 the Khan of Nanpara in Oudh offered a Challenge Cup for competition in shooting. It was open only to the British cavalry serving in India. All the squadrons of each regiment that entered had to take part. In the first year thirty-six squadrons competed and the 15\textsuperscript{th} Hussars won the cup as well as taking third and fourth places. In the years that followed the 15\textsuperscript{th} often came at the top of this and other competitions, one of the most prestigious of which was the Empire Cup…Two of the best shooting regiments were the 13\textsuperscript{th} and 14\textsuperscript{th} Hussars. The results of their annual musketry courses in India show that interest in the subject was not confined to a few outstanding shots. In 1906, for example, the 13\textsuperscript{th} Hussars produced seventy-eight ‘marksmen,’ 170 1\textsuperscript{st}-class shots, 209 2\textsuperscript{nd}-class and four 3\textsuperscript{rd}-class shots… In 1904 the 14\textsuperscript{th} Hussars had done even better with 354 ‘marksmen,’ 212 1\textsuperscript{st}-class shots, thirty-five 2\textsuperscript{nd} and four 3\textsuperscript{rd}-class shots.\textsuperscript{196}

This emphasis was certainly mirrored across the Empire, but it seems to have found its strongest adherents among those who served in India. There may have been a corresponding drop-off in training with the traditional weapons of the cavalry, and this trend can perhaps be seen to have

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 425.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 425.
begun somewhat earlier. Alfred Hutton wrote in 1889, some years before the outbreak of the Boer War, that “The art of the Broadsword or Sabre has developed and improved rapidly in foreign schools during the present century, whereas in England progress has been but slight, even if we can be said to have progressed at all…Quite lately, indeed, our movement has been distinctly retrograde.” Hutton was a “career military officer, teacher of swordsmanship, historian, and antiquarian” who may well have noted a trend toward the fire action and away from use of sword and lance. In many of the colonial wars of the British Empire the carbine had already been used in place of or alongside the sword and lance, and it makes sense that as it became more familiar and useful in the hands of the cavalry it would come to rely upon it more and more. Whatever the cause, Hutton clearly noted a decline in the ability of the troopers to use their sabers effectively, and he suggests that practice with the weapon had become less frequent and less intense, with practice confined almost to the basics and nothing else. If this was the trend even before the Anglo-Boer War, it seems likely that it continued once the firearm of the cavalry trooper had been upgraded and its use actively encouraged.

Another, more thoroughly documented trend was the emerging emphasis on training the cavalry trooper to exercise individual initiative and to work, if necessary, alone or as part of a smaller group such as the squadron where individual initiative took the place of direction from higher officers. “To whatever ‘cavalry school’ officers adhered, there was among them an increasingly explicit feeling that, in Correlli Barnett’s words, ‘for the first time barrack-square drill and battlefield tactics [had become] different things…’ At the lowest level, that is the squadron and troop, more and more officers, especially those who had served during the war in inferior commands, were impressed with the need for the training of their men in individual

198 Ibid., 1-2.
After the Anglo-Boer War these ideas were reiterated in print and in testimonies before various commissions. “Lord Scarbrough told the Royal Commission that one of the chief reasons why the cavalry had failed so wretchedly in South Africa was the ‘unsuitable training on German lines…total absence of individual thought and action; too much polishing of bits and buttons, long stable hours wearisome to man and horse.” 200 The emphasis in training finally moved toward the individual trooper and the smaller unit, typically the squadron. Their training also reflected not the need for an almost automaton-like trooper but an individual with greater responsibility, aptitude, ability and range of action. Well-known cavalry officers such as Lieutenant-General Robert Baden-Powell had started to employ these methods as early as the 1890s, when he instituted individual rides of each trooper of 120 miles across country which should take him roughly one week. The trooper was thus forced to learn self-reliance, individual initiative, and a sense of personal responsibility which only improved the troopers’ performance in times of war or crisis. Baden-Powell brought this system with him when he became Inspector of Cavalry in the early 1900s.

