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War In History 2011 18: 495

DOI: 10.1177/0968344511417348

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War in History
18(4) 495–513
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DOI: 10.1177/0968344511417348
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Abstract

Although reconnaissance was considered the primary duty of cavalry, British cavalry were poorly trained in this role prior to the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). The dismal performance of scouting duties in this conflict prompted a complete overhaul of reconnaissance organization, while innovative training methods were introduced to improve scouting and horse-mastership. Although the process was not without difficulties, the results were positive and proved extremely valuable in 1914. It is the purpose of this article to add to the ongoing debate on British cavalry in the period 1899–1914 by demonstrating how the vital skills of reconnaissance were developed as a result of the Anglo-Boer War experience.

Keywords

Anglo-Boer War, cavalry, First World War, reconnaissance

In the aftermath of the long and hard-fought Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), the entire British army underwent a period of introspection and reform. While this produced vociferous discussion in all the major service arms, a particularly acrimonious debate developed regarding the future of the cavalry. On one side, the reformers championed by Lord Roberts argued for greater emphasis on dismounted tactics and the abolition of the lance as a combat weapon. Against them stood the so-called ‘Old School’ led by John French and Douglas Haig, who are traditionally held to have fiercely resisted the changes and kept the cavalry arm wedded to cold steel tactics.

This debate has caught the eye of historians, and the tactical development of cavalry in this period has received greater academic study than either infantry or artillery. Traditionally, views of cavalry have been largely negative, seeing the arm as antiquated and reactionary, with key officers such as Haig stubbornly attached to obsolete ideas and

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ignorant of new technology.¹ For example, Edward Spiers has argued that attempts to reform the cavalry in 1899–1914 were a failure, ending with the mounted arm using the same shock tactics it had used prior to the Anglo-Boer War.² The ineffectiveness of cavalry during the years of trench deadlock on the Western Front is cited as final proof that the mounted arm was little more than an expensive, unreformed relic by 1914.³ However, in recent years a revisionist view has emerged to challenge the idea that the cavalry was a military anachronism in the twentieth century. Stephen Badsey and Gervase Phillips have argued that the British cavalry, having undergone important and valuable reforms prior to 1914, emerged as an effective battlefield force in the First World War during the more mobile periods of the conflict in 1914 and 1918, while also proving valuable in the Middle East.⁴ The revisionists argue that the British cavalry, far from being wedded to old-fashioned shock tactics, was considerably in advance of continental rivals in the use of the rifle during the pre-First World War period, with tactics comprising an effective hybrid of cold steel charges and dismounted fire-power.⁵

Running parallel to this debate was a crucial yet oft-neglected effort to reform scouting and reconnaissance within the arm. In the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War, such reforms were considered vital. Reconnaissance during the conflict had been hampered by inadequate training, unanticipated difficulties with the South African terrain, and terrible problems with horse attrition. Throughout the struggle, mounted reconnaissance was dogged by errors and often failed to find Boer positions, which resulted in a number of blunders and setbacks. Indeed, Thomas Pakenham and Stephen Miller have argued that the flawed nature of British reconnaissance was a fundamental factor in the defeats that marked the early stages of the war.⁶ In the aftermath of the conflict, there was a considerable overhaul of reconnaissance organization and tactics, ably supported by the work of important officers such as Robert Baden-Powell and Michael Rimington. Although some flaws remained, the efforts to improve reconnaissance had ultimately begun to bear fruit in the years immediately preceding the First World War and proved their value during the period of mobile warfare in 1914.

1 Gerard De Groot, *Douglas Haig, 1861–1928* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 109; Gerard De Groot, 'Educated Soldier or Cavalry Officer? Contradictions in the Pre-1914 Career of Douglas Haig', *War and Society* IV (1986), p. 65; Edward Spiers, 'The British Cavalry, 1902–1914', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* LVII (1979), p. 79.

2 Spiers, 'British Cavalry', p. 79.

3 John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (London: Pimlico, 1993), pp. 54–5.

4 Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry, 1880–1918* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 229; Stephen Badsey, 'The Boer War (1899–1902) and British Cavalry Doctrine: A Re-evaluation', *Journal of Military History* LXXI (2007), p. 76; Gervase Phillips, 'The Obsolescence of the *Arme Blanche* and Technological Determinism in British Military History', *War and Society* IX (2002), pp. 39–41; Gervase Phillips, 'Scapegoat Arm: Twentieth Century Cavalry in Anglophone Historiography', *Journal of Military History* LXXI (2007), p. 38.

5 Badsey, 'Boer War', p. 76.

6 Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Abacus, 1997), p. 188; Stephen M. Miller, *Lord Methuen and the British Army: Failure and Redemption in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), p. 147.

Reconnaissance was seen as the principal duty of cavalry during this period. A tactical manual of 1890 noted that 'for reconnoitring purposes, in pursuit, and during a retreat, cavalry is absolutely essential'.⁷ John French echoed such sentiments, arguing that overall success during a campaign could often 'be traced directly to the activity or inertness of the cavalry reconnaissance'.⁸ However, the efforts to improve training in this field have received comparatively little detailed analysis from historians. Scouting in the Anglo-Boer War posed unique challenges and revealed a number of serious problems that required improvements in training and tactics. The purpose of this paper is to examine this vital area and demonstrate how the difficulties of mounted reconnaissance in South Africa provided a crucial spur for reforms in the pre-First World War period. While the reform of scouting was not as dramatic or controversial as the fire-power versus cold steel debate, it was crucially important to the overall development of the British cavalry arm in this period. Ultimately, any discussion of the tactical effectiveness of cavalry in this era must include an understanding of its ability to perform the reconnaissance role which was considered its primary function.

The art of reconnaissance was far from unknown to the British cavalry in the years prior to the Anglo-Boer War. The numerous 'small wars' of the Victorian period often required scouting to be undertaken in difficult circumstances against foes operating in their native terrain. This dangerous work could prove harrowing: Lord Roberts remembered that scouting operations in Afghanistan were exceptionally nerve-wracking, even more so than being involved in a full-scale cavalry charge.⁹ During colonial campaigns, intrepid officers were often able to gather useful intelligence through a combination of local scouts, spies, and their own bravery.¹⁰ Mounted reconnaissance remained important, as information gained from the local population could not always be relied upon. For example, in 1898, during the Sudan campaign, mounted reconnaissance proved vital in revealing the inaccuracy of information being offered by local spies.¹¹

However, while intelligence work during colonial campaigns was vitally important, in many such conflicts the regular cavalry were present in only small numbers, with reconnaissance duties being taken by mounted infantry or other locally raised mounted forces.¹² Furthermore, the variety of terrain over which troops were forced to operate made establishing a doctrinal approach to reconnaissance difficult.

