INTRODUCTION

The mounted soldier is perhaps one of the most evocative symbols in Australian military history. Although by no means negligible, the military achievements of such men were restricted largely to the veld of South Africa, the trenches of Gallipoli and, more famously, the sands of the Sinai and the rocky hills of Palestine. In purely military terms the contribution of the Australian light horse to the general victory in the First World War seems relatively minor compared to the efforts of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) fighting on the Western Front. There the Australian Corps took part in some of the largest battles of the war and played its part in the final battles that brought Germany to seek an armistice. By comparison the campaign in the Middle East was something of a strategic backwater, but it was a seemingly cleaner and less vicious war in which the front line moved, battles produced more than long casualty lists, and bravery and boldness might still, in the minds of many, as evidenced by Beersheba and other battles, sway the day. The men who fought on the Western Front have hardly been forgotten, but it was the actions of their mounted military compatriots in the Palestine theatre that, when combined with a continuing romantic ideal of mounted soldiers, has gone on to capture a remarkable place in the collective memory.

For many students of Australian military history the quintessential Australian soldier (in as much as such a person exists) of the First World War might be thought of as the 'digger', the infantryman who fought at Gallipoli or the Western Front. There is much to be said for this view, and it is certainly the case that the battles such men fought and

the conditions they endured are among the most examined aspects of Australia's military heritage; the number of books about them grows each year. Yet an examination of popular representations of Australian soldiers of the First World War produces an intriguing result: that the memory of the light horse and the light-horseman has found a number of manifestations that no other arm of the Australian Army, including the infantrymen of Gallipoli and the Western Front, has come close to matching. Certainly the representations of infantrymen are common on the war memorials that are a fixture of the Australian landscape, but outside the cities and larger towns it is not uncommon to find that the ghostly figure atop a monument is instead a light-horseman. Beyond war memorials it is difficult to find depictions of the infantrymen, gunners or the dozens of other military employment categories of the men of the AIF.

Conversely the light horse seems to go from strength to strength. When the Reserve Bank of Australia chose to put the visage of the soldier and engineer John Monash on its $100 note, for example, it selected as its key design elements a field gun with crew, an image of Simpson and his donkey, and no fewer than three separate images of light-horsemen. During the First World War Monash commanded first an infantry brigade, then an infantry division and, as the commander of the Australian Corps, had no more than one light horse regiment under his hand. That a representation of him should then be surrounded by mounted men who mostly fought in a completely different theatre, and contain no images of the infantrymen he did in fact command, is incongruous to say the least, but it does suggest how pervasive is the romance and remembrance of the light horse. Similarly when an Australian Army recruiting advertisement called 'Army Rise' was aired in 2008 it sought to emphasise the army's heritage, not with pictures of Gallipoli or the Western Front (they are perhaps too grim for an advertisement anyway), but with film taken of light-horsemen marching past somewhere in Palestine. In cinema the charge of Beersheba has been recreated twice for major feature films, first in Charles Chauvel's 1940 production of *Forty Thousand Horsemen* and again in 1987 for *The Light Horsemen*. The battle of Beersheba, a one-day affair brought to a dramatic conclusion by a charge by two regiments of light horse, is undoubtedly well suited to a cinematic presentation, but it is interesting to compare this double telling of a mounted action in Palestine with the complete dearth of film representations of Australians fighting on the Western Front. The 1980s television mini-series *1915* and *Anzacs* are as close as anyone has come to doing something similar to treat the infantry and artillery actions of Gallipoli, France and Belgium. Even Peter

Weir's *Gallipoli* is constructed around the disastrous dismounted charge of light-horsemen at the Nek.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of the continuing popular appeal of the light horse is the habit of a growing group of people who spend their weekends taking part in the activities of light horse re-enactment groups. Undoubtedly tied into a sentiment of what might be best termed 'equine nostalgia', at present there are more than 30 such groups around the country whose members keep horses, dress in light horse uniforms and spend their spare time tent-pegging, taking part in parades and otherwise ensuring that the light horse is not forgotten.[1] In 2007, 50 of them travelled to Israel and re-enacted the charge at Beersheba on the ninetieth anniversary of the battle. These groups operate under the overarching guidance of the Australian Light Horse Association, which has as its aim to 'preserve the History and Tradition of the Australian Light Horse and its predecessors'.[2] To this end it maintains a web site with a discussion forum and produces a member magazine as well as its own manuals of riding and dress. Although there are other re-enactment groups, there seems to be nothing as organised or sizeable as that which is trying to preserve the traditions of the army's long-extinct mounted branch.