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If training and its emphasis had changed, as they most certainly had in the wake of the Anglo-Boer War, not everyone agreed on what the lessons to be learned from the war precisely were. For some, the lesson was clearly that the mounted warrior was no longer capable of mounting a successful charge except under extraordinary circumstances and must, therefore, become a

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199 Anglesey, 435. Correlli Barnett’s quote is taken from Anglesey’s book, and refers to the later development of the cavalry in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War.  
200 Ibid., 435.
mounted rifleman to remain effective and useful. For others, the lesson was that even in the face of newer weapons such as the machine gun, the repeating rifle and larger, more sophisticated artillery the cavalry could mount a charge with the arme blanche and be successful, and that the psychological effect of such a charge far outweighed its ability to inflict casualties. When such charges could be brought to bear against the Boers, the results seemed to bear out such an argument; the Boers dreaded being run through or cut open and rarely stood to receive such a charge. Yet the absolute rarity of occasions on which such charges could have been and were mounted should perhaps have suggested different conclusions.

This was the primary debate which raged during the years between the Anglo-Boer War and World War I, and it had not been fully resolved even at the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1914. Erskine Childers, who had served in the Anglo-Boer War as well as editing a volume of that war’s official history, was a vocal proponent of the purely rifle-armed cavalryman. His War and the Arme Blanche is a spirited polemic which seeks to demonstrate that in every case the cavalry armed with rifle as well as melee weapon is inferior to the cavalry armed solely with the rifle. His critiques and examples certainly possess weight and of themselves are convincing, yet in sometimes perhaps overstating his case he gave his critics at the time openings through which to deny his claims. He was not alone in his beliefs, however; General Sir Frederick Roberts, who had held a number of high ranking positions in the cavalry including that of Inspector General, wrote the introduction to his first book. Roberts was a reformer who believed in the use of the firearm among other needed changes in the mounted arm.

Childers was met in the battle of words by a number of experienced cavalry officers, not all of them British. Lieutenant-General Friedrich von Bernhardi, a commander in the German army, wrote his own treatise on the uses and value of cavalry, with a foreword by Britain’s own
Lieutenant-General Sir John French. Bernhardi is unimpressed with the idea that cavalry should give up their traditional role completely, and instead suggests that because of the changed conditions of warfare the cavalry must simply make better use of terrain and preparatory fire to shake an enemy before they are charged, since “it has ceased to be possible to ride straight at the front of an unshaken enemy.”\textsuperscript{201} It is interesting that Childers took so much exception to Bernhardi’s work, since in it the German makes clear that past wars should be examined and their lessons considered, and that “First, we must be absolutely clear as to those points in which our system is behind the requirements of the time, and what objectives we must now pursue. Secondly, being satisfied as to the above, that we should take the straightest way which leads towards them, not hesitating to break with tradition wherever it hinders our advance.”\textsuperscript{202} In spite of these forward-sounding ideas, Bernhardi certainly argues for the retention of the lance and sword, and for better training with them which will lead to better results; he does not advocate the removal of these weapons from the cavalry nor its replacement with the rifle as the primary weapon.

In Britain, prominent voices such as General Sir Douglas Haig argued that “efficiency in the use of the rifle is absolutely essential, as it will be in more frequent use. On the other hand, now as formerly, all great successes can only be gained by a force of Cavalry which is trained to harden its heart and charge home.”\textsuperscript{203} For Haig, as for Bernhardi, the cavalry role had merely expanded into new dimensions, but its fundamental purpose, the charge and its attendant psychological effect, remained intact. Major-General M.F. Rimington also agreed with this approach for the cavalry as well. Indeed, he went so far as to suggest that because the Mounted

\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 181.
Rifles from various places, such as Australia and Canada were such naturally good horsemen, they should be armed with the lance or saber so that they could charge properly instead of using rifles with bayonets.\textsuperscript{204}

Childers published a second book in 1911 as a companion to his first, largely in response to the works of Bernhardi. In it he decries what he views as the overbearing influence of the German cavalry and military traditions on the British cavalry. In it he says of the state of cavalry at the time:

\begin{quote}
...we have the power of creating a Cavalry incomparably superior in quality to any Continental Cavalry. The indispensable condition precedent to that revival is to sweep away root and branch the tactical system founded on the lance and sword, and to create a new system founded on the rifle. I shall endeavor to show, using von Bernhardi’s “Reiterdienst,” with Sir John French’s Introduction, and our own official Manuals, as my text, that in the matter of modern Cavalry warfare no principles worthy of the name exist among professional men. The whole subject is in a state of chaos, to which, I believe, there is no parallel in all the arts of war and peace. And the cause of that chaos is the retention in theory of a form of combat which is in flagrant contradiction with the conditions exacted by modern fire-arms, and is utterly discredited by the facts of modern war.\textsuperscript{205}
\end{quote}