This was a particular problem as reconnaissance training in the 1890s was seriously hampered by lack of available space in drill grounds and a lack of time during larger manoeuvres. Additionally, a dangerous assumption had developed in some cavalry circles that reconnaissance would not be possible until the enemy cavalry had been destroyed,

7 H.R. Gall, *Modern Tactics* (London: W.H. Allen, 1890), p. 132.

8 Colonel J.D.P. French, 'Cavalry Manoeuvres', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XXXIX (1895), p. 565.

9 Erskine Childers, *War and the Arme Blanche* (London, 1910; repr., Uckfield: Naval and Military, no date), p. xv.

10 Edward M. Spiers, 'Intelligence and Command in Britain's Small Colonial Wars of the 1890s', *Intelligence and National Security* XXII (2007), pp. 663–5.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 667–8.

12 For example, see Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform*, pp. 54–5.

causing practical scouting against active opposition to become neglected in training.¹³ In 1895 John French bemoaned the fact that just 3 or 4 days a year were dedicated to reconnaissance work, which compared unfavourably with the 27 days assigned to the duty in the French army.¹⁴ Such problems continued throughout the 1890s. A cavalry exercise in 1897 lasting 38 days allocated just 3 days to outpost and reconnaissance work.¹⁵

The training that was done was often flawed. For example, during cavalry manoeuvres in 1894, reconnaissance patrols were given such restrictive orders that local initiative was stifled, it being noted that 'many commanders seemed intent on disposing the men under their command as if to complete some diagram' rather than allowing the scouts to do their work.¹⁶ At least one scout patrol became completely lost during the exercise and blamed a lack of maps, an excuse that was treated with incredulity by the inspector general of cavalry, James Keith Fraser.¹⁷ Reconnaissance during combined manoeuvres was little better: one officer remembered that it was not uncommon 'to see cavalry scouts approach openly to within 500 yards of infantry firing at them, and often closer'.¹⁸ In 1899 an anonymous cavalryman wrote on the subject of training problems, arguing that 'the art of patrolling is almost unknown in our cavalry. *And yet patrolling is the most important service cavalry can render to its side in war.*'¹⁹

The weaknesses in pre-war training were greatly exacerbated by a number of factors during the Anglo-Boer War. The sheer scale of the South African terrain was daunting, with the grass veldt in the east and scrub deserts in the west providing relatively little cover, while high kopjes proved to be formidable defensive positions, granting dominating views over the surrounding country to those who occupied them. A German volunteer fighting with the Boers summed up the terrain problems facing British scouts:

the great level plain gives one nothing to take hold of. There are some flat-topped mounds, but they are all alike, and it is impossible to tell one from another. [Effective reconnaissance was] practically impossible with the enormous extent of the Boer positions ... the bare plain offered no cover for the scout.²⁰

Adding to the peculiar local terrain difficulties, a related problem was the severe shortage of maps, with the best map of the Transvaal being a farm survey dating from the

13 French, 'Cavalry Manoeuvres', p. 565.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 565.

15 Major J.F. Morrison, 'Cavalry in the Manoeuvres of 1898', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLIII (1899), pp. 632–3.

16 Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), WO 279/3, Report on Cavalry Manoeuvres, 1894, pp. 27, 29.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

18 Lieutenant-Colonel R.H. Morrison, 'Lessons to be Derived from the Expedition to South Africa in Regard to the Best Organization of the Land Forces of the Empire', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLV (1901), p. 816.

19 A Cavalry Officer, 'British Cavalry', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLIII (1899), p. 453. Emphasis in original.

20 Count Sternberg, *My Experiences of the Boer War* (London: Longmans, 1901), pp. 204–6.

1850s. The poor supply of maps caused Archibald Hunter to rage, 'Our maps are worse than useless; they are a positive danger and delusion.'²¹

Furthermore, the exceptionally clear air of South Africa allowed observation at enormous distances. Inexperienced in operating in such an unusual atmosphere, British troops struggled to estimate distances accurately, and even veteran officers were known to make huge errors of judgement in this regard.²² The atmospheric conditions proved a particular burden to the British cavalry in the early part of the war, when it was found that their carbines were dramatically outranged by the Mauser rifles carried by many of the Boers. Charles Warren complained that the carbine was only accurate up to 1200 yards, noting that 'The Boers had only to keep at 2,000 yards from our cavalry in the hills, and they could shoot them down with impunity'.²³ A related problem was the fact the majority of Boer rifles used smokeless powder, meaning that there was no tell-tale puff of smoke to betray the location of the marksman. One anonymous officer wrote of the effect caused by the combination of long-range fire and smokeless powder, noting, 'War is not what it was when armies manoeuvred in sight of each other, and when 600 yards was the limit of artillery fire ... Now Bill is killed at 2400 yards, and Bill's pal hasn't an idea where the shot was fired. That is modern warfare.'²⁴ The Boers took advantage of this to stall British reconnaissance efforts, often posting snipers several hundred yards ahead of their main position to pick off scouts as they appeared.²⁵ Frederick Burnham, an American adventurer and Lord Roberts's chief of scouts, recalled that during attempts to reconnoitre over the Rhinoster River in early 1900, Boer marksmen killed five of his best scouts and prevented any information being gained.²⁶ Lord Methuen experienced similar problems during his attempt to relieve Kimberley, stating in a letter to Redvers Buller, 'We are terribly handicapped ... the open country plus Mauser rifles render a reconnaissance impossible.'²⁷

Adding to the burden faced by the cavalry was the fact that they were initially deployed in relatively small numbers. There were only two regular cavalry regiments in South Africa when the war broke out on 11 October 1899.²⁸ A further brigade of three regiments was rushed out from India at the outbreak of the war, bringing the total up to five, but four of these units became trapped in Ladysmith when the town came under siege.²⁹

21 Quoted in Miller, *Lord Methuen*, p. 72.

22 G. Forbes, 'Experiences in South African with a New Range Finder', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLVI (1902), p. 1389.

23 *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Military Preparations and Other Matters Connected with the War in South Africa*, 4 vols (London: H.M.S.O., 1903), II, Q15850, p. 233 (hereafter *Elgin Commission*).

24 Not A Staff Officer, 'Some Remarks on Recent Changes', *United Service Magazine*, October 1904, p. 47.

25 B.F.S. Baden-Powell, *War in Practice: Some Tactical and Other Lessons of the Campaign in South Africa, 1899-1902* (London: Isbister, 1903), p. 94.

