

CRANFIELD UNIVERSITY

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BRITISH CAVALRY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916-1918

DEFENCE COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the activities and effectiveness of the British, Indian and Canadian cavalry which formed part of the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders (The 'Western Front') during the First World War. The study concentrates on the period from January 1916 to November 1918, focusing on four major Allied offensive battles;

The Somme, July-November 1916

Arras, April 1917

Cambrai, November-December 1917

Amiens and the '100 Days', August-November 1918

Other episodes of cavalry fighting associated with these offensives are also considered.

It is argued in this study that the contribution of cavalry to the fighting on the Western Front has been consistently underestimated by historians, a trend which began with the *Official History* of the conflict and continues in even the most modern scholarship. The arm has been characterised as vulnerable to modern weapons, out of date, of little use in combat, and an unnecessary burden on scarce resources.

Through analysis of the performance of mounted units in these battles, using data principally obtained from the unit *War Diaries*, as well as other primary sources, it is argued that cavalry were both much more heavily involved in fighting on the Western Front, and more effective, than has previously been acknowledged. The problems which constrained the performance of the cavalry are also examined. These included the limited understanding of their potential among senior officers, as well as command and control problems at lower levels. Issues concerning tactics, equipment, and interaction with other arms, (in particular tanks) are also examined.

The evolution of the cavalry arm is also considered in the context of the evolution of the B.E.F. as a whole, and its part in the changing face of the conflict is examined, both as an agent of change, and as a beneficiary of wider developments in how the war was fought.

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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND ORGANISATION

In the following text unit nomenclature follows the pattern established by the B.E.F. itself and subsequently the *Official History*; thus, Fourth Army; XV. Corps; 1st Division; 5th Brigade, etcetera. Where they appear, German formations are italicised.

The British cavalry divisions on the Western Front were known throughout the war as the 1st 2nd and 3rd 'Cavalry Divisions'. By 1916 the Indian Cavalry divisions were the only Indian divisions remaining in France, and were thus referred to simply as 1st and 2nd 'Indian Divisions'. Later these were to become the 4th and 5th 'Cavalry' Divisions. British Cavalry Brigades were numbered, Indian Brigades were known by their home stations eg. 'Lucknow' 'Meerut' etcetera It should also be remembered that each Indian brigade contained one British regiment, as well as British artillery and supporting elements.

Unlike the infantry, which had abandoned (at least officially) the old regimental numbers, cavalry regiments retained their numbers as well as titles. Regiments are therefore normally referred to by number and type, eg. 7th Dragoon Guards, 15th Hussars etcetera. However, historic distinctions between dragoons and hussars, or 'heavy' and 'light' cavalry survived in name only. All British cavalry used the same basic 'Universal Pattern' equipment and drills, the only variation being the issue of lances to 'Lancer' regiments.

Indian cavalry were also listed in a numerical sequence, and fell into 'Light Cavalry', 'Cavalry', 'Horse', and 'Lancers', thus; 4th Cavalry, 19th Lancers etcetera Conveniently, no Indian Lancer regiments duplicated the number of a British Lancer regiment. For clarity in the text Indian regiments are usually additionally referred to by their regimental title, eg. 34th Poona Horse. Some regiments styled themselves in Roman numerals, eg. 'XXth Deccan Horse', again for clarity Arabic numerals are used throughout.

The term 'cavalry' is used in the text to denote the arm of service, whether mounted or not. In higher formations, brigade and above, this includes the attached RHA, signallers and other supporting services. Where the term 'mounted troops' is used, this specifically implies soldiers remaining on horseback in the battle area, or dismounting to fight but with their horses kept nearby.