If Childers represents one extreme, that of scrapping the entire system of cavalry warfare and replacing it with one more suited to the modern method and weapons of war, it does not necessarily follow that French is his opposing number. In fact, French and Bernhardi both advocated more training with the rifle and changed tactics including the use of ground and terrain to cover the advance of cavalry. It might be more appropriate to say that men like Rimington represented the opposing force to Childers, regarding the role of cavalry as little changed and requiring very little aside from perhaps upgrading weapons and training. Certainly

\textsuperscript{204} Major-General M.F. Rimington, \textit{Our Cavalry} (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1912), 13-14.
\textsuperscript{205} Erskine Childers, \textit{German Influence on the British Cavalry} (London, Edward Arnold, 1911), iv-v.
French, Haig and their circle were conservative in a general sense, but they accepted that some change was necessary to keep cavalry relevant and useful, and the *Cavalry Journal* figured prominently in the debate beginning with its first publication in 1906. Men like Rimington advocated teaching the Mounted Infantry to charge and fight like cavalry troopers, with the lance and saber, and seem more extreme in their conservatism, almost to the point of fantasy, suggesting that it merely took greater resolve to drive a charge home in the face of new conditions. Men like Roberts were more akin to French and Haig, more moderate in tone and views than Childers, though leaning toward more dramatic reform and suggesting that the new realities of the battlefield meant a new role for the cavalry and this new training and methods.

While these were prominent names in the debate, the conversation between the officers and former officers of the cavalry about reform, training, tactics and the place of cavalry in the more modern style of warfare was robust, ongoing, and frequently heated. Polemical articles, pamphlets and books were created and debated hotly, and even more moderate members of the debate were frequently drawn into spirited exchanges. What effect did all of this ultimately have on the British cavalry in the years before World War I?

* * *

Whatever the nature and tone of the debate, reforms did occur in the years between the Anglo-Boer War and World War I. Once Roberts became Commander-in-Chief of the army, some attempt at reform was inevitable, although “Roberts was told in 1901 that the Treasury would not sanction large-scale reforms.” Roberts desired significant reform in the cavalry and

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206 Badsey, 144.
the army as a whole, but was constrained in his efforts by economic and political factors. He thoroughly desired an end to the lance as a weapon of war, and he felt the rifle was to be the primary weapon of the cavalry trooper going forward, although he was somewhat less vehement and radical in this than was Erskine Childers, who sought sweeping reforms and the removal of officers who in any way opposed them. Still, Roberts did move many officers who agreed with him into important positions during his tenure and he did make moves to abolish the lance except in ceremonial and parade functions.

In terms of real reform, in 1900 the Yeomanry was converted, as technically was the cavalry, to the rifle instead of the carbine. This continued under Roberts, although with the added push to remove the lance and, in some cases at least, the saber from service. A revolver and bayonet also found their way into the Yeomanry’s kit, but it was to be issued neither saber nor lance, and it was not to be trained with either. Rounding out its new armament and doctrine the Yeomanry received a new training manual which focused on dismounted rifle tactics and maneuvers for employing the new weapons effectively.

Other important official reforms followed. “In 1904, the Cavalry School was established at Netheravon…with horsemastership and veterinary science as important parts of its training.” A parallel school was set up in India at Saugar. A Cavalry Committee was formed in order to oversee cavalry issues, reforms, and problems and to review operations and make recommendations regarding the cavalry Empire-wide. There was also some reorganization of the army in the interwar years, and the cavalry as well, although this was an evolving process and was still underway when the outbreak of war in 1914 brought it to at least a temporary halt.

\[207\] Badsey, 189-190.
The conversation about cavalry reform in the years between the Anglo-Boer War and World War I was vibrant, partisan and at times heated and marred by personal attacks. The various personalities involved at the highest levels of the debate frequently waged their war of words while simultaneously attempting to outmaneuver one another through appointments to important positions and lobbying politicians and even for a time public opinion. Despite the infighting and personal attacks, though, some progress was made toward a more modern and better equipped cavalry organization. Yet the defenders of the traditional cavalry role and its attendant weapons managed to hold some ground, and the saber and lance remained in service even after World War I, in some regiments until the switch to mechanized or motorized transport forced them out of service.

