PART ONE

A soldier's time is passed in distress and danger or in idleness and corruption.

Samuel Johnson

CHAPTER 1

FOUNDATIONS: 1894-1915

Horace Clement Hugh Robertson was born on 29 October 1894, in Warrnambool on the coast of western Victoria. His father, John Robertson, was a state school teacher then aged thirty-six, native-born and a keen member of the local volunteer militia. His mother, Annie, neé Gray, was thirty-three and had already given birth to five children, of whom four had survived, in the ten years since their marriage.

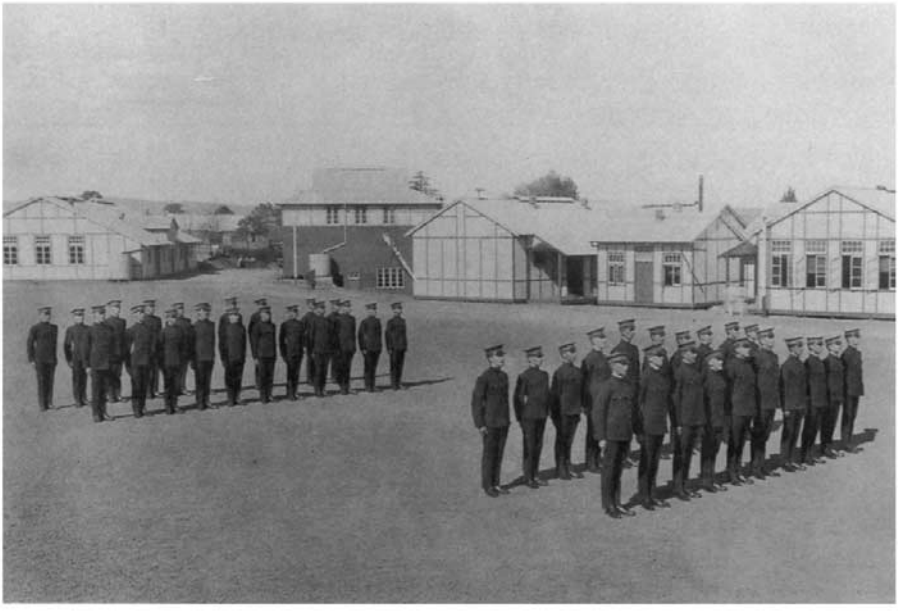
As a boy Horace was the unremarkable son of an ordinary lower middle-class family, born in a decade of economic depression and straitened circumstances. The family moved at the dictates of the education department, and Horace attended a number of schools in the course of his education. Between May 1905 and April 1910 he went to the state school at Outtrim, a small town in Gippsland to the south-east of Melbourne. By 1910 his father was teaching at state school No 1190 in the small coastal resort town of Queenscliff on the mouth of Port Phillip Bay, later the site of the army's Command and General Staff College. In April 1910, Horace was sent to board at the much more exclusive Geelong College. He was fifteen and a half, too young to take the public examinations of the day, but it seems clear that he went to the school in order to prepare himself for entry to the newly-created Royal Military College, Duntroon, which was to open its doors on the site of a resumed sheep property near Canberra in the following year. He took no prizes at Geelong, and 'there was nothing outstanding about him as a student'.[1] He left the school at the end of the year. He was still too young for entry to Duntroon, and so spent 1911 in the workforce, although in what capacity is not clear. There may also have been a schoolboy accident involving a diving platform, from which he took some time to recover. In October he applied to sit the entry examination and was accepted into the new class for 1912.