Where measures of weight and distance are quoted directly from original sources these have been left unaltered, but with a metric equivalent. All distances measured by the author are metric.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.V.S.	Assistant Director Veterinary Services. Officer in charge of veterinary services, typically for a Division.
B.E.F.	British Expeditionary Force. The British army in France and Belgium 1914-18.
B.G.G.S.	Brigadier General General Staff. Chief staff officer with the H.Q. of an Army Corps.
B.G.R.A.	Brigadier General Royal Artillery. Commander of artillery forces within an Army Corps, Later G.O.C.R.A.
Brig. Gen.	Brigadier General, Officer typically commanding a Brigade.
C.I.G.S	Chief of the Imperial General Staff.
D.D.V.S.	Deputy Director Veterinary Services. Officer in charge of veterinary services, typically for an Army Corps.
F.G.H.	Fort Garry Horse. Regiment within Canadian Cavalry Brigade.
Gen.	General, Officer typically commanding an Army.
G.O.C.R.A.	General Officer commanding Royal Artillery. See B.G.R.A.
K.E.H.	King Edward's Horse. Regiment of special Reserve, comprised of men returned from residence in overseas colonies.
L.A.C.	Light Armoured Car.
L.S.H.	Lord Strathcona's Horse. Regiment within Canadian Cavalry Brigade.
Lt. Gen.	Lieutenant General, Officer typically commanding an Army Corps.
Maj. Gen.	Major General, Officer typically commanding a Division.
M.G.C.(C)	Machine Gun Corps (Cavalry).
R.C.D.	Royal Canadian Dragoons. Regiment within Canadian Cavalry Brigade.
R.C.H.A.	Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.
R.H.A.	Royal Horse Artillery.
Sqn.	Sub-unit of cavalry regiment, typically approx. 100 men.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Introduction- In Search of a Debate

The Marquis of Anglesey opened the final volume of his *History of the British Cavalry* in 1997, with the words “Justice has never been done to the part played by the cavalry in France and Flanders during the years 1915 to 1918.”¹ Ten years later that justice still remains to be served, for while Anglesey provided a fine narrative account of the efforts of the British Cavalry on the Western Front, and created a worthy literary monument to the arm, a detailed modern analytical investigation of the cavalry remains to be undertaken.

A survey of the constantly growing corpus of literature relating to the Western Front reveals (with the honorable exception of Anglesey), hardly any significant published works devoted wholly to the cavalry. Steven Badsey’s chapter in Griffith’s recent *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*² stands virtually alone in this regard, and in any case forms a small part, less than 40 pages, of a larger work devoted to other arms. Badsey had previously given consideration to cavalry on the Western Front in his thesis on the ‘*Arme Blanche* controversy’,³ but this remains unpublished, and in any case the Western Front did not form the main focus of the research. Badsey also concluded his thesis with the rueful observation that

The metaphor of the charge against machine guns, or of the incompetent Victorian cavalry general attempting to control a tank battle, has spread beyond military studies into the general vocabulary of historians and readers of history, as a touchstone of all that is reactionary, foolish, and futile. It is probably too well established ever to be removed.⁴

Richard Holmes put the point rather more succinctly when he observed “There are few subjects where prejudice has a clearer run than with the mounted arm in the First World War.”⁵ As a result, what little has been written on the cavalry has, of necessity, largely limited itself to attempting to overcome this significant body of ingrained negative opinion expressed concerning the arm, and to attacking the wealth of myth and uncritically repeated half-truth which surrounds its activities. Cavalry chapters in recent

works by both Holmes, and Gordon Corrigan are honourable examples of this.⁶ However, little or no time has yet been devoted to passing beyond assaults upon the old myths and preconceptions, and moving on to make a fresh and detailed assessment of the real history of cavalry in trench fighting. Thus there remains a significant gap in the literature of the Great War with regard to the analysis of the cavalry. It is the purpose of this study to move on to just such a detailed assessment.

Existing Literature and Issues

It is a necessary preliminary to this study to examine how the omission of the cavalry from Great War research has occurred. How, in a field of study where lengthy works are devoted to a bewildering diversity of topics, more or less obscure, no major research effort has been directed specifically at the cavalry arm. The little research that has taken place has also concentrated on various rather narrow and oft-repeated questions. This omission can be discerned in the evolution of historical ideas concerning the Western Front as a whole, and in the changing orthodoxies surrounding the major issues of historical debate, such as the competence of command, the evolution of tactics, and the influence of technology.