26 F.R. Burnham, *Scouting on Two Continents* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1926), p. 155.

27 TNA, WO 132/15, Lord Methuen to Redvers Buller, 2 December 1899.

28 Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, vol. IV: 1899-1913 (London: Leo Cooper, 1986), p. 39.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

With most of the regular mounted troops cut off, the relief columns were left short of cavalry. Redvers Buller's column was supported by just two regiments of cavalry and Lord Methuen's by one, while William Gatacre's force had to make do without any regular cavalry whatsoever.³⁰ Although supported by mounted infantry³¹ and irregular horsemen, these small numbers of cavalry had to shoulder a vast workload. Cavalry were expected to provide extended reconnaissance, screen the infantry, cover the flanks, and play a battlefield role in the form of direct charges and pursuits. Given their small numbers, this multitude of duties was essentially incompatible. For example, a veteran officer recalled that prior to the battle of Modder River on 28 November 1899, the majority of cavalry scouts were withdrawn from the front to investigate 'some diversion in the flank', which contributed to the failure to discover the main Boer position.³²

The work rate imposed on the cavalry and the South African climate combined to expose another serious weakness in pre-war training. The cavalry had little experience in long-distance riding or horse-mastership, and training in Britain had done nothing to prepare them for the scale of problems that were to be faced in South Africa. Horses initially sent out to South Africa were heavy and strong, but such mounts demanded a great quantity of forage that proved impossible to supply, and were further limited by the fact that they travelled from a northern hemisphere winter to a southern hemisphere summer without being given time to fully acclimatize. Furthermore, the horse was expected to carry a large amount of weight, which gave a greater impact in the charge but proved a serious problem in the more mobile, long-distance operations that were common in South Africa. Jay Stone has suggested that a fully loaded cavalry horse could be expected to carry as much as 400 pounds in weight, including the rider, his weapons, and various other items of kit.³³

These factors posed serious health problems for the animals, and such difficulties were compounded by the poor horse-mastership prevalent among the cavalry. Lack of training meant that, although the British cavalry were considered good riders, they were not accustomed to long-distance riding or extended operations in the field. Instead, rider and horse generally only spent a few hours per day together outside the stables, leading John French to admit after the war that, 'They [the cavalry] understood stable management better than the care of horses in the field', while Leo Amery was more scathing when he complained that the average British cavalryman was 'hardly more conscious' of his horse than of his boots.³⁴ This lack of experience in horse-mastership meant that a number of bad habits were prevalent among the mounted forces, such as failing to allow a horse to graze when the opportunity arose, and remaining mounted even when at a

30 Ibid., pp. 69–70, 80, 85.

31 For recent discussion of the role of mounted infantry in South Africa, see Peter Robinson, 'The Search for Mobility during the Second Boer War', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* LXXXVI (2008), pp. 140–57.

32 Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, p. 234; Miller, *Lord Methuen*, p. 147.

33 J. Stone and E. Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), p. 93.

34 *Elgin Commission*, II, Q17129, p. 301; Leo Amery, ed., *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, 7 vols (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1902–10), II, p. 75.

halt.³⁵ This latter error tired the horse needlessly and risked causing a sore back, making it impossible for the animal to wear a saddle and thus effectively rendering it a casualty. Michael Rimington, generally considered the best horse-master in the British army, felt that remaining mounted unnecessarily was perhaps the greatest cause of horse losses in the entire war.³⁶

Not all the problems with the health of the horses were the result of individual negligence. The length of supply lines and their vulnerability to Boer raids meant that providing the vast quantity of forage required for the horses was a tremendous difficulty. Initially, horse rations were 12 pounds of oats a day, which would be reduced if hay or grazing was available.³⁷ By the time Lord Roberts took command in January 1900, the figure had dropped to 10 pounds of oats a day, but in the midst of active operations even this figure often proved impossible to provide. These shortages were exacerbated by Lord Roberts's efforts to increase the numerical strength of the mounted infantry, which placed still further demands on overburdened supply networks.³⁸ Adding to the difficulties was Roberts's controversial decision to reorganize transport arrangements while in the midst of launching a major offensive.³⁹

As a result of these related issues, during the advance to relieve Kimberley, the horses of the Cavalry Division went without feed for two days from 17 to 19 February, and then received just 6 pounds of oats per horse for the next four days.⁴⁰ Called upon to undertake strenuous work on such short rations, the horses suffered terrible casualties, which rendered the division virtually immobile for want of animals by April 1900.⁴¹

The British made great efforts to bring replacement animals to South Africa, but the quality of these horses varied enormously. In April 1900 Douglas Haig was frustrated to find that 'only wretched beasts of Argentine ponies are arriving and very few of them'.⁴² Even when fresh animals were available, they were given little time to acclimatize and the difficult conditions often rendered them casualties within a matter of days. Michael Rimington described the process of bringing new animals to the front: 'thirty days' voyage, followed by a five or six days' railway journey, then semi-starvation at the end of a line of communication, then some quick work followed by two or three days' total starvation, then more work, and so on'.⁴³

As the British gained greater control over South Africa the supply situation was stabilized and the horses received more regular rations, and additionally officers and men learned how to make better use of whatever forage was at hand.⁴⁴ However, the rate of

35 *Elgin Commission*, II, Q12652, p. 27.

36 *Ibid.*, Q12652, Q12653, p. 27.

37 Frederick Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa* (London: H.W. Brown, 1919), pp. 14–15.

38 Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform*, pp. 98–9.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–14.

42 Douglas Scott, ed., *Douglas Haig: The Preparatory Prologue, 1861–1914. Diaries and Letters* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2006), pp. 132, 167.

43 M.F. Rimington, *Our Cavalry* (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. 82.

44 *Elgin Commission*, II, Q17129, p. 301.

horse attrition remained shockingly high throughout the conflict. Official figures noted that 347,007 animals were 'expended' during the campaign, mainly as a result of exhaustion and disease, the figure representing around 67 per cent of the total number of horses sent to the theatre.⁴⁵

The related factors of vast distances, smokeless powder, and horse attrition seriously limited the ability of the British cavalry to perform effective reconnaissance. The poor health of horses was a particular problem and forced a change in tactics. Initially, reconnaissance was carried out by the traditional method of detached patrols under the command of officers or non-commissioned officers, who would range ahead of the rest of the squadron.⁴⁶ However, the feeble condition of horses meant that these patrols were at risk of being cut off or overtaken by the Boers, as they lacked the speed to escape the fast-moving commandos.⁴⁷ This caused the scouts to lose confidence and encouraged timid movement, with the patrols rarely advancing more than a quarter of a mile from the supporting squadron.⁴⁸ Even experienced scout Frederick Burnham found penetrating Boer lines on a weakened horse virtually impossible, and recalled that attempting to evade the subsequent Boer pursuit 'gave me a tremendous run for my life and about the closest rifle duel it was ever my chance to be engaged in'.⁴⁹ Gradually, a number of regiments phased out the patrol system in favour of forming a long line of scouts from an entire squadron, spacing them out over several hundred yards and performing a sweep of the countryside.⁵⁰ Although this allowed the scouts to push further forward and ensured the Boers could not ambush individuals, it was a defensive system and not an efficient method for gathering information, being highly conspicuous and encouraging the men 'to trust to their neighbour instead of using their own eyes'.⁵¹ Perhaps the worst defect of this method was that, unlike the system of officer patrols, this formation could not penetrate beyond the Boer pickets and thus was easily delayed by Boer rearguards.⁵²

The overall conduct of reconnaissance in the Anglo-Boer War drew almost universal criticism. Leo Amery summed up the popular perception toward scouting in the war when he commented that, among other flaws, the average British soldier 'was always getting surprised or lost'.⁵³ The most notorious reconnaissance errors were the failure to identify the main Boer positions at the battles of Magersfontein on 11 December and Colenso on 15 December 1899. These blunders contributed to humiliating defeats for the

45 *Elgin Commission*, IV, p. 97. For a thorough study of horse attrition during the Boer War and the British efforts to provide remounts, see Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry*, IV, pp. 279–375.

46 Captain J. Vaughan, 'Cavalry Notes: South Africa, 1899–1900', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLV (1901), p. 449.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 449.

48 Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p. 94.

49 Burnham, *Scouting on Two Continents*, pp. 153–5.

50 Vaughan, 'Cavalry Notes', p. 449.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 450.

52 Christiaan De Wet, *Three Years' War* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1902), p. 213.

53 Amery, *Times History*, II, pp. 34–5.

British, but there were also many smaller examples of poor scouting leading to feeble battlefield performance, with one anonymous officer ruminating, 'faulty reconnaissance has led us in this campaign into one mess after another'.⁵⁴ Inadequate scouting prior to the small action at Zoutspans Drift, 13 December 1899, caused Redvers Buller to lament, 'I suppose our officers will learn the value of scouting in time, but in spite of all one can say, up to this point our men seem to blunder into the middle of the enemy and suffer accordingly.'⁵⁵ During 'The First De Wet Hunt' of July–August 1900, the principal cause of Christiaan De Wet's escape was attributed by the *Times History* to 'extraordinarily bad scouting' on the part of the British pursuit columns, which were often within a few miles of the Boer commander's forces but regularly failed to detect his presence.⁵⁶ De Wet himself was dismissive of British reconnaissance efforts, noting that they 'frequently ended in disaster'.⁵⁷

Faced with such problems, the regular cavalry worked hard to improve their methods throughout the conflict. Although some regiments favoured the method of squadron-level 'sweeps', the old system of small patrols was never entirely abandoned. As the war continued, experience and the gradual improvement of the health of the horses meant that mounted reconnaissance was beginning to show signs of improvement, with scouts ranging further and being able to report back more useful information. These improvements in reconnaissance led to several successful ambushes of Boer laagers.⁵⁸ For example, the 5th Dragoon Guards acquired a particularly good reputation for reconnoitring Boer laagers during the night, thus facilitating the launch of dawn raids.⁵⁹ Additionally, the controversial but widespread use of native guides and Boer deserters alongside the scouts provided crucial local knowledge that had often been lacking in the early part of the conflict.⁶⁰ T.D. Pilcher organized a six-man patrol system of three picked troopers, two native guides, and an Afrikaner mounted on the best horses available to the column, and found this produced 'most satisfactory results', while De Wet felt that the addition of local guides to the British forces was instrumental in improving their reconnaissance ability.⁶¹

In addition to improving organization and tactics in the cavalry, the British deployed a wide range of specialist scout formations to support the regular mounted troops. At their best, these units could prove a genuine asset. Perhaps the most famous of these regiments was the Lovat Scouts, raised by Lord Lovat from Highland stalkers. This unit benefited from an exceptionally thorough selection process, with over 1500 initial volunteers ultimately producing a regiment 236 men strong.⁶² Subsequent drafts maintained a similar

54 A British Officer, *An Absent-Minded War* (London: John Milne, 1900), p. 27.

55 Quoted in R.S.S. Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men* (London: Gale & Polden, 1899), no pagination.

56 Amery, *Times History*, IV, p. 432.

57 De Wet, *Three Years' War*, p. 18.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 263–4; Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p. 94.

59 Major G. Reynolds, 'Scouting Notes', *Cavalry Journal* II (1907), pp. 179–82.

60 T.D. Pilcher, *Some Lessons from the Boer War, 1899–1902* (London: Isbister, 1903), pp. 90–1.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 91; De Wet, *Three Years' War*, p. 18.

62 Michael Leslie Melville, *The Story of the Lovat Scouts, 1900–1980* (Trowbridge: Librario, 2003), p. 24.

selection standard, and the regiment drew much praise for its work.⁶³ The apparent success and glamour of such irregular scouts led to the creation of a number of scouting corps during the guerrilla phase of the war.⁶⁴ These formations varied in quality and often suffered from declining recruit numbers as the war continued.⁶⁵ Although they often garnered much publicity, the overall impact of these scouting corps was mixed. Despite the presence of expanded scouting forces and improved tactics within the cavalry, reconnaissance failures allowed the Boers to launch surprise attacks on British columns on a number of occasions, inflicting stinging defeats at actions such as Nooitgedacht on 13 December 1900, Groenkop on 25 December 1901, and Yzer Spruit on 25 February 1902.⁶⁶

The entire British army had much to digest in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War. Not all the lessons drawn from the conflict were self-evident, and in a number of cases this resulted in vociferous debates on future training and tactics. However, the need to improve reconnaissance training was unquestioned. The report on the 2nd Corps manoeuvres in 1903 stated, 'The first duty of Cavalry is to obtain information', while Lord Roberts's comments on the 1903 combined manoeuvres described scouting and reconnoitring as 'two of the most important duties of the Cavalry soldier'.⁶⁷ Although writing shortly before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, Robert Baden-Powell summed up the increased importance of reconnaissance in the following terms: 'when acting against enemies armed with long-range weapons and smokeless powders that render his position invisible, we should be exposing our troops to absolute destruction were we to blunder them boldly against an enemy without knowing exactly how and in what strength he was posted etc.'⁶⁸

Although his appointment was controversial in many respects, in the drive to improve cavalry scouting during the early postwar period the British army was fortunate to have Baden-Powell as inspector general of cavalry. Baden-Powell had long championed the need to improve reconnaissance work, which culminated in his best-selling pocket book *Aids to Scouting for N.C.Os and Men*, printed in 1899. Building on pre-war ideas and South African combat experience, Baden-Powell pioneered the organization of a body of specially trained scouts at both squadron and regimental level, with the first of these appearing in 1904. Reform aimed at providing at least four scouts per squadron, with a further twelve scouts at regimental level underneath the command of a specially trained officer.⁶⁹ Scouts were to be assigned on the basis of ability, with first-class scouts being

63 Ibid., pp. 35–9, 44.

64 Fransjohan Pretorius, *Historical Dictionary of the Anglo-Boer War* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2009), p. 413.

65 For example, the Imperial Light Horse, a colonial regiment under British regular officers, achieved a fine reputation in the early part of the war, but declined in quality as the conflict continued, becoming known as the 'Imperial Light Looters' towards the end of the war. See Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry*, IV, pp. 48–9.

66 Pretorius, *Historical Dictionary*, p. 413.

67 TNA, WO 279/516, Army II Corps Manoeuvres, p. 13; WO 279/7, Combined Manoeuvres, 1903, p. 4.

68 Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scouting*, p. 12.

69 TNA, WO 163/10, Inspector General of Forces Report for 1904, p. 301 (hereafter IGF Report).

assigned to regimental level and second-class scouts placed at squadron level.⁷⁰ This was the first time the cavalry had possessed an organization at regimental level specifically for the purposes of reconnaissance, and although it took time to develop its full potential, it marked a distinct advance from the haphazard organization that had existed in the pre-Boer War army.⁷¹ Supplementing the scouts was the institution of a group system, with a section of eight men under the command of a non-commissioned officer becoming a permanent unit and encouraging 'intelligence and initiative' when on detached and reconnaissance duties.⁷²

While it was expected that all troopers in the squadrons receive instruction in basic scouting duties, it was stipulated that a number of men should be selected 'for their superior intelligence and good horsemanship' and given more thorough instruction.⁷³ Specific subjects for scout training were listed as the ability to find the way across unfamiliar country via map, sketch, compass, or stars; quickness of observation with and without binoculars or other aids; concealment of both scout and horse; crossing obstacles such as rivers, fences, and canals; ability to deliver accurate oral and written reports; ability to sketch maps; skill in horse-mastership; and ability to decipher and follow tracks.⁷⁴ Much leeway was allowed to instructors to develop their own methods of training. Individual training thus varied from regiment to regiment, although one common method involved sending individual scouts on extended rides of over 50 miles, with the trooper under instructions to report on his observations upon his return.⁷⁵ Other small-scale exercises included 'Spider and Fly', in which a party of scouts would attempt to remain hidden from a small patrol; flag-stealing competitions, in which scouts would attempt to penetrate a hostile picket line and retrieve a flag without being caught; and long-distance races between scouts using only compass and stars to guide them.⁷⁶ Once trained, a scout held the position for 18 months, at which point he had to qualify once again in competition with new applicants.⁷⁷

The scouts were not intended to replace the old system of patrols, but instead to complement them through their own specialist training. Trained scouts were expected to operate in the advance of regular patrols, securing approaches from the possibility of ambushes and attempting to locate the enemy positions.⁷⁸ Once a scout had located the enemy, information would be relayed to the patrol itself while the scout was generally expected to maintain contact until more observers could be brought to his position.⁷⁹

70 War Office, *Cavalry Training, 1912* (London: H.M.S.O., 1912), p. 215.

71 TNA, WO 163/10, IGF Report for 1904, pp. 301–2.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

73 War Office, *Cavalry Training, 1912*, p. 215.

74 *Ibid.*, pp. 215–17.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

76 Inspector General of Cavalry, 'Recent Steps in Cavalry Training in England', *Cavalry Journal I* (1906), p. 133. For detailed descriptions of competitive exercises such as 'Spider and Fly' and others, see Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scouting*, pp. 130–8.

77 Inspector General of Cavalry, 'Recent Steps', p. 134.

78 War Office, *Cavalry Training, 1912*, p. 258. Scout duties could also include operating as a rearguard or flank protection, or working to identify and eliminate enemy scouts.

79 *Ibid.*, pp. 260–1.

Furthermore, it was hoped that skilful and active scouts would be able to locate enemy forces on the march and gain useful information on their numbers and intentions, thus alleviating the pressure on reconnoitring established enemy positions where concealed trenches and smokeless powder could make the task very difficult.⁸⁰ Operating in this manner, the new scout organization mimicked the role performed by native guides and Boer deserters during the South African War, providing specially qualified individuals who could enhance the abilities of the reconnaissance patrol as a whole.

Reconnaissance duties were broken into three separate categories. 'Strategic' reconnaissance took place when the armies were reasonably distant, and aimed to identify approximate enemy strength, direction, and intentions. 'Tactical' reconnaissance was defined as taking place when the armies were within striking distance of one another, and aimed to identify key points of the enemy's position. Finally, 'protective' reconnaissance was intended to intercept enemy patrols and scouts, thus denying intelligence to the enemy and protecting friendly scout formations.⁸¹ It was assumed that, during most operations, all three types would be in progress simultaneously.

These changes provided a useful doctrinal and organizational framework for the development of reconnaissance, but it took time to develop tactics and training to match. Initially, scoutmasters were noted as being highly enthusiastic but generally lacking in practical knowledge, with one anonymous cavalryman complaining that they mainly consisted of second lieutenants who knew 'little or nothing'.⁸² Existing reconnaissance training methods were considered inadequate to prepare these new scouts. Baden-Powell had been critical of the nature of pre-war training, which tended to inculcate theoretical rather than practical knowledge, describing the consequences of faulty training:

Men who have been taught to draw maps beautifully, and to make excellent reports in peacetime, go out on service to scout, and promptly lose their way, or forget to keep hidden, and from want of quickness of eye they neglect to see the enemy stalking them – and they never turn up again.⁸³

Furthermore, limited training space meant that scouts were often forced to perform reconnaissance over familiar ground, which caused loss of interest among the troops and failed to prepare them for the challenges that would be faced during war.⁸⁴ The limited training areas available were also related to another key weakness revealed by the conflict. While the poor level of horse-mastership within the cavalry was a problem for the mounted arm as a whole, it was particularly critical for scouts. Scouts operating in advance of the army could often be isolated from normal sources of supply for several

80 War Office, *Field Service Regulations, Part 1: Operations, 1909* (London: H.M.S.O., 1909), p. 125.

81 *Ibid.*, pp. 121–5. The same terms were used in *Cavalry Training, 1912*, p. 256, but without the definitions.

82 Another Cavalryman, 'The Squadron System', *United Service Magazine*, November 1904, p. 171.

83 Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scouting*, p. 113.

84 *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

days, and thus required a thorough knowledge of horse management to ensure that their mounts remained healthy.

Thus, to develop fully the scouting capabilities of the cavalry, complex training that involved work over unusual terrain and extended operations to develop horse-mastership was considered necessary. An early pioneer of this type of training was Michael Rimington. He had risen to fame during the Anglo-Boer War as commander of 'Rimington's Tigers',⁸⁵ a specialist scout unit composed of South Africa volunteers. Following the war, he was made commander of 3rd Cavalry Brigade, a formation which became noted for its innovative training, particularly in scouting duties. Training in Ireland, the brigade was regularly put through long-distance marching schemes with the emphasis on maintaining horse health even in adverse conditions. Whereas prior to the Anglo-Boer War one cavalryman noted that the average cavalry horse spent 20 hours out of 24 in the stables, the brigade's exercises often lasted several days without interruption, forcing officers and men to handle supplies and horse care in a more realistic fashion.⁸⁶ The seriousness attached to the work is well illustrated by the fact that, during one such exercise in 1903, any man who was adjudged to have neglected his horse was placed on the minor crimes list.⁸⁷

In addition to improving horse-mastership, Rimington's training schemes also aimed to improve reconnaissance. Taking advantage of the greater manoeuvre space available in Ireland, Rimington devised a series of progressive training schemes to develop the brigade's scouts. For example, in 1904, the 'Ulster' and 'Wicklow' training exercises both included infantry and cyclists acting as an 'enemy', with cavalry scouts required to track them and find as much information as possible without being discovered.⁸⁸ Rimington summed up the objectives of the training in the following terms:

In addition to the main object of training scouts in watching an enemy and finding their way about the country, this scheme aimed at training men and young officers in self-reliance and the power of thinking for themselves ... small patrols and posts of two or three men were carrying on their duties alone, miles away from an officer.⁸⁹

The exercises were progressive, initially aiming to train individual scouts, but later developing to include the movement of friendly troops that were dependent on the reports received from the scouting forces. However, the work was not without fault. In particular, the Ulster scheme was marred by the fact that the 'enemy' that was the target of the reconnaissance was actually carrying out a pre-arranged ceremonial march with bands

85 Although commonly known as the 'Tigers', their formal title was actually 'Rimington's Guides'.

86 Major General C.E. Webber, 'Army Reform Based on Some 19th Century Lessons in Warfare', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLV (1901), p. 388; TNA, WO 27/503, Cavalry Training: The Ulster Scheme and Wicklow Raid, Comments on the Wicklow Scheme, p. 11.

87 TNA, WO 279/516, 3rd Cavalry Brigade Manoeuvres, 1903, p. 17.

88 TNA, WO 27/503, Cavalry Training: The Ulster Scheme and Wicklow Raid, pp. 1, 11.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

playing.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the exercises still marked a substantial improvement on the faulty training that had been common in the pre-war era, and the work was continued with innovative exercises in 1905. These included the 'Treasure Hunt' scheme, described by Rimington as 'miniature manoeuvres' purely for scouting forces. In this exercise, one force attempted to move a 'treasure' across enemy-held country via stealth, while a second force attempted to intercept it.⁹¹ Rimington adjudged the scheme a marked advance on earlier work, attributing this to the experience gained through regular, progressive training.⁹² The overall improvement in quality was well illustrated by the reports from the combined manoeuvres around the Shannon River in the late summer of 1905, when participating officers were almost unanimous in their praise for the work of cavalry scouts.⁹³ Acting as inspector general of cavalry, Baden-Powell commented, 'These manoeuvres marked a great advance in the development of reconnaissance ... In this Brigade they are no longer amateurs, but really capable and reliable long-distance scouts.'⁹⁴

Rimington's work with 3rd Cavalry Brigade was particularly thorough, but it demonstrates the increased importance attached to scouting in the British army following the Anglo-Boer War. While problems of cost and scale prevented the entire British cavalry from training in this manner, there was a concerted effort to improve reconnaissance training. A unique exercise was devised by 4th Cavalry Brigade in which the city of York rebelled and a group of scouts was tasked with smuggling important dispatches through the rebel lines, represented by the men of the 18th Hussars. The operation culminated when one scout disguised himself as a girl, and attempted to carry the messages into York via public train. Unfortunately, the 'rebels' had advance warning of this attempted ruse, and were waiting for his arrival at the platform. During the commotion at the station, the public became involved, reportedly taking 'great interest' in events and allowing themselves to be questioned by the troopers. In the bustle, the disguised scout managed to evade the picket, but was subsequently recognized and arrested by an officer.⁹⁵ Possibly as a result of the stir caused by this exercise, regulations for 3rd Cavalry Brigade manoeuvres later that year noted that any disguise was permitted, except dressing as a woman.⁹⁶

As well as brigade manoeuvres, there were regimental-level exercises and competitions using small groups of scouts, with prizes awarded for the best performance.⁹⁷ Senior officers were impressed with the training of their scouting forces. John French reported that 1st Cavalry Brigade had carried out 'excellent work' in reconnaissance during combined manoeuvres on the Berkshire Downs in 1906, while Ian Hamilton commented that in Eastern Command, 'Officers and men show how greatly they have profited

90 Ibid., p. 3.

91 TNA, WO 279/516, 3rd Cavalry Brigade Training: The Treasure Hunt Scheme, 1905, p. 1.

92 Ibid., p. 40.

93 TNA, WO 279/516, Report on the Shannon Manoeuvres, 1905, pp. 108–10.

94 Ibid., p. 124.

95 Inspector General of Cavalry, 'Recent Steps', p. 137.

96 Ibid., pp. 136–7.

97 Editor, 'Reconnaissance Competition', *Cavalry Journal* II (1907), pp. 111–14.

by their South African experience ... The scouting is done freely and well, the system and skill by which officers' patrols are inspired being especially commendable.⁹⁸

However, while scouts were regularly noted as working hard at regimental- and brigade-level training and being highly proficient individually, putting their skills into practice in larger manoeuvres sometimes proved more difficult.⁹⁹ In 1909, during Cavalry Divisional Training, a variety of problems emerged, including a tendency for reconnaissance patrols to fragment, with each scout 'becoming engrossed in minor enterprises of his own making'.¹⁰⁰ At combined manoeuvres in 1909 and in Ireland in 1910, problems emerged when cavalry brigades were given duties that included extended reconnaissance and the holding of key positions through 'tenacious fighting'.¹⁰¹ This harked back to the problems encountered by the cavalry in the Anglo-Boer War, where a small number of mounted troops were given a multitude of contradictory duties.

A recurring problem was the difficulty of communicating any information gained back to the main body. In 1905 Baden-Powell had recognized this difficulty and suggested that each regiment train a number of well-mounted dispatch riders to convey information.¹⁰² In 1907 veteran intelligence officer David Henderson published *The Art of Reconnaissance*, a widely read volume aimed at front-line officers that included an entire chapter on transmission of information.¹⁰³ However, despite these efforts there was no formal system for how information was to be relayed from scouts to the main body, with different regiments employing a bewildering variety of methods. For example, at the Army Manoeuvres of 1909, it was noted that methods used included flag and heliograph signalling; dispatch riders on horses, bicycles, or motorbikes; carrier pigeons; balloons; and individuals in motor cars.¹⁰⁴ The report on this aspect of reconnaissance work noted that it was at an 'experimental stage' and was gentle in its criticism, merely urging that a formal system be devised.¹⁰⁵ However, similar problems continued to occur throughout manoeuvres in the years prior to the First World War.¹⁰⁶ The use of assigned dispatch riders on bicycles to relay information was given a degree of official sanction by 1913, but at the manoeuvres of this year it was found that the cyclists often ignored their role and instead became additional scouts.¹⁰⁷

98 Inspector General of Cavalry, 'Notes on Cavalry Training, 1906', *Cavalry Journal* II (1907), pp. 117–18.

99 TNA, WO 279/30, Cavalry Divisional Training, 1909, p. 9; WO 279/31, Report on Army Manoeuvres, 1909, p. 52.

100 TNA, WO 279/30, Cavalry Divisional Training, 1909, p. 10.

101 TNA, WO 279/13, Army Manoeuvres, 1909, p. 40; WO 279/40, Irish Manoeuvres, 1910, p. 18.

102 Inspector General of Cavalry, 'Recent Steps', p. 133.

103 David Henderson, *The Art of Reconnaissance* (London: John Murray, 1907), pp. 154–68; J. Beach, 'De L'Art de la reconnaissance au Livre jaune: le renseignement militaire britannique, 1902–1915', *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* CCXXXII (2008), p. 111.

104 TNA, WO 279/31, Report on Army Manoeuvres, 1909, p. 103.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

106 For example, see TNA, WO 279/39, Report on Army Manoeuvres, 1910, p. 61; WO 279/52, Report on Army Exercise, 1913, p. 20.

107 TNA, WO 279/52, Report on Army Exercise, 1913, p. 29.

A final, related problem was the lack of a genuine intelligence section within the cavalry during manoeuvres. This meant that when information was received by cavalry headquarters, it often took an unacceptably long time for it to reach the infantry or army commanders.¹⁰⁸ This problem was not resolved prior to the outbreak of war in 1914, and ultimately the Cavalry Division went to France with an ad hoc intelligence section whose principal officer had been recruited by Edmund Allenby in a corridor at the War Office.¹⁰⁹ While it is somewhat unclear why the Cavalry Division lacked an integral intelligence section, the scattered deployments of its constituent brigades in peacetime largely prevented the establishment of a permanent divisional staff prior to mobilization in 1914.¹¹⁰

However, while some organizational problems remained, the overall quality of scouting within the British cavalry rose steadily throughout the period. While work at regimental and brigade level had been praised in the earlier years of the Edwardian period, larger-scale reconnaissance work during the 1912 and 1913 Army Manoeuvres was singled out for special commendation.¹¹¹ For example, during the 1913 exercise, scouts were able to observe opposing forces at a distance of over half a mile without being detected themselves, maintaining contact and sending back valuable information.¹¹² The 1913 Inspector General of Forces Report also had praise for the work of scouts, noting that they made good use of the ground and that overall reconnaissance quality was now of a high standard throughout the cavalry.¹¹³ On the eve of the war the patrol system supported by specialist scouts remained the core of British tactics. Although *Cavalry Training, 1912* was not prescriptive on patrol strength, *Field Service Regulations, 1909* suggested a twelve-man patrol as ideal.¹¹⁴ In August 1914 the latter strength was often employed, with two trained scouts acting as the advance and rear points.¹¹⁵

By 1914 the British cavalry had a well-developed basis for reconnaissance and supplemented this with vastly improved horse-mastership among all ranks, ensuring that their animals remained healthy and thus retained mobility even during active operations. The superiority of British horse-mastership over that of the French and German armies was striking, an asset that was to prove of enormous value during the period of mobile warfare in the early weeks of the First World War. Although both men and animals were exhausted by the demands of the retreat from Mons, casualties among horses were relatively light.¹¹⁶ In comparison, German horses were overburdened and worked to the

108 For example, see TNA, WO 279/40, Irish Manoeuvres, 1910, p. 61.

109 Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, vol. VII: *The Curragh Incident and the Western Front, 1914* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1996), p. 77. Admittedly, Barrow had undertaken intelligence work during manoeuvres before and thus had a certain degree of experience.

110 *Ibid.*, pp. 76–7.

111 TNA, WO 279/47, Report on Army Manoeuvres, 1912, p. 155; WO 279/52, Report on Army Manoeuvres, 1913, p. 20.

112 TNA, WO 279/52, Report on Army Manoeuvres, 1913, p. 20.

113 TNA, WO 163/20, IGF Report for 1913, pp. 330, 338.

114 War Office, *Cavalry Training, 1912*, p. 257, and *Field Service Regulations, 1909*, p. 122.

115 L.B. Oatts, *Emperor's Chambermaids: The Story of the 14th/20th King's Hussars* (London: Ward Lock, 1973), p. 325.

116 J.C. Darling, *20th Hussars in the Great War* (Hampshire: Lyndhurst, 1923), p. 22.

point of exhaustion, while the bad habit of staying mounted while marching on hard roads caused large numbers of horses to become lame.¹¹⁷ By the end of August one German veteran noted that many of the horses were 'dead beat', and the cavalry were unable to take advantage of promising opportunities as a result.¹¹⁸ British liaison officer Edward Spears found the French cavalry in an equally poor state, with many horses suffering from sore backs caused by the men remaining mounted at all times, noting that as a result the smell of some squadrons was 'painful'.¹¹⁹ A British cavalryman recalled that when French cavalry did stop to rest their horses, 'it was not unknown for part of the horse's back to come away with the saddle'.¹²⁰

Furthermore, when the anticipated clash of massed cavalry divisions failed to occur, the ability of British cavalry in reconnaissance duties proved a critical asset. In particular, the capacity of the British cavalry to fight dismounted gave them an edge in action against enemy screening forces. It had long been expected that the final stages of reconnaissance would be carried out dismounted, and the British cavalry were well prepared for this role.¹²¹ Conversely, the German cavalry placed considerable reliance on their *Jäger* infantry for fire support. British cavalry exploited this, often stalling German reconnaissance by delivering a burst of dismounted fire and thus forcing the cavalry to fall back onto their supporting infantry. This could cause critical delays while stalled horsemen waited for their infantry to deploy to clear the position, at which point the British slipped away.¹²² In combination with rapidly rising horse attrition and poor operational handling, this limited the potential of the German cavalry in a reconnaissance role to the point where it has been suggested that it caused Alexander von Kluck, commander of German 1st Army, to operate in a 'partial intelligence vacuum' in the opening months of the war.¹²³

The performance of the numerically superior German cavalry was largely ineffective. Clumsy operational handling meant that large areas of the country were left unreconnoitred, while a handful of accurate reports regarding the presence of the BEF at Mons were ignored owing to the stubborn belief among 1st Army command that the British would be operating around Lille.¹²⁴ German cavalry subsequently failed to detect the open

117 Nigel Cave and Jack Sheldon, *Le Cateau* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008), p. 14.

118 Lieutenant-Colonel A.G. Martin, 'Cavalry in the Great War: A Brief Retrospect', *Cavalry Journal* XXIV (1934), p. 136.

119 Edward Spears, *Liaison, 1914: A Narrative of the Great Retreat* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), p. 101.

120 Richard Van Emden, ed., *Tickled to Death to Go: Memoirs of a Cavalryman in the First World War* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1996), p. 59.

121 Major F.C. Ornsby-Johnson, 'Reconnaissance as a Fine Art under the Present Conditions of War', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* XLVI (1902), p. 1210.

122 Cave and Sheldon, *Le Cateau*, p. 14; Darling, *20th Hussars*, pp. 26–7, 32.

123 Cave and Sheldon, *Le Cateau*, pp. 14–15.

124 Major H.V.S. Charrington, 'German Cavalry in the Opening Stages of the Great War', *Cavalry Journal* XV (1925), p. 120; Terence Zuber, *The Mons Myth: A Reassessment of the Battle* (Stroud: History, 2010), p. 128.

flanks of Smith-Dorrien's II Corps as it made its stand at Le Cateau.¹²⁵ Although German cavalry squadrons did pursue the British after the battle, they were held off with relative ease by rearguard formations, and rarely threatened to break beyond these screens.¹²⁶ British officers were surprised by the overall passivity of German reconnaissance. Edward Spears commented that they 'showed neither initiative nor dash, seldom left the road, and when attacked galloped back to their infantry supports'.¹²⁷ John Darling of the 20th Hussars largely concurred, noting that although the Germans seemed to employ larger patrols than the British, they were 'unenterprising' and rarely threatened the British main position.¹²⁸ Ruminating on the superior performance of British cavalry in 1914, a veteran German cavalry officer noted: 'Owing to the advantage of long term service, as well as to the lesson learned in the South African War, the British Cavalry were indisputably far better trained for dismounted action than their Continental fellow horsemen.'¹²⁹

Making use of such skills, British cavalry reconnaissance helped identify the looming threat of the powerful German advance prior to the battle of Mons, albeit only to have it rejected by GHQ.¹³⁰ The cavalry also carried out a crucial 'protective reconnaissance' role in screening the retreat of the BEF after the battles of Mons and Le Cateau, keeping German cavalry at bay and ensuring a potentially hazardous withdrawal proceeded without undue interference. Although the operational handling of the Cavalry Division in this period has drawn criticism, the tactical performance of regiments and squadrons during the retreat has received considerable praise.¹³¹ Following the battle of the Marne, British cavalry were able to maintain contact with retreating German forces and, although casualties and exhaustion prevented a decisive pursuit, the work of cavalry scouts could still lead to notable tactical victories. For example, on 7 September 1914 advance scouts from the 15th Hussars located a squadron of dismounted German cavalry holding a crossroads, which ultimately led to a well-executed surprise attack that completely routed the defenders.¹³² Reflecting on the success of cavalry work during the retreat, John Darling wrote:

It is also due in a very large measure to the excellence of the work done by the officers' patrols. These small bodies of men, who were usually pushed boldly out a long way in advance of the main position, not only gave that 'early information' of the enemy's movements on which the drill book insists, but also by their bold action must have caused the enemy delay and inconvenience out of all proportion to their numerical strength.¹³³

125 Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry*, VII, pp. 143–5.

126 Darling, *20th Hussars*, p. 146.

127 Spears, *Liaison, 1914*, p. 101.

128 Darling, *20th Hussars*, p. 13.

129 Martin, 'Cavalry in the Great War', p. 447.

130 Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform*, p. 244.

131 For criticism, see Nikolas Gardner, 'Command and Control in the "Great Retreat" of 1914: The Disintegration of the British Cavalry Division', *Journal of Military History* LXIII, pp. 29–54; for praise, see Stephen Badsey, 'Cavalry and the Development of Breakthrough Doctrine', in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 147; Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry*, VII, pp. 127–34.

132 Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry*, VII, p. 193.

133 Darling, *20th Hussars*, p. 32.

Although the period of mobile warfare in 1914 was brief, the value of skilful cavalry reconnaissance work in this crucial period was great, and played a vital role in keeping the BEF relatively intact during the retreat from Mons.¹³⁴ The success of the cavalry in this role can be directly attributed to the lessons learned from the bitter experience of combat on the veldt. The training of specialist scouts and their integration in the existing system of mounted patrols drew its inspiration from Britain's earlier colonial struggles, particularly the experience of reconnoitring against a well-armed and active foe in South Africa. Although the system suffered from some organizational flaws, in tactical terms it was a great improvement on that which had prevailed prior to the Anglo-Boer War.

The reform of reconnaissance and horse-mastership in the 1902–14 period was a quiet success story for the British cavalry. The mounted branch had come a long way from the force that had suffered repeated setbacks at the hands of the Boers. Although often overlooked in favour of the controversial 'fire versus shock' debate, these reforms ensured that British cavalry were capable of performing the key duty of mounted troops, namely gathering information and denying the same to the enemy. While the reform of the battlefield tactics of cavalry in the 1902–14 period has drawn great attention, any assessment of the tactical competence of cavalry must also consider the fact that, as a whole, the arm was well trained in reconnaissance and performed effectively in the role against a numerically superior opponent in 1914. The bulk of cavalry work in the opening weeks of the war did not take the form of large-scale battlefield actions, but was instead defined by small clashes between patrols, squadrons, and regiments. Thus, while the ability of the British to fight both mounted and dismounted was a tactical asset in 1914, the cavalry's skill in reconnaissance was particularly valuable, allowing them to identify oncoming German advances and then stall them through ambushes and other rearguard actions. This admirably fulfilled the role of 'protective reconnaissance', preventing German horsemen from threatening the main body of the retreating army. This skilful work in screening the BEF was vital to the success of the 'Great Retreat' of August 1914, proving that the lessons of the Anglo-Boer War had been well learned.

134 *Ibid.*, pp. 129–31.