In retrospect, the continued use of the lance seems foolhardy in the face of modern artillery and machine guns, yet the cavalry had successes in South Africa, and the psychological impact of such weapons in the hands of mounted troopers was seen as disproportionally effective compared to a mere mounted rifleman, basically the Dragoon of old. The British even managed to score successes with the *arme blanche* during World War I, although these were few and occurred under very specific circumstances. On the Western Front the cavalry charge was practically unheard of, and the conditions of static trench warfare certainly did not allow for much cavalry action of the type which *arme blanche* proponents had envisioned. Many cavalry troopers found themselves manning trenches with the infantry, duties for which they were wholly unprepared by their training.
It is easy to criticize the whole cavalry organization as conservative or resistant to change while ignoring both the realities of the battlefield and the more moderate attitudes of what might be called slow reformers such as French or Haig. On battlefields across the Empire the British cavalry managed to rise to the challenge of various environments and methods of warfare for which it had not trained and was not prepared. The cavalry adapted itself time and again, not through official changes in doctrine but through expedient methods in the theater of operations where it served fought. Some of what it did in those far-flung outposts of the Empire became official doctrine such as carrying rifles and practicing marksmanship. Other adaptations did not, because they were suited only for particular circumstances or theaters of operations. What is clear is that far from being unable to deviate from the methods and doctrine on display in the Crimean War, the British cavalry proved to be flexible enough to make itself effective and useful in each of Britain’s colonial conflicts.

Why, then, did the British not take to heart the lessons of the many so-called “small wars” during the second half of the nineteenth century? Why did so many officers in the cavalry and other arms of the service retrench and argue against any systemic and deep reform? Not all of them did, of course, and some lessons were learned. Yet a significant number resisted meaningful reforms or the development of a new doctrine based on experiences in the field and the changing weapons and conditions of war. The view shared by many of them was that:

Although both officers and men had in general far more campaigning experience than most of their Continental contemporaries, it was largely irrelevant to the conditions of a major engagement against a skilled and determined enemy armed with the most modern weapons. Moreover these mountain, desert, and jungle campaigns against tribal forces equipped at best with primitive firearms and only dangerous if allowed to get to close quarters, were
regarded by most senior officers as improvisations – which, of course, they mostly were – and therefore exceptions to the rule.\textsuperscript{208}

Fortunately the British cavalry could rely on men such as Roberts, with his experiences in handling cavalry still fresh in his mind, to effect change. Before him, during Wolseley’s time as Commander-in-Chief, attempts had also been made to change what was, arguably, anachronistic and non-functional. Both agreed that some types of cavalry belonged in the past, although “HRH [His Royal Highness, the Duke of Cambridge] was a traditionalist and would have retained two-thirds of the available numbers as heavy cavalry, armed, mounted and equipped on the old pattern. Wolseley tentatively, and Roberts after his South African experiences, absolutely, rejected the whole conception of heavy cavalry as being a total anachronism in the conditions of modern war…a massed cavalry charge in such conditions could only result in mass suicide.”\textsuperscript{209}

Ultimately the British cavalry found itself, like the rest of the British Army and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the armies of continental Europe, in a period of flux. New weapons had arrived on the battlefield but their full implications had yet to be realized, and few at the time could have foreseen the devastation and waste that would come to embody World War I. Still, unrealistic training exercises and parsimony from the government in London meant that field exercises were often kept short and modern weapons could not be fully integrated before the outbreak of war, blunting the potential lessons to be learned. Because of this the cavalry entered World War I unprepared for what would come, still carrying lances and sabers and, while the load it carried was reduced, encumbered by too much equipment. It would still manage to mount successful

\textsuperscript{208} William McElwee, \textit{The Art of War: Waterloo to Mons} (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1974), 215-216.
\textsuperscript{209} McElwee, 313-314.
charges in the Middle East against non-European foes, and it would as always adapt to circumstances when and where it could, but in many ways World War I was the moment when the British cavalry came face to face with its shortcomings and found its role in the war much reduced from the conflicts of the previous fifty years.
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