The Royal Military College had been set up on the recommendation of Field Marshal Lord Kitchener during his tour of inspection of Australia's defences in 1910. It was modelled on the US Military Academy, West

Point, and not on the Royal Military Academies Sandhurst or Woolwich in Britain, because Kitchener believed the former was better suited to the needs of an emerging post-colonial society. Colonel William Throsby Bridges, a Scottish-born immigrant who had been commissioned into the New South Wales colonial artillery in 1885, had been appointed its first commandant. The regimen was strict and conditions spartan. Cadets were paid, in order that entry should be open, at least theoretically, to all, although in practice they could not draw on their salary and received five shillings a week pocket money from their families, and they enjoyed the status of private soldiers only. Gambling, liquor and cigarettes were banned, as were pets, and marriage was forbidden while a cadet. Like West Point, Duntroon was to be an educational institution as well, and the course lasted four years. In its foundation years the academy was very small, with an executive staff of four officers and a clerk, ten instructors including three civilian professors, of physics, mathematics and English, and thirty general staff. These were to be responsible for an initial intake of forty-one cadets in 1911, which increased to seventy-nine when Robertson and his class marched in on 7 March 1912.[2]

The course at Duntroon aimed at both education and training. The latter encompassed instruction in infantry and light horse exercises, riding, physical training, signalling and musketry, in all of which Robertson performed consistently well. The academic curriculum added physics, chemistry and mathematics, which an officer was thought to need in order to meet the technological demands of modern war, and which was very much in line with the West Point philosophy, and history, English, foreign languages and drawing, which had practical application to the discharge of his duties. Robertson's results in this side of college life were generally good, although his performance in drawing was judged 'keen and energetic' and foreign languages largely eluded him. On the military side his reports were consistently good. A young man 'of cheerful disposition' and 'good temper', smart in his appearance and on parade, he was judged to possess initiative, tact and the power of command. He was keen, alert, industrious, had 'plenty of common sense', and was seen as a good influence within the Corps of Staff Cadets. He was likely to make a good young officer, making 'the most of his brains and the opportunities offered him'.[3]

The received picture of Robertson as a cadet and subaltern is at variance with the popular later image of the hot-headed, extroverted senior officer. His nickname, 'Red Robbie', owed nothing to this later view of his temperament, and was in fact a family name — his elder brother, John Gray Robertson, was known as 'black' to his intimates throughout his life, again on account of his hair colour.[4] As a rule, young men make few appearances in public records or private correspondence until they become figures of note, and we know nothing of what shaped



'No 2 from left, rear half company'. Robertson at Duntroon, 1912.

Robertson's own character and values in this formative period of his military career. That Duntroon was an important influence upon the early classes of graduates is undeniable. Of the first four classes to enter before the First World War, fifty-one eventually reached the rank of brigadier or above, attesting both to their ability and to the wartime expansions of the army. There seems nothing unusual about Robertson in this early group. He was a Victorian, whose state of origin was heavily over-represented in the early classes (forty-eight per cent), and a Presbyterian (seventeen per cent), who had attended both state and private schools at a time when most successful entrants came from state schools.[5] He graduated ninth in his class, won no prizes, held the rank of corporal in the Corps of Staff Cadets, and had attracted just two charges on his conduct sheet in nearly three years at the Royal Military College.

The first great test of the Duntroon product was provided, of course, by the First World War. If it was the making of many of its graduates, it helped ensure the college's future also. Bridges had been appointed to command the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), and was faced immediately with the problem of selecting suitable officers for a contingent of twenty thousand men, comprising an infantry division, three brigades of artillery and a brigade of light horse. The entire peacetime regular army numbered only 2989 all ranks, and Bridges recommended that the first

class, due to be commissioned on 1 January 1915, be graduated early and made available for active service. Curiously, the newly-commissioned lieutenants were not posted to staff positions, in general, but were given regimental appointments, in which a good number of them were killed. The second class, not intended to graduate for another year, looked on their seniors with envy, but on 22 October it was announced that they too would graduate early to provide junior officers for the additional contingent then being raised. On 2 November 1914, Horace Robertson was commissioned into the Staff Corps, and appointed to a commission in the AIF.

Within a week of graduating and before departing for his first posting and overseas service, Robertson did something the truth of which he never publicly admitted for the rest of his life — he got married. It was a necessarily private service in a registry office in Collingwood, Melbourne on 7 November. The bride was Jessie Bonnar, a native of Bendigo but at that time living in Sydney. She gave her profession as nurse and that of her father, Robert Bonnar, as station manager. The witnesses, Emily Williams and Katie Ferguson, presumably were friends of the bride for no colleague of the groom's attended. In those days, a permanent officer required the army's permission to marry and Robertson, barely twenty years old and freshly commissioned, would not have received it.