Given this popular interest it is remarkable that the historiography of the light horse and its predecessors is, if not thin, then remarkably incomplete. The literature is still dominated by Henry Gullett's volume of the Australian First World War official history, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*. Gullett's examination of the campaign is the starting point for anyone interested in the Australian aspects of the campaign but, like all volumes of the official history, it is perhaps 'more frequently referred . . . to than actually read';[3] the inevitable consequence of which is that, although pervasive, its influence has possibly now become more impressionistic than detailed. The commonly held, oft-repeated and (as will be seen) incorrect contention that the light horse were mounted infantry has a number of contributing historical threads, but the ubiquity of that idea can be traced to what appears to be an uncritical acceptance of Gullett's simplification of the light horse's military role for a lay audience.[4] Similarly the popular image of the light-horseman owes a great deal to Gullett's impressive, but somewhat polished, sketch of a uniformed extension of the bushman ideal. What is more, this sketch has evolved into what is largely a stereotype, a mounted extension of the Anzac legend in which such ideas as mateship, egalitarianism, the bush ethos and irreverence tend to be stressed.

Beyond Gullett there are certainly books that offer some insights into the Australian mounted branch. Alec Hill's excellent biography of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, *Chauvel of the Light Horse*, for example, is a valuable and readable insight into the life of the officer most commonly associated with the light horse. Ian Jones's volume of the Time-Life series *Australians at War*: *The Australian Light Horse*, and its subsequent revision as *A Thousand Miles of Battles*, is based on detailed research into the wartime light horse and is a good introductory book. However, such books have their limitations as they are targeted at juvenile readers and prone to heroic language. More generally there are a large number of unit histories that can be drawn on by those interested. Many of these were written after the war and are no longer generally available unless one has the wherewithal to buy first editions from rare-book sellers. Regimental histories do continue to be produced, typically for units that did not have histories published after the Great War or in the form of works that detail the history of their descendant units in the Royal Australian Armoured Corps. There are also periodic editions of books aimed at popular audiences that deal with some aspect of the light horse's involvement in the Palestine campaign. Some of these are admirable in themselves, but go over much the same ground as the books already mentioned, or aim to keep digger mythology alive.

Among all this work there is as yet no history that deals specifically with the light horse as a military institution through its entire existence. That which does exist is confined to the light horse at war or only goes beyond the war at the regimental level. There has thus far been no effort to delve into the long-term development of Australia's mounted military forces, to analyse how they evolved, to consider what place they had in defence thinking, to look at the development of their tactical thinking, or to examine the way they interacted with the society around them, particularly at home. This book is an effort to fill this gap and is an institutional history of the light horse, not just at war but also from the raising of its colonial antecedents in the mid-nineteenth century through Federation to the disbandment of the last regiment during the Second World War. It will also examine the resource that is essential to any military institution, the men who constituted its ranks.

The light horse came into existence and had its crowning military moments at a time when the role and very existence of mounted troops in modern warfare was increasingly being questioned. Too often the light horse is examined in isolation, typically being presented as something uniquely Australian. That it might have something in common with other

mounted troops raised elsewhere is rarely considered, and in some cases a deliberate contrast is created between the supposedly innovative or modern light horse and the just as supposedly hidebound fools to be found elsewhere, often exemplified by pointing to British regular cavalrymen.[5] Related to this is a common view that by the beginning of the twentieth century military horsemen were an anachronism on modern battlefields: casualties in waiting who would ride to their death at the ill-considered order of some dull-minded general whose military imagination belonged in the nineteenth century. The origins of this latter idea are manifold, but have a great deal to do with scapegoating of senior generals after the First World War by various people, often politicians or theorists of mechanised warfare, who were selective or misleading in using history to deflect blame or advocate their vision of the future.[6] Both of these ideas require challenging. Australia's light horse and its colonial predecessors did not develop in isolation, and in many ways they reflected thinking and practice evident elsewhere in the British Empire. Similarly, as historians are beginning to realise, that thinking and practice was remarkably forward-thinking, and Britain's cavalry and mounted troops, and the multitudinous imperial extensions of them, underwent a remarkable process of reform between the 1880s and the First World War, which meant that in 1914 they were a thoroughly modernised force – contrary to common thought, the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava was not an everlasting tactical template.[7] In order to understand the light horse it is necessary briefly to consider its imperial backdrop.

Mounted troops in the British Empire, 1850–1918

By the end of the nineteenth century the position of cavalry on the European battlefield was by no means certain. The adoption of new, more accurate, longer-ranged and increasingly quick-firing weapon technology, which had commenced in the middle of the century and proceeded apace thereafter, cast a shadow over the role and place of horse-mounted soldiers. What should be done in response to such developments proved to be a hotly debated subject right up to the eve of the First World War.

Although the problem was already being appreciated by the middle years of the nineteenth century, it was the experiences of the American Civil War and later wars in Europe, particularly the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, that did much to stimulate thinking. In North America the defensive power of rifle-equipped infantry had been manifest. The fact that

to many observers traditional cavalry did not seem to exist in America but had apparently been supplanted by horsemen who moved about on horses and fought with rifles or carbines was thought to be a remarkable development. It was not an entirely accurate assessment because mounted action had remained part of the American cavalrymen's skills. Some also noted the apparent use of cavalry columns made up of rifle-equipped horsemen accompanied by artillery, which had operated independently and mounted deep raids into enemy territory.[8] Similarly observers noted the apparent difficulties that had faced cavalry making traditional cavalry charges in pitched battle during the Franco-Prussian War, but also noted the effectiveness of the German cavalry in fulfilling the long-established cavalry roles of reconnaissance and screening its army from its opponents, a duty that required not just skill with bladed weapons, the sword or lance – known as the *arme blanche* (meaning literally 'white arm') in the parlance of the time – but also skill with firearms so as to overcome localised resistance or win information.[9]

Not surprisingly, military pundits began to analyse the events of these and other wars and theorise about what should be done to ensure that cavalry, which was still the most mobile element of any army, remained a useful arm. There was no shortage of theorists, and the considerable number of books published were reinforced by contributions to the service journals and other periodicals. One of this multitude was Lieutenant-Colonel George Denison, commander of the Governor-General's Body Guard in Canada, who wrote two books: *Modern Cavalry: Its Organisation, Armament and Employment in War* in 1868, and *A History of Cavalry from the Earliest Times: With Lessons for the Future* in 1877. In these books he argued strongly that cavalry must abandon its traditional tactical approach, in which the *arme blanche* was the main and sometimes only weapon, to embrace firepower. Indeed firepower should be embraced to such a point that most horse soldiers should become mounted riflemen prepared to dismount to use their weapons in fulfilling the traditional roles of cavalry, particularly in reconnaissance and outpost duties. He did not dismiss the possibility of the charge completely, but thought that training for it should be restricted to a limited number of specialised troops, and that the *arme blanche* should perhaps be replaced with a pistol.[10] Although ultimately just one voice among many, and by no means the only man to take a similar view, Denison's arguments should be particularly noted because among those who found his work interesting was a British officer, Edward Hutton, who would have a profound influence on the development of Australia's mounted troops.