An examination of the historiography of the First World War shows that a significant change of view has taken place, in particular over the last two or three decades. This is most readily apparent in the interpretation of the rôle of the infantry and artillery, and the men who commanded them. The old myths of bungling incompetent leadership and of futile repeated sacrifice have largely been demolished. The roots of this change lie in the works over the last thirty years, of John Terraine, and more recently in the efforts of scholars such as Griffith, Prior and Wilson, Travers, Sheffield, and others.⁷ Indeed these writers have built up a body of opinion so large that it may be argued that their school of thought has passed out of the realms of historical revisionism and become the new orthodoxy.

This quiet revolution in Great War studies has, however, largely passed without the detailed re-examination of the cavalry. Several of the old 'incompetence' myths which have been ably refuted in relation to the infantry have been allowed to stand in relation

to the cavalry, and been reinforced by writers who take a much more modern and revisionist view with regard to other arms. This is at least partly because the debate has been viewed in terms of the battle between ‘modernism’ and ‘reaction’ in military thought, and the cavalry arm is an easy (if erroneous) shorthand for the latter. Badsey observed “even those academic historians who write on operational matters take the uselessness of cavalry and the *arme blanche* for granted.”⁸

An example of this is Travers, who in expounding a lengthy and at times vitriolic critique of Field Marshal Haig, set up an opposition between the “traditional” (ie. ‘bad’) and the “professional” (ie. ‘good’). In this distinctly black and white world he firmly placed Haig, “...clinging to traditional nineteenth-century ideas about moral and cavalry”⁹ at the head of the former camp. The word ‘cavalry’ is inserted in this context as a metaphor for all that is out-dated and unrealistic.

The roots of this ‘anti-cavalry’ stance can be traced to some of the earliest, and most influential writers on the war. Terraine¹⁰ and Badsey¹¹ have both placed the early responsibility for this on Sir James Edmonds, the, in Badsey’s words, “now slightly notorious”¹² Official Historian. Edmonds was an engineer officer, and clearly no great supporter of cavalry or cavalrymen. Three of the most tenacious, and erroneous ‘myths’ can be directly attributed at least in part, to him, and may be summarised as follows. Firstly,

- The ‘Cavalry Generals’ myth; that the high command was both dominated by cavalry officers, and by extension, incompetent.

Secondly,

- The ‘Last machine-gun’ myth; that machine-guns in any quantity, and in virtually any circumstances rendered mounted operations suicidally costly.

And finally,

- The ‘Fodder’ myth; that the support of the Cavalry Corps was a drain on vital resources, particularly of shipping, and that the same effort would have been better spent in the support of other arms.

The post-war debate over mechanisation also assisted in the demonisation of the cavalry arm. Writers such as Fuller and Liddell Hart in their advocacy of the future of armour were quick to use the cavalry as a counterpoint to this, and as a symbol of all that was traditional and outdated.¹³ This train of thought has been adopted by more

recent writers seeking to show that victory on the Western Front was achieved through the advance of technology, and through the success in particular of the tank, to the extent that a fourth myth, 'the victory of the tanks', may also be discerned.

The curious feature of all of these allegations is that while a series of articles have appeared over the years individually demolishing each one, they are somehow so ingrained in the psyche of Great War writers that they do not really go away. Rather they persist, below the surface, as it were, to colour those writers' subsequent views. Although, as has already been stated, it is intended here to move beyond these old arguments, the history, and pernicious influence of each is worthy of brief examination.

Cavalry Generals

Broadly stated, the 'Cavalry Generals' myth alleges that the presence of Field Marshal Haig amongst the ranks of the cavalry supports a (rather circular) thesis within which the man is used to denigrate the arm, and *vice versa*. The argument runs that Haig was the figurehead of a wider group of out-of-touch nineteenth-century cavalry officers, who succeeded in gaining positions of high command due to their mutual influence and support, and who, to a man, proved incapable of dealing with the technological and intellectual challenges of a conflict on the scale of the Western Front. The usual suspects commonly listed among these 'Cavalry Generals' include besides Haig, his predecessor Sir John French, and army commanders Gough, Byng, Allenby, and Birdwood. (A concise summary of the history and chief proponents of this viewpoint can be found in Anglesey Vol VIII.)¹⁴

John Terraine's article '*Cavalry Generals and the 'Gee' in Gap*'¹⁵ was the first to present a full, statistically supported refutation of this argument. The piece was more widely viewed as a model of the new (at the time in 1980) revisionist thinking on the war, and the demolition of the old mythologies. Terraine was able to marshal a range of statistics to disprove the notion that the senior ranks of the B.E.F. were disproportionately filled with cavalry officers. He was also able to show the origins of the myth in the published opinions of Edmonds (in the *Official History*) and Lloyd George, neither of whom were particular supporters of Haig, or of the cavalry arm. It is

largely his model which has been followed by later scholars tackling the same question (eg. Neillands¹⁶ or Anglesey¹⁷). Indeed, Ian Malcolm Brown was sufficiently confident of the expiry of this controversy in 1998 to state simply:

...the very idea that Britain France and Germany (as well as Austria-Hungary and Russia) all managed simultaneously to produce a generation of complete incompetents at the highest levels of command is patently ludicrous.¹⁸

That might well be considered to be the end of the matter. However, in spite of the destruction of the myth itself, it continued to cast a shadow over subsequent thinking. On closer scrutiny, even Terraine's own views on 'Cavalry Generals' are not as benign towards the cavalry as it might at first appear. The chief plank of his argument seems to be that the majority of commanders were not cavalymen, and therefore by implication not incompetent. The inference can be drawn from this that to be a cavalry officer somehow implied a degree of incompetence. Terraine's own biography of Haig, *Douglas Haig The Educated Soldier* albeit written seventeen years before *The G in Gap* also showed that he was not quite able, in spite of his later protestations, to throw off an anti-cavalry prejudice. Examination of the earlier work reveals a marked degree of ambivalence towards the idea of Haig being a cavalryman. Terraine is at pains on a number of occasions to distance Haig from his own arm of service, observing, for example, "There was very little 'Tally Ho' about Douglas Haig".¹⁹

In seeking to exclude generals from such a group, the 'Cavalry Generals' debate tacitly acknowledges the existence of it. It is tempting to reverse this chain of logic, and to argue that if the leading allied commanders were, as is suggested by Terraine, Griffith and others, actually quite good at their jobs, then their arm of service is irrelevant. Indeed further, the fact that so many of the senior commanders came from a cavalry background shows the pool of expertise and ability which existed within that arm, contrary to the opinion of those outside it, or of later historians.

The Last Machine-Gun

The 'Last Machine-gun' myth, that a mounted soldier was hopelessly vulnerable on the modern battlefield of 1914-18, is also clearly traceable to Sir James Edmonds and

the *Official History*. Therein he quoted the observation by an anonymous American officer that “you can’t have a cavalry charge until you have captured the enemy’s last machine-gun.”²⁰ Even Edmonds does not offer us any suggestion as to the qualifications of this commentator, and his opinion, for that is clearly what it is, is not borne out by the facts of a number of successful cavalry engagements. A number of these engagements will be examined in detail in the course of this study. However this viewpoint survives even into very recent literature on the subject.

The longevity of this myth can also, at least in part be laid at the feet of John Terraine, albeit with the assistance of later writers who followed his line of argument. Edmonds opinion was extracted from the *Official History* and quoted as if it were a substantial fact by Terraine both in *To win a War* in 1978²¹ and again in *White Heat* in 1982.²² Terraine extended this, to him self-evident, argument to provide a blanket assessment of the Cavalry’s contribution on the western Front; that cavalry was out-dated and vulnerable and that its contribution to the outcome of the war was insignificant. In his discussion of the battle of Neuve-Chapelle in 1915 he observed:

To exploit a success, five divisions of cavalry were brought up behind the offensive front; this would also continue to be standard procedure. Occasion after occasion on the Western Front would show, until the changed conditions of the very last days, that cavalry were quite incapable of performing this function.²³

Similarly, in a discussion of the Cambrai offensive in 1917: “The complete ineffectiveness of horse soldiers on a modern battlefield was demonstrated.”²⁴ And finally as late as 1918: “For one branch, however, there was no change. The Western Front remained an impossible theatre for cavalry to the end.”²⁵ Terraine is probably correct in his assertion that the overall contribution made by the cavalry to the outcome of the war was not great, (they certainly did not ‘win the war’). It is, however, by no means equally obvious that the cavalry was an inherently useless and obsolete fighting arm. As so often in history, an assertion that is deemed to be so self-evident as to require no further elaboration is found on closer examination to rest on extremely shaky foundations.

This same dismissal of the cavalry as self evidently useless, and requiring of no further comment or investigation has also continued to permeate other more recent and

otherwise highly balanced analytical studies of the war. Prior and Wilson's *Command on the Western Front* (1992) has been widely praised as an important and penetrating work, yet their attitude to 'Horse soldiers' (by which epithet the cavalry are frequently described in their book), is dismissive to a degree. Indeed their keenness to denigrate the cavalry led the authors to offer an interpretation of events which undermines the credibility of the remainder of their work. In commenting on the action at High Wood on 14 July 1916 they observed:

Unhappily a regiment of cavalry which had reached the front in the late afternoon accompanied the attack. The cavalry were soon dealt with by German machine-gunners. The infantry by contrast initially made good progress.²⁶

This action will be examined in detail in Chapter 2, but it takes little reading, even of Edmonds' *Official History*²⁷ to discover that on that particular occasion a *brigade* of cavalry was able to advance successfully, undertake at least one mounted charge, capture a number of prisoners and machine guns, and hold the position until relieved by supporting infantry. Such distortions reflect little credit on their authors, but are typical of the curious historical blinkers by which many historians seem constrained when dealing with cavalry matters.

Even very modern works by those who place themselves firmly within the 'new thinking' on the war suffer from this burden of received wisdom. Garry Sheffield, in his *Forgotten Victory* (2001), is able to take a much more balanced view of the detail, he calls the cavalry operations at High Wood "...a considerable success."²⁸ However when it comes to generalities, he follows the old line: "...under the conditions usually pertaining to trench warfare, a combination of barbed wire and modern weapons rendered cavalry obsolete."²⁹ This remark might well have been lifted from any one of Terraine's writings of 20 years earlier.

The failure of these writers to examine fully the relationship between mounted soldiers and machine-guns also leads to a failure to appreciate the further point that this new technology was applied as often *by* the cavalry as *at* them. Even before the war *Cavalry Training* stated "the characteristics of machine guns as described in the previous section render them valuable for employment with cavalry..."³⁰ This potential was further enhanced after the creation of the Machine Gun Corps (Cavalry) in 1916, as well as the issue of as many as sixteen Hotchkiss guns per regiment. Thus in the later

part of the war a cavalry brigade had a large and highly mobile source of potential firepower. This question will also be examined in more detail in later chapters, but the wider point often missed, is that the machine-gun was at least as much the friend of the mounted soldier as his enemy.

Fodder

The third 'Fodder' myth is perhaps the most often repeated of Edmonds' assertions, and despite a number of thorough rebuttals in print continues to recur in Great War literature. Referring to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade's successful action at Reumont in October 1918, Sir James Edmonds, observed:

...the cavalry had done nothing that the infantry, with artillery support and cyclists, could not have done for itself at less cost; and the supply of the large force of horses with water and forage had gravely interfered with the sending up of ammunition and the rations for the other arms, and with the allotment of the limited water facilities.³¹

It is possible that in this observation Edmonds was referring to the specifics of that operation, however it is equally probable that he intended a more general criticism. Either way, the remark has been taken and widened as a critique of the cavalry in the war as a whole, it is quoted at length by Terraine, both in *To win a War*³² and again in *White Heat*, where he refers to it as "the final verdict" on the cavalry.³³ The Cavalry Corps, