ERSKINE CHILDERS

WAR AND THE ARME BLANCHE

Erskine Childers

War and the Arme Blanche

EAN 8596547373001

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Table of Contents

BY
FIELD-MARSHAL EARL ROBERTS, V.C., K.G.

I have read with the greatest interest Mr. Childers's illuminating book "War and the Arme Blanche." My opinion of the subject with which it deals is already so well known throughout the army that I need not labour to say how entirely I agree with the author's main thesis; indeed, anyone who will take the trouble to read "Cavalry Training" (1904), will see that I anticipated the arguments which he has so ably developed. This being so, it is not surprising that I should view the regulations laid down in "Cavalry Training" (1907), with some concern.

Let us consider briefly what the history of this question—the comparative value of steel weapons and firearms for Cavalry in war—is. Until within the last few years our Lancer regiments depended entirely on the lance and sword, while other Cavalry regiments depended almost entirely on the sword.[1] This was inevitable because of the inaccuracy and short range of the smooth-bore carbine. Tentative changes were made when rifled arms were adopted, but it is only within the last thirty years that Lancer regiments have had any firearm given to them save a pistol.[2] With such an equipment and such traditions it was perhaps but natural that the training of Cavalry should have been almost exclusively devoted to shock tactics and the use of the *arme blanche*.

But why now, with a different equipment, should Cavalry still be trained on the old tradition, and their rifles reside in buckets attached to the horse, only to be used on certain exceptional occasions to “supplement the sword or lance”? (“Cavalry Training,” sec. 142.)

The late Colonel Henderson, in his essay on the tactical employment of Cavalry, “Science of War,” chapter iii., page 51, pointed out that, notwithstanding the introduction of gunpowder, the Cavalry was the arm that had undergone the least change. He went on to say that “shock-tactics, the charge, and the hand-to-hand encounter are still the one ideal of Cavalry action; and the power of manœuvring in great masses, maintaining an absolute uniformity of pace and formation, and moving at the highest speed with accurately dressed ranks, is the criterion of excellence.” He added: “to such an extent has this teaching been carried out, that the efficiency of the individual, especially in those duties which are performed by single men or small parties, cannot fairly be said to have received due attention.”

After explaining how Cromwell’s troopers “were taught the value of co-operation,” and how “Cromwell built up his Cavalry on a foundation of high individual efficiency,” he goes on to show that, “as time went on and armies became larger, and skill at arms, as a national characteristic, rarer, drill, discipline, manœuvre in mass, and a high degree of mobility came to outweigh all other considerations; and when the necessity of arming the nations brought about short service, the training of the individual, in any other branch of his business than that of riding boot-to-boot and of rendering instant obedience to the word or signal of his

superior, fell more and more into abeyance. Shock-tactics filled the entire bill, and the Cavalry of Europe, admirably trained to manœuvre and attack, whether by the squadron of 150 sabres, or the division of 3,000 or 4,000, was practically unfitted for any other duty. The climax of incompetency may be said to have been reached during the cycle of European warfare, which began with the Crimea, and ended with the Russo-Turkish conflict of 1877–78. The old spirit of dash and daring under fire was still conspicuous, discipline and mobility were never higher. The regiments manœuvred with admirable precision at the highest speed, and never had great masses of horsemen been more easily controlled. And yet, in the whole history of war, it may be doubted whether the record of the Cavalry was ever more meagre."

Referring specially to the German Cavalry during the war of 1870–71, Henderson says: "The troopers knew nothing whatever of fighting on foot—their movements were impeded by their equipment--and a few *Francs-tireurs*, armed with the chassepot, were enough to paralyze a whole brigade.... In fact, to the student who follows out the operations of the Cavalry of 1870–71 step by step, and who bears in mind its deficiencies in armament and training, it will appear very doubtful whether a strong body of mounted riflemen of the same type as the Boers, or better still, of Sheridan's or Stuart's Cavalry in the last years of the War of Secession, would not have held the German horsemen at bay from the first moment they crossed the frontier."