Theorising was one thing, but what also had to be considered was the experiences in Britain's colonies where mounted troops performed different roles from those who stayed in Britain preparing for the next European war. In the colonies the British Army was faced with the dilemma of patrolling and controlling large tracts of territory, usually with a minimum of manpower at its disposal. Because cavalry regiments were expensive to maintain, this task, as often as not, fell to infantry regiments. Still, the necessity of having horse-mounted troops remained and, in order to cover the large expanses of the empire's frontiers, local commanders often used the expedient of mounting part or all of an infantry unit to accomplish the task.[11] In Australia, for example, a portion of the 3rd Regiment of Foot was mounted on horses as early as 1825 to combat bushrangers. A similar practice was often used in the Cape Colony, and it was here in 1827 that the first dedicated mounted rifle unit in the British Army was raised when the Cape Mounted Rifles was formed from the mounted elements of the Cape Regiment.[12]

Cavalry too were compelled to vary its methods when on colonial service. Sent to Canada in 1838, the 7th Hussars and the King's Dragoon Guards were issued with carbines, and the commanding officer of the latter regiment stressed the importance of skirmishing and outpost duties for cavalry.[13] Colonial garrisons mounted on horseback and equipped with a firearm could patrol more widely and more quickly than infantry. They were well suited to the type of skirmishing that usually took place with colonial malcontents and indigenes, and enabled a generally overstretched British Army to employ whatever troops were at hand. Later in the century, in an extension of the principle, mounted infantry proved to be valuable in the Zulu War of 1879, the First Boer War of 1881 and the Egyptian War of 1882. In these locations it had primarily been a case of, in the words of one officer, 'the legitimate cavalry [having yet] to be arranged for, and where any available means on the spot [having] necessarily to be utilised for that purpose'.[14]

From these colonial experiences and experiments there were efforts to apply a new nomenclature to the different forms of mounted soldier that were beginning to appear in the British Army and its colonial offshoots. 'Cavalry' was a term applied to the type of organisation it had for centuries; that is, mounted squadrons armed primarily with the *arme blanche*. Although in its various forms it could be made responsible for the wide variety of tasks that cavalry traditionally fulfilled, it trained with the mounted charge as its primary action. 'Mounted rifles' was a term used most often to describe troops who, although equipped primarily

with a rifle, were designed to be used in the traditional roles of the light cavalry, such as skirmishing, scouting and screening. 'Mounted infantry' was traditionally just that: regular infantry mounted as an expedient for a particular duty or campaign. Organised on traditional infantry unit guidelines, for these troops the horse, or whatever other form of beast they were given, was simply a means of speedy locomotion from which they would alight to fight the battle as standard infantry. Unfortunately for all concerned, the terms 'mounted rifles' and 'mounted infantry' were subject to confusion, and were often used interchangeably. Subsequently they became the subject of much confusion and abuse by partisans in the ensuing debates about cavalry reform. That the roles of the two branches often overlapped in campaigns where no other mounted troops were available, and where mounted infantry had to fulfil the role of cavalry or mounted rifles, made it all the more difficult.

The early *ad hoc* arrangements for mounted infantry on campaign had been sufficient for some time but, with its colonial commitments, and with a cautious eye on the possible utility of mounted infantry in European warfare, the British Army became increasingly interested in formalising the mounted infantry organisations. Cost was a factor, and by adopting a part-time training scheme for regular infantrymen, the number of mounted men the army had at its disposal theoretically jumped to the tune of two battalions worth, but the cost was just £700 a year to maintain.[15] In 1888 the then Adjutant-General, Viscount Wolseley, established two schools of mounted infantry in Britain for the training of infantry detachments drawn from regular army battalions.[16] The detachments trained at the schools before returning to their battalions where they could be drawn upon should a campaign require it.

In the meantime there emerged from the late 1880s and early 1890s a reformist movement within the cavalry that embraced what has been called a cavalry hybrid; that is, horsemen who were trained with the *arme blanche* as their primary weapon and for which the charge remained a key tactic, but who were also equipped and trained to undertake dismounted duties with a firearm when circumstances dictated. One young cavalry officer who became prominent as a reformer wrote in 1890: 'Every cavalry soldier must thoroughly understand that his proper place is on horseback, his proper mode of action the charge. Only in cases where cavalry cannot obtain its object by executing a charge, should men be dismounted in order to use the carbine [but] unless a cavalry force is by instruction and practice ready to fight on foot its usefulness will be curtailed and it cannot be considered efficient.'[17]

This officer was a young Douglas Haig. He and another officer, John French, were both cavalrymen who also happened to be key voices in the cavalry reform movement that existed before the First World War. Both would go on to command the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front during the Great War and be soundly criticised for their commands, which would have more than a little to do with the post-war condemnations of the so-called cavalry general mentality that is supposed to have been evident during the war.[18]

By the 1890s the idea that cavalry should act either mounted or dismounted depending on the situation had become commonplace, if not universally adopted – inevitably there were conservatives who opposed the changes. Many regiments took their shooting seriously and spent more time practising their skirmishing tactics. Charge tactics were changing, too, and there was less of the traditional knee-to-knee variety and more focus on open formations.[19]

With the cavalry undergoing a process of reform and the mounted infantry having been given a formalised start, not surprisingly, an argument began among various army officers about the respective roles, duties and methods of tactical employment that should be employed. Should mounted infantry merely act as supplement to cavalry on campaign, or should it be developed to replace it? Should cavalry be further reformed towards fire action and maybe do away with the *arme blanche* altogether or, indeed, should it be restricted to just the *arme blanche* as its only weapon and have mounted riflemen attached to provide fire? These questions and a great many others were vigorously argued in service forums throughout the 1880s and 1890s and beyond.

The experiences of mounted troops in the Boer War (1899–1902) will be examined later in this book, but because the nature of the war in South Africa provided anyone with a partisan view on the future of mounted troops with enough examples to support their particular view, there soon erupted another debate about the future direction of mounted troops. Regular mounted infantry proved to have its limitations, but once these units gained enough experience they, and the irregular colonial mounted rifle units raised in vast numbers for service in South Africa (and which included the Australian contingents), often performed as well as cavalry on campaign, so there emerged a view that cavalry proper might be done away with altogether or reformed to more closely approximate the mounted rifle model. The new Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, who had commanded the British Army in South Africa in 1900, in March 1903 abolished the lance as a weapon of

war and stated 'that although the cavalry are armed with the carbine (or rifle) and sword, the carbine (or rifle) will henceforth be considered as the Cavalry soldier's principal weapon'.[20]

Roberts, who had spent most of his career in India, had not properly realised the extant work of reformist cavalry officers, who were loosely aligned and in contact with each other (but by no means homogeneous in their views), and who had been advocating a similar course for more than a decade. What made their views different from the sort of reform advocated by some of the other proponents of mounted firepower, was their belief that cavalry could be reformed to accommodate both mounted and dismounted action and did not have to make an absolute choice between one course or the other. They generally believed that firepower had to be embraced and that by using rifles and machine-guns as fire support (in an extension of the long-established idea of horse artillery), the possibilities of mounted action might be again opened to them.[21]

Roberts wanted cavalry reform, but he differed from the cavalry reformers in believing that the rifle had supplanted the *arme blanche*. Reformist cavalrymen like John French and Douglas Haig, by contrast, believed that the sword and lance were central and that the rifle, although vital, was a supplement to the bladed weapons This distinction was felt to guard against the erosion of 'cavalry spirit', a general term that meant something to cavalrymen but seemed vague to outsiders, but which encapsulated the cavalry's view of itself as the mobile arm *par excellence*. The gap between the two views was, in reality, quite small, but personalities and military cliques clashed, and the matter of the abolition of the lance, although of little real consequence, became a symbol around which cavalry officers rallied in their objection to what they thought was Roberts's high-handedness and meddling. The differences would come to appear huge as the debate about the future of mounted troops erupted out of the officers' mess, the service journals and the War Office into the public sphere of books and letters to *The Times*. In truth the heat cooled quickly as Roberts lost his appointment as Commander-in-Chief with the abolition of the post and its replacement with a committee. Nevertheless there would be continuing rounds of the argument right up to the eve of the Great War, with Roberts weighing in from retirement, sometimes assisted by the historian-cum-polemicist Erskine Childers, who wrote several books on the subject.[22]

Regardless, the key reformist cavalrymen had gone on to change their branch of the service, a process helped by the occupation of key appointments by persons with an interest. In 1905 consideration was given to