The oddities do not end there. Robertson lied about his age, giving it as twenty-four. The bride admitted to thirty-one, but was in fact thirty-eight. Publicly they stated always that they were married in Palestine in October 1916 where Jessie went to nurse at the hospital at Heliopolis, and a version of this story was given to Robertson's family upon his return from the war in 1919 with supposedly new bride in tow. The reasons for this hurried and furtive wedding are now lost. It was to be a childless and at times cheerless match, and one can only speculate on the effects it had on the younger man as he progressed slowly in his chosen profession amid the frustrations of the interwar years. It may be that Jessie alleged breach of promise, something which was scarcely unknown and which would have been disastrous professionally had it become known. In the semi-monastic life at Duntroon Robertson can have acquired no very great experience of women, and initial contact may have come through family proximity, since by then Jessie's mother lived near his own parents in East Malvern, a suburb of Melbourne. But the mystery remains.

Seven of the class of 1912 found themselves posted to the 3rd Light Horse Brigade. Robertson was the only Duntroon graduate sent to the 10th Light Horse Regiment, as machine gun officer, having been allotted for service 'to L[ight] H[orse], M[achine] G[uns] and Sig[nals] in this order'.[6] The same post was filled by classmates in the 10th's sister units, the 8th and 9th Light Horse, as were four of the troop commands. Of the seven, three would be killed on Gallipoli by the middle of August. The

only other regular in the 10th was the adjutant, Captain R. E. Jackson, a member of the prewar Administrative and Instructional Staff. The 10th was the only mounted unit raised in Western Australia, and Robertson joined it at the light horse camp at Guildford, outside Perth, on 19 November.[7] The unit had been concentrating since the first week in October, and Robertson must have been one of the last arrivals before the regiment embarked for war service.

Much has been made of the mystique and romance of the light horse in subsequent historiography, a product of their involvement in the last great mounted campaign in modern war, conducted in a theatre which lent itself to romantic and inappropriate comparisons with the Crusades, the young Napoleon, and so on. Like most commentary on the nature and composition of the AIF, such writing overlooks the tensions and rivalries which exist in any organisation, civil or military, and ignores the part which class and social position played in the selection of officers and men, especially in the mounted units. Bean noted that a higher proportion of men with private school backgrounds was found in the light horse than in the infantry battalions; he also noted that birth and education were important determinants in being selected for officer training units and a commission from the ranks. After January 1915 the only path to a commission in the AIF, other than for Duntroon graduates and officers of the prewar forces, was enlistment in the ranks, but for the first two contingents to sail this was not the case, and the selection of officers was based on a number of factors, not all of which were conducive to selecting the young, the fit, and the professionally competent.

The 3rd Light Horse Brigade was an excellent case in point. The brigade commander, Colonel F. G. Hughes, had been selected for command owing to his social connections and his pre-war association with the militia in rural Victoria; 'an elderly citizen officer belonging to leading social circles' was Bean's description.[8] The weakness in command which resulted was compensated in part through the appointment of a regular with previous service in South Africa, Lieutenant Colonel J. M. Antill, as brigade major, despite his being too senior in rank for the post. He was 'the main influence in command of the brigade';[9] while Birdwood, the Indian army general who was Bridges' successor in command of the AIF, had little confidence in Hughes, he was unwilling to remove him outright. Whatever his other deficiencies, at fifty-eight Hughes was simply too old for active service. The same could be said of the commanding officer of the 10th Light Horse, Lieutenant Colonel N. M. Brazier. A pastoralist and surveyor with good pre-war militia connections, he was forty-nine years of age on Gallipoli, and unfit for the demands of a rigorous campaign. His limitations did not end there. The 10th had been raised on the framework of the 25th Light Horse Regiment, the militia unit based in Western Australia as part of the pre-war army, and commanded for several

'Old Geelong Collegians' in the Light Horse, Egypt, probably before Gallipoli. Robertson is second from the left in the back row.

years before 1914 by Brazier himself. He attempted to take many of his officers with him into the AIF, regardless of age or competence. Some, like Captain T. J. Todd, proved to be excellent. Brazier's insistence on taking Major A. J. Love as his second in command, over the objections of Headquarters, 5th Military District in Perth, was to have unfortunate consequences on Gallipoli. Brazier did not get on with Antill, either, and their feuding added further strains to an already weakened organisation.[10]

A light horse regiment consisted of a headquarters (six officers and thirty-nine other ranks), three squadrons (each with six officers and approximately 150 other ranks), and a machine gun section (one officer and twenty-six other ranks), for a total strength of twenty-five officers and about 500 other ranks. The light horse were not trained as cavalry, nor intended to be used as such. Like dragoons in the eighteenth century, they relied upon their horses for mobility, not for shock action. They were

mounted infantry, a type of soldier believed by many in the British army to be best produced in the colonies. The attachment of a machine gun section to each regiment boosted the firepower of a dismounted unit which was smaller than an equivalent infantry battalion and could not put as many rifles into the line. At this stage, each squadron had two Vickers guns, and guns were not yet grouped into machine gun units. After Romani, in August 1916, the number of guns was increased to twelve and machine gun squadrons were developed for each brigade, in six sections of two guns each, with a total of eight officers and 221 other ranks. This both recognised tactical exigencies and paralleled developments in France.[11]

After concentration at Guildford, the 10th Light Horse moved to Claremont on 18 December and, after Christmas leave, to Rockingham on 6 January. Brazier had noted in his diary that while 'things [are] getting better generally' there was 'a lot to do yet'.[12] The second contingent of the AIF did not embark for Egypt until February, and the intervening time was used in training and gathering equipment and stores, although whether the training regimen went much beyond a basic stage must be doubted. On 2 February 1915 the 3rd Light Horse Brigade, spread over six transports, set sail for Egypt and the war in the Middle East. The bulk of the 10th was aboard the *Mashobra*.

Contrary to much popular and some military expectation, the war undertaken so confidently in August 1914 was not over by Christmas, and indeed before the end of the year had widened with Turkey's entry on the German side in November. A belligerent Turkey posed a threat to Britain's Middle Eastern possessions, and the prospect of Turkish-fomented Muslim insurrection in its colonial territories alarmed Britain's leaders. In the course of the war the Turks were to fight on five different fronts, and lost on all save one, the Dardanelles, in direct defence of Turkish soil. But the campaigns in the Middle East demonstrated as well the weaknesses which empire could bring for the British: the need to safeguard India and the Suez Canal was a constant drain on men and material which could have been utilised in France against Germany, the main enemy.

The 10th was the first unit to reach Egypt, the transports arriving at Port Said on 8 March. The brigade disembarked at Alexandria and was allocated quarters at Mena Camp, recently vacated by the 3rd Infantry Brigade which had sailed for Lemnos preparatory to leading the assault on the Turkish positions at Gallipoli. On 29 April the newly arrived light horse moved to Heliopolis racecourse, and continued to train. Nearly all the training in Egypt was in infantry work; there was very little mounted training before embarkation for Gallipoli.[13] The training syllabus emphasised dismounted action: for the week ending 8 May the 10th

Australian Light Horse was to practice reconnaissance for the attack, the advance under shell fire, and the attack, retirement and counter-attack at regimental level. On another day the three regiments of the brigade were detailed for training as follows: '8th — entrenchments; 9th — field firing practice with ball [ie, live] ammunition; 10th — squadrons in attack, dismounted'.[14] All such training was based on the pre-1914 British training syllabus, and took no account of the changes in modern war revealed by early experience in France. With a lack of modern training went deficiencies in equipment, especially artillery, and a lack of the trench stores necessary for positional warfare. When the Dardanelles campaign bogged down into trench warfare after the first few days of fighting, the Australians and New Zealanders were woefully under-prepared for what followed.

News, and casualties, from Gallipoli had begun to filter through, and with them the pressing demand for reinforcements. The 1st Australian Division had lost half its infantry strength in the first week of fighting, and Generals Bridges and Birdwood wanted the light horse regiments broken up and used as drafts of reinforcements for the infantry, a view with which the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, General Sir Ian Hamilton, concurred. General Sir John Maxwell, who commanded the mounted brigades for the defence of Egypt, refused to allow this, and in this he mirrored exactly the views of the officers and men concerned. When approached by their commanding officers, the 2nd and 3rd Brigades volunteered to serve on Gallipoli dismounted, although some commanding officers still wanted to take the horses. Maxwell cabled Hamilton that 'the men are entraining full of enthusiasm. I think you had better take this lot as it is.'[15]

The first to go were the machine gun sections, which left their units on 8 May. The sections from the 2nd and 3rd Brigades were brought together under the command of Captain W. H. Hastings, an Indian army officer, and sailed from Alexandria on the night of 9-10 May, leaving their horses behind.[16] The remainder of the regiments embarked on 16 May, again leaving their horses behind although, in the case of the 10th at least, they did not receive the necessary infantry webbing and equipment until July.[17] They also left a quarter of their strength to act as horse handlers, and this served to emphasise Bridges' concern that the units sent as reinforcements might prove too weak to be effective tactically. The 10th arrived on Gallipoli late on 21 May and dug in for their first night on active service behind Plugge's Plateau. They were commanded by Major Love; Colonel Brazier had stayed behind in Egypt for no adequately explained reason. The latter confided to his diary on the day his regiment marched out: 'Oh Lord. How rotten are things in general. Nothing looks right. Some men have left but should not. We are all short of officers and the muddle is awful. Preparatory details and to see they are carried out

are lessons to be learnt from this.' And in July, just before himself embarking for the peninsula, he noted dolefully that 'Egypt is a rotten place'.[18] The shortcomings in some of the command appointments were increasingly clear.

For the rest of May, the 10th Light Horse Regiment was detached and served with the 1st Light Horse Brigade under Colonel H.G. Chauvel, occupying positions on Quinn's Post, one of the most dangerous and exposed positions on Anzac. The machine guns were not with them. As the infantry training manual noted, 'by employing several sections under the control of one commander a brigade commander is able to keep a powerful reserve of fire in hand to be used for any special purpose'.[19] The brigading of the machine guns and their liberal use in providing fire support for the infantry compensated for the weakness of the positions on Gallipoli in the first two months. 'The feature of difference between night and day most marked', wrote one trooper from the 10th Light Horse, was 'the artillery fire during the day and rifle and machine gun fire at night. Turkish guns and our own guns ashore rarely fired at night owing to the danger of exposing their positions . . . Rifle fire and machine guns on the other hand rattled briskly and continuously all night.'[20] We may be sure that Robertson and his men were kept busy. Instructions from Headquarters, New Zealand and Australian Division, directed that 'our machine gunners . . . must be constantly on the lookout for fresh positions from which to open, when the time comes, effective fire, which should come as a surprise to the enemy. Several alternative positions for each gun must be prepared.'[21] On 1 June the regiment moved to new positions on Walker's Ridge, which they occupied until the end of July, and the machine gun section was posted back to its parent unit, at least temporarily.

After the failure of the major Turkish attack on 19 May, both sides had settled down to positional warfare while building up their reserves and planning new offensives which, it was hoped, would break the stalemate and end the campaign. Despite the absence of major attacks, casualties were incurred continuously, and this was especially serious in the smaller light horse regiments. The shortage of officers and men was felt as early as the beginning of July. Because of the number of officers who had been left behind in Egypt to supervise the care of the horses, selected non-commissioned officers were commissioned in the field 'under special exigencies of active service'. But this could not make up for the losses among the other ranks. Such losses were incurred not only through enemy action, but as a result of disease, poor diet and the hard conditions under which the men laboured and lived. 'The men, for the most part, were far below their normal standard of fighting efficiency. Physically they were weakened and wasted. The intense summer, the ever-lasting racket of digging, the long front-line vigils with the necessary standing to