"Had the successes gained by shock-tactics been very numerous, it might possibly be argued that the sacrifice of

efficiency in detached and dismounted duties, as well as the training of the individual, was fully justified. What are the facts?" After enumerating the successes gained by shock-tactics from the days of the Crimea onwards, when anything larger than a regiment was engaged, Henderson adds: "Such is the record: one great tactical success gained at Custozza: a retreating army saved from annihilation at Königgrätz,[3] and five minor successes which may or may not have influenced the ultimate issue. Not one single instance of an effective and sustained pursuit; not one single instance—except Custozza, and there the Infantry was armed with muzzle-loaders—of a charge decisive of the battle; not one single instance of Infantry being scattered and cut down in panic flight; not one single instance of a force larger than a brigade intervening at a critical moment. And how many failures? How often were the Cavalry dashed vainly in reckless gallantry against the hail of a thin line of rifles! How often were great masses held back inactive, without drawing a sabre or firing a shot, while the battle was decided by the Infantry and the guns! How few the enterprises against the enemy's communications! How few men killed or disabled, even when Cavalry met Cavalry in the mêlée! Can it be said in face of these facts that the devotion to shock-tactics, the constant practice in massed movements, the discouragement of individualism, both in leaders and men, was repaid by results? Does it not rather appear that there was some factor present on the modern battle-field which prevented the Cavalry, trained to a pitch hitherto unknown, from reaping the same harvest as the horsemen of previous eras? Was not the attempt to apply

the same principles to the battle of the breech-loader and the rifled cannon, as had been applied successfully to the battles of the smooth-bore, a mistake from beginning to end; and should not the Cavalry, confronted by new and revolutionary conditions, have sought new means of giving full effect to the mobility which makes it formidable?”[4]

Since Colonel Henderson, no one has dealt so exhaustively and so logically with this aspect of Cavalry in war as Mr. Childers. He has gone thoroughly into the achievements of our Cavalry in South Africa. It has been said that this war was abnormal, but are not all wars abnormal? As, however, it was the first war in which magazine rifles were made use of, and as the weapon used in future wars is certain to be even more effective, on account of the lower trajectory and automatic mechanism about to be introduced, shall we not be very unwise if we do not profit by the lessons we were taught at such a heavy cost during that war?

These, then, are Mr. Childers’s conclusions in reviewing the period from the beginning of the campaign up to March, 1900:

"Widening our horizon to include the whole area of the war at this period, we perceive that Cavalry theory, so far as it was based on the *arme blanche*, had collapsed. The only and not especially remarkable achievement of that weapon is the pursuit at Elandslaagte on the second day of hostilities. Everywhere else we have seen it directly or indirectly crippling the Cavalry, and the greater the numbers employed and the larger the measure of independence permitted, the more unmistakable is the weakness. When

the Cavalry succeed strategically, as in the ride to Kimberley and back to Paardeberg, they succeed in spite of disabilities traceable to *arme blanche* doctrine. When they succeed tactically, as in the Colesberg operations, and in containing Cronje's force on the eve of Paardeberg, they succeed through the carbine, in spite of its inferiority as a weapon of precision. In tactical offence, the paramount *raison d'être* of the *arme blanche*, they fail, and in reconnaissance they fail."

With every word of this I agree, and it must be remembered that my judgment is based upon personal and first-hand knowledge. Why did our Cavalry fail? Because they did not know, because they had never been required to know, how to use the principal and most useful weapon with which they were armed. Because they did not understand, because they had never been asked to understand, that their rôle should consist in attacking the enemy "exactly like the Infantry,[5] and to shoot their way up to him."[6]

In this matter of shooting their way up to their enemy, Cavalry possess great advantages owing to their mobility. General 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 generally understood, and the *arme blanche* had nothing to say to it.

In the preface to "Cavalry Training" (1904), I laid down that such an operation was sound in principle. I went farther

—I encouraged it—and there is no doubt that on many occasions such an advance will have a far greater effect than a methodical advance on foot. But, such an advance must be essentially a rapid advance of fighting men armed with rifles, and the threat lies in the power of the rifle.

In the same Preface I pointed out that the rifle, which "will chiefly be required when dismounted, must be carried on the person of the soldier himself." The necessity for this was brought very prominently to my notice during the fight in the Chardeh Valley, near Kabul, on December 11, 1879. On that occasion more than forty carbines were lost by the 9th Lancers, two weak squadrons of which regiment, numbering only 213 men, took part in the engagement. Partly owing to the rough nature of the ground, and partly to the enemy's fire, several horses fell, and before the men could disengage the carbines from the buckets the Afghans were upon them. Without their firearms the dismounted Cavalry were quite helpless, and it was a sorry spectacle to behold these men, with their swords dangling between their legs and impeding their movements, while they vainly endeavoured to defend themselves with their lances. This incident confirmed the experience I had gained in the Mutiny as to the necessity for the firearm being attached to the man instead of to the horse, and I at once issued orders for this change to be made, and for the sword—which is only required to be used when the soldier is mounted—to be carried on the saddle.

The strongest opposition to these alterations was made by Cavalry officers in this country, and it was not until 1891 —twelve years after it had been adopted in Afghanistan—

that sanction was accorded to the *men's* swords being carried on the saddles. Eleven years more had to pass before *officers* were authorized (Army Order, June 1, 1902) to have their swords similarly carried. But the rifle is still being carried on the horse, and, if this arrangement is not changed, the result will certainly be that, if a man gets upset and separated from his horse in a fight, he will have neither sword nor rifle with which to defend himself. This is not the case in India, where the rifle, supported by a small bucket, is attached to the man, so that when he dismounts the rifle goes with him.[7]

I trust that thirty years will not again be allowed to elapse before we take to heart and act upon the main lesson to be learned from the Boer and Russo-Japanese Wars, and in a lesser degree from every war that has taken place since the introduction of breech-loading arms. That lesson is, that knee to knee, close order charging is practically a thing of the past. There may be, there probably will be, mounted attacks, preferably in open order, against Cavalry caught unawares, or against broken Infantry. But, after reading Mr. Childers's book, backed by my own practical experience, I am driven to the conclusion that the only possible logical deduction from the history of late wars is, that all attacks can now be carried out far more effectually with the rifle than with the sword.

At the same time I do not go so far as the author in thinking that the sword should be done away with altogether. It is desirable that Cavalry soldiers, equally with their comrades in the Infantry, should have a steel weapon of some kind for use in the assault by night, in a mist, or on

other occasions when a fire-fight might be impossible or inadvisable. Instead, however, of the present sword, the Cavalry soldier would be more suitably equipped with a sword-bayonet for fixing on the rifle when fighting on foot—something like that with which our rifle regiments were formerly armed—but made with a substantial handle, large enough to be firmly gripped, so that in the event of its being required it could be used on horseback as well as on foot. This sword-bayonet must, of course, be attached to the man.

The two essentials of Cavalry in the present day are mobility and the power to use the rifle with effect. Unless Cavalry is mobile it is practically useless, as is proved over and over again in the pages of this book. It is by saving their horses in every possible way, and by skill in the use of the rifle, that Cavalry soldiers can hope to carry out properly the many important functions required of them in advance of, at a distance from, and in conjunction with, the main army. Further, as the rifle is the weapon which will enable Cavalry to be of the most real value in co-operating with the other arms on the actual field of battle, Cavalry soldiers must not only be good shots, but they must be taught how to fight as Infantry.

Owing to the enormous increase in recent years in the numbers which now constitute a modern army, the strategical area in which Cavalry will have to operate must inevitably be of considerable extent. Owing also to the increased size of armies on the actual battle-field, and to the extended formations necessitated by the long-reaching effect of modern weapons, the strain upon the Cavalry

horses is infinitely greater than in former days, and unless men are taught to take every possible care of their horses, Cavalry will be unable to co-operate with the other arms when their services are most urgently needed—perhaps at a critical period of the fight—or to follow up and harass a retreating enemy.

It is impossible to over-estimate the value of Cavalry—trained as I should wish to see them trained—under the existing conditions of war. It is Cavalry that carries out the preliminary operations. It is frequently due to the information gained by Cavalry that a commander is enabled to make, or alter, his plan of action. It may often happen that Cavalry may help to decide the issue of a battle. It is by Cavalry that the fruits of a successful action are most completely reaped. And it is to the Cavalry that the army will look to save a retreat being turned into a rout or a disaster.

It is for these reasons, and because Cavalry is so frequently required to act alone, and often in quite small parties, at a considerable distance from the main force, that all ranks need the most careful training. The men should be intelligent and trustworthy; they require to have their wits about them even in a greater degree than other soldiers, for a single Cavalry soldier may at times have great responsibility thrown upon him. The officers should possess all the qualities of good sportsmen. They should be fine riders, careful horse-masters, have a keen eye for country, and be thoroughly well educated.[8]

In some recently written books on Cavalry great stress is laid on the necessity for inculcating the “true Cavalry spirit,”

and on the idea that “shock action alone gives decisive results.” I cannot call to mind one single instance during the last half-century—ever since, indeed, arms of precision have been brought into use—when shock action alone has produced decisive results, and I doubt whether shock action, or, in other words, the *arme blanche* alone, will ever again be able to bring about such results against a highly trained enemy armed with magazine rifles. I confess I cannot follow the train of thought which insists upon Cavalry requiring a “spirit” for “shock action,” and a spirit different, it is presumed, to the soldierly spirit which it is essential for the other arms to possess if they are to behave with resolution and courage on the field of battle.

It is this soldierly spirit, which can only be produced by discipline and thorough training, that animates the Engineers to carry out the extremely dangerous duty of blowing open the gates of a walled city. It is this soldierly spirit that enables the Artillery to continue serving their guns until the last man of the party is shot down. It is the same soldierly spirit that enables the Infantry soldier to stand the strain of lying out in the open, possibly for hours, under a burning sun or in drenching rain, unable to move hand or foot without being shot at, a strain to which the order to charge the enemy’s position comes as a distinct and welcome relief. And it is the same soldierly spirit which sustains the Cavalry soldier when employed on the important and hazardous duties of scouting and reconnoitring, in the carrying out of which he so often finds himself alone or with quite a small party. The “charge” doubtless requires “dash,” but no special “Cavalry spirit”;

the excitement of galloping at full speed, in company with a number of his comrades, is of itself sufficient to carry the Cavalry soldier forward.

I certainly would not venture to speak so decidedly on a matter, which has given rise to so much controversy of late years, did I not feel that I am justified in expressing an opinion from the fact that I have taken part in Cavalry combats, and have frequently had occasion to scout and reconnoitre with two, three, or perhaps half a dozen Cavalry soldiers, at a time when capture by the enemy meant certain death. And I have no hesitation in saying that scouting and reconnoitring try the nerves far more seriously than charging the enemy.

In conclusion, I would ask you, my brother officers, in whatever part of the Empire you may be serving, whether in the mounted or dismounted branches, whether in the Cavalry, Yeomanry, Mounted Infantry, or Colonial Mounted Corps, whether in the Artillery, Engineers, or Infantry, to read this book with an unbiassed mind, and not to be put off by the opening chapters, or to throw the book on one side with some such remark as, “This is written by a civilian, and what can he know of the subject?” Remember that most of our finest military histories have been written by civilians. I would ask you to study the facts for yourselves, weigh the arguments, follow the deductions, note the conclusions, and then do one of two things. Either traverse the facts, refute the deductions, and upset the conclusions, *or* admit the facts, agree to the arguments, acknowledge the deductions, and accept the conclusions.

CHAPTER I
THE ISSUE AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Table of Contents

My central purpose in this volume is to submit to searching criticism the armament of Cavalry. That armament now consists of a rifle and a sword in all regiments, with the addition of a lance in the case of Lancers. I shall argue that the steel weapons ought either to be discarded or denied all influence on tactics, and a pure type of mounted rifleman substituted for the existing hybrid type. I shall contrast the characteristics and achievements of this pure type with the characteristics and achievements of the hybrid type. I shall argue that a right decision in the case of Cavalry carries with it indirect consequences of the most far-reaching importance in regard to the efficient training of all our other mounted troops, regular or volunteer, home or colonial—troops which belong almost entirely to the pure type, but on whose training the mere existence of a hybrid type, with a theory of tactics derived from the steel, reacts unfavourably.

I cannot do better than begin by quoting two passages from page 187 of the latest edition of “Cavalry Training” (1907). They constitute an epitome of the case I wish to combat, and I challenge almost every proposition, express or implied, contained in them. The first runs as follows:

“From the foregoing it will be seen that thorough efficiency in the use of the rifle and in dismounted tactics is an absolute necessity. At the same time the essence of the Cavalry spirit lies in holding the balance correctly between fire-power and shock action, and while training troops for the former, they must not be allowed to lose confidence in the latter.”

Beginning with the first sentence, I challenge two assumptions implied in it: first, that “thorough efficiency in the use of the rifle and in dismounted tactics” (by hypothesis an absolute necessity) is compatible with thorough efficiency in shock action, also, by hypothesis, a necessity; second, that thorough efficiency with the rifle is confined to what the compilers of the drill-book call “dismounted tactics.” Passing to the second sentence of the same quotation, I challenge the definition of the “essence of the Cavalry spirit” there laid down. This definition is borrowed word for word from a German book, originally written before the Boer War and republished in 1902, when the war was ending, by an officer—the distinguished General Bernhardi—who founded his conclusions not on experience but on report, and addressed those conclusions to the German Cavalry, whose tactics, training, and organization by his own admission were, and seemingly are still, so dangerously antiquated in the direction of excessive reliance on the steel as to present no parallel to our own Cavalry. I challenge the Cavalry spirit so defined because it is a hybrid spirit, impossible to instil and impossible to translate into “balanced” action, even if the steel deserved, as it does not deserve, to be “balanced” against the rifle. I

challenge the definition still further, because it is not even an honest definition. Affecting to strike a just balance between the claims of the rifle and the steel, it does not represent the facts of existing Cavalry theory and practice in this country. Though borrowed from a German authority, it is even less to be relied on as representing the facts of German theory and practice, nor does it correspond to the general tenor of the very handbook—"Cavalry Training"—in which it appears. Those facts and that tenor find their really honest and truthful expression in the second quotation, which runs as follows:

“It must be accepted as a principle that the rifle, effective as it is, cannot replace the effect produced by the speed of the horse, the magnetism of the charge, and the terror of cold steel.”

I challenge both the form and the essence of the statement: its form because the words imply that “the speed of the horse and the magnetism of the charge” are exclusively connected with the use of the cold steel; its essence because the principle laid down is fundamentally unsound.

I want to induce all thinking men, whether professional soldiers or not, who take an interest in our military progress, to submit this theory of the *arme blanche* once and for all to drastic investigation, in the light of history—especially of South African history and Manchurian history—in the light of physical principles, and in the light of future Imperial needs. Above all, I want them to examine the case made for the theory by Cavalry men themselves, and to judge if that case rests upon an intelligent interpretation of new and valuable

experience, or, rather, upon a stubborn adherence to an old tradition whose teaching they have indeed been forced to modify, but have not had the good sense to abandon. The principles laid down by professional men for the use of their own arm must of course exact the greatest respect, but they are not sacrosanct, and if they are found to rest on demonstrably false premisses they deserve to be discarded.

Of all military questions this question of the *arme blanche* and the rifle is one around which general or outside criticism may most appropriately centre. It is not merely a Cavalry question; it cannot be disposed of by reference to the British regular Cavalry as it exists to-day. The training of all mounted troops, regular or volunteer, home or colonial, however armed and trained, depends on clear notions as to the relative value of the two classes of weapon. As an example of what I mean, I suggest that it is shallow and unscientific to present the Yeomanry with the "Cavalry Training" handbook as a whole, and to inform them in a sort of postscript of three perfunctory pages that they should be "so trained as to be capable of performing all the duties allotted to Cavalry, except those connected with shock action." According to the interpretation of the words "duties connected with shock action," the injunction might mean anything or nothing. No clear interpretation of the words could be derived from the handbook itself. The Yeoman might turn for light to the Mounted Infantry Regulations, and ask if, in its opening words, he was "an Infantry soldier ..." governed "in his tactical employment by the principles of Infantry training," and, if not, in exactly what sense and for what reasons he was supposed to differ from the Mounted

Infantryman; but he would ask in vain. In the end, he often concludes from the fact that he is “Cavalry,” that he is in peril for lack of a sword, and appeals for the sword when he has barely mastered the rudiments of the rifle. The Mounted Infantryman, who has been first an Infantry soldier, nourished on “Infantry Training,” may well wonder why that manual encouraged him not to fear Cavalry, while directly he obtains a horse he is warned to fear the steel.

These are examples of confusion of thought at home. What of Greater Britain? A critical time has arrived in our Imperial history. There is an universal sense of the necessity of closer union for Imperial defence. An Imperial General Staff has been initiated which is to “standardize” organization and training. One of its functions ought to be to formulate some clear, rational principles for the employment of mounted troops. We know we can get large numbers of these troops. From first to last in the Boer War we obtained upwards of 70,000 men outside Great Britain. We could obtain many in another great war, and make far more valuable use of them; if time and thought were to be given to their organization and training, with a special view to service in an Imperial Army. Inspiration in the first instance will naturally come from the home country. What are we going to ask of these troops, who, be it remembered, are designed to form an integral part of an Imperial Army, ready, without the confusion, waste, and inefficiency due to an improvised system, to take their place in the field for the performance of definite, specific duties? We shall hardly, it is to be presumed, recommend shock action with the steel weapon to men who have not even the sentimental tradition

of shock action, much less any practical belief in its efficacy. In what light, then, is shock action to be presented to them? What is to be their rôle? Are they, like the Yeomanry, to be informed that they are unfit to perform an undefined range of duties for which shock action alone is a qualification, or are they to be held competent to act as “Cavalry,” while the Yeomanry cannot claim that privilege? Again, are they, like the Mounted Infantry, to regard themselves on the one hand as “Infantry soldiers” mounted upon horses, and, on the other, as competent to perform regularly the duties of “Divisional Cavalry”? Or are they to be called Mounted Riflemen, a name officially unknown in England? And, if so, in what precise and positive way do Mounted Riflemen differ from Yeomanry, Mounted Infantry, and Cavalry? These questions must be answered, and they must be answered to the satisfaction of practical men whose ideas of war have been moulded by the South African War, where shock action, as they know very well, fell into complete disuse, where all classes of mounted troops, home and colonial, performed according to their varying degrees of ability, the same functions, and where the rifle was the only weapon which counted.

This question of weapons for horsemen must be fairly and squarely faced. It is a national and Imperial question, upon which every shade of opinion, volunteer or regular, should be consulted, and a verdict formed on the evidence, historical and technical. Part only of the rich and varied experience gained upon this question in South Africa was gained by Cavalrymen. Gunners, Sappers, and Infantrymen, to say nothing of volunteer officers of every description, led

mounted troops with distinction. The most brilliant Boer leading came from lawyers and farmers. The point is largely one for common sense, applied to known and recent facts, and everybody who takes any interest in military matters, whether he bears arms or not, can and ought to form an intelligent judgment on it.

But at present the situation is far from satisfactory, and, unless the controversy can be brought to a head in time, seems likely to grow more and more unsatisfactory. General public interest in the details of the South African War languished even before it was ended. After the war was over the tendency was to banish a tedious and unpleasant subject from memory. That, probably, is only a phase, yet a phase which may be dangerously overprolonged. The citizen army which fought in South Africa side by side with the regular forces has disappeared. A great number of its individual members still bear arms as volunteers, but most of the organizations raised for war purposes have perished as such, and with them many of the sound, young traditions which were derived from war experience. A new generation is slowly coming into being, permeated, indeed, by growing enthusiasm for military service, but not particularly interested in the war, and taught on the highest authority to regard it as abnormal. In the regular forces a somewhat similar tendency has been inevitable; the causes which led to a general concentration of thought on mounted problems have disappeared. The war once over, the army naturally fell back into its normal organization. Men temporarily called to become leaders of horse from branches outside the Cavalry and regular Mounted Infantry returned to their

former vocations and became reabsorbed in their old interests.

A great current of vital and original thought was irrevocably diverted. The ideas, no doubt, have lived on and thrived sporadically. At this moment there is probably much opinion in the army at large which is unfavourable to the official Cavalry view of the *arme blanche*, but the opposition is neither authoritative nor effectively articulate. In the natural course of things the regular Cavalry—a force centuries old and vested with immemorial traditions, the premier mounted force of the Empire—has reasserted its sway over theory and practice. Shock action, consigned to complete oblivion in South Africa and to equally complete oblivion in Manchuria, still holds the first place in the training of the Cavalry soldier. The reaction has been gradual but sure. In 1903, a year after our war, the lance, by official order, was relegated to the realm of “ceremony” and “recreation,” and the sword was expressly subordinated to the firearm, which became the soldier’s “principal weapon.” Then the sword regained that place, and finally the lance returned to use as a combatant weapon in conjunction with the sword. It is true that the rifle has been substituted for the carbine, and that “thorough efficiency in the use of the rifle” is enjoined as an “absolute necessity”; but, as I have pointed out, the spirit of the regulations suggests primary reliance on the steel as the main source of enterprise and dash. I lay stress on the spirit, for in the endeavour to make the best of both worlds, and to picture a perfect hybrid type, capable of doing all that first-class mounted riflemen can do, and all that first-class shock soldiers can do, the letter of

the instructions for the employment of Cavalry in the field is often inexcusably evasive and ambiguous.

But if there were any doubt about the essential meaning, the published writings of Cavalry authorities like General Sir John French, when combating the advocates of the rifle, would dispel that doubt. At such times, the principle of balance is forgotten, and the ineradicable belief in the supreme efficacy of the steel is laid bare. Does this belief rest on a sound basis? I want to show that it does not. It is a formidable task; how formidable, the mere mention of the name of General French will show. Deservedly he commands widespread respect and confidence, not only as the most distinguished British Cavalry officer now living, but as a soldier of high general ability. To a vast number of minds his verdict on any military point would be decisive. In South Africa he was the incarnation of the soldierly virtues. His name is bound up with some of the best work done by the Cavalry during that war, so that any critic of the *arme blanche* who founds his criticism on that war, finds himself continually confronted by the seemingly unanswerable argument that our ablest Cavalry officer believes in the *arme blanche*, and our ablest Cavalry officer, himself endowed with long war experience, must be right. I ask the reader to reserve his judgment. No one who has not studied in a critical spirit this question of weapons for horsemen can realize the incalculable influence of purely sentimental conservatism upon even the ablest Cavalry soldiers. The whole history of the subject has been one of indifference to, or reaction from, war experience, with the result that every great war from the middle of the nineteenth century to the

recent war in the Far East, with the solitary exception of the American Civil War, has produced a confession of comparative failure in the Cavalries employed, even from the Cavalry leaders themselves. General French himself would, I believe, be the first to admit that in South Africa he owed little or nothing to the *arme blanche*, and everything to the rifle. His case is that that war was abnormal. The *arme blanche*, indeed, is a religion in itself, comparable only to the religion of sails and wood which, in the affections of the old school of sailors—able sailors—long outlived the introduction of ironclads. This kind of conservatism must be analyzed, and, if need be, discounted, before we can arrive at the truth.

The published opinions of Sir John French may fairly be taken to represent the best, and in a sense the official, case for the steel weapon. In 1909 a new edition was issued in this country of Von Bernhardi's "Cavalry in Future Wars," the work from which the compilers of "Cavalry Training" have taken their definition of the hybrid "Cavalry spirit," and much more beside. It is admirably translated by Mr. Goldman, who wrote "With French in South Africa," after accompanying General French in the field during an important part of the South African campaign, who founded the *Cavalry Magazine*, and who may be regarded as the principal lay advocate of the *arme blanche*. Bernhardi's book is preceded by an introduction from the pen of General French himself. This introduction takes the form of an enthusiastic and absolutely unqualified eulogy of everything contained in the German publication, whose author is described as having, "with remarkable perspicacity and

telling conviction, dealt in an exhaustive manner with every subject demanding a Cavalry soldier's study and thought."

Nor is the book only praised for its intrinsic merits. It is avowedly put forward as a conclusive answer to the English critics of shock manœuvre with the *arme blanche*—critics whom General French, in the earlier part of his introduction, takes special pains to answer with additional arguments of his own. Mr. Goldman, whose views may be presumed to have received the approval of General French, adds a preface, in which he pursues the same object. Here, then, we have a volume which correctly represents in a compact and convenient form the best professional opinion on this question. I propose to refer to it incidentally, and at a later stage to submit it to closer analysis; but I urge my readers to read the book for themselves, only taking care to remember who Bernhardi was, when he wrote, why he wrote, and for whom he wrote. I venture to think that they will pronounce the representation of his volume as the last word of wisdom for British Cavalrymen, and as the supreme vindication of the *arme blanche*, an almost incredible phenomenon in a strange controversy. They will find it, indeed, profoundly suggestive and interesting, but unconsciously destructive of the very doctrines which its English sponsors believe it to uphold. A more genuine representation of Continental thought may be found in a book entitled "Cavalry in the Russo-Japanese War," by the Austrian authority, Count Wrangel, to which I shall also refer.

In submitting theory to the test of facts, I propose to concentrate attention on the modern evidence, and by "modern" I mean evidence since the introduction of the

smokeless long-range magazine rifle. Of the two great wars since that era, those in South Africa and Manchuria, I shall deal principally with the former. For Englishmen, bent on discovering from their own national experience the best weapons and tactics for mounted men of their *own race*, as distinguished from foreign races, the South African facts are the only modern facts strictly relevant to the inquiry. Aside from savage warfare, and disregarding the first Boer War as too brief and inconclusive to afford reliable evidence, we have to go back in our search for earlier experience as far as the Crimean War, when the firearm was a plaything as compared with the modern rifle. In the realm of foreign experience, there has been a great deal of controversy, much of it painfully sterile, on Cavalry work in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the Franco-German War of 1870, and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. Here, too, the firearm, though considerably improved, was primitive compared with the Mauser or the Lee-Enfield rifles. Nor, in spite of the illuminating examples furnished by the American Civil War, had anything approaching the type we now know as mounted riflemen been initiated by the Continental soldiers. There was no means of testing the value of this type, because it simply did not exist. Cavalry training and manœuvres were still those of the Napoleonic era. The firearm carried by the Cavalry was inferior even to that carried by the Infantry, and scarcely an attempt was made to inculcate any effectual use of it. Hence the comparative impotence of the Cavalries.

The American Civil War of 1862–65, for Englishmen especially, stands in a class by itself.[9] The men engaged in

it were men of Anglo-Saxon race, untrammelled by prejudices and traditions, working out mounted problems by the light of common sense. The firearm, poor weapon as it was, judged by our modern standard, became the most valuable part of Cavalry equipment, and the most fruitful source of dash and enterprise. Sheridan's Cavalry were said by Stuart, who was the best possible judge, to have fought better on foot than the Federal Infantry. The great Cavalry raids in which the war abounded, and of which the European wars which followed were conspicuously barren, depended absolutely for their success, as all such enterprises always must depend, on aggressive fire-efficiency. Fire from the saddle was constantly used by Morgan, Forrest, and other leaders. Infantry on both sides learnt to despise the sword, though for inter-Cavalry combats that weapon, owing to the imperfections of the firearm, remained a trusted auxiliary. Our modern rifle would have certainly produced the pure type of mounted rifleman which South Africa produced in both sets of belligerents. The example had no effect upon Continental tactics, a blind imitation of which has always been the besetting sin of our own Cavalry school. Thirty-four years later, when the rifle had enormously increased in power, we pitted ourselves against the born shots and hunters of the veld with as little regard for the Cavalry lessons of the American Civil War as though it had never been fought.

Lastly, we have the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. That, as I shall show, seals the doom of the *arme blanche*, and crowns the case for the mounted rifleman. But it is a foreign war, and not, therefore, so peculiarly applicable to

ourselves as the Boer War, whose lessons, nevertheless, it drives home. I propose to discuss it at a later stage, and will only remark now that even the most ardent advocates of the sword and lance have to admit that those weapons played no part in the war, while, on the other hand, neither Cavalry, not even the Japanese, approached the standard of fire-action attained in the course of our own war.

One more general word about the history of the subject prior to 1899. A vast amount has been written upon it. There is much common ground. Nobody denies that the relative important of shock manœuvre with the steel weapon has steadily declined for a century. It is generally admitted that the examples of successful shock action in the European wars of the sixties and seventies were relatively very few, and the performances of the Cavalries relatively poor to those of other arms. While persisting in the argument that, had certain conditions been fulfilled, Cavalry work, including shock work, might have been more distinguished, advocates of the steel now generally admit that even then the neglect of fire-action was the main cause of ill-success. Upon this point no one could speak more strongly than Bernhardi. But if there is much common agreement, we must make our minds absolutely clear as to the nature of this agreement. A great part of the controversy has raged round a comparatively narrow point: whether masses of Cavalry can any longer charge Infantry, and, if so, what are the limitations to the success of such a charge. It is agreed that since 1870 limitations are many and severe; but the settlement of that point leaves the major issue untouched. The opportunities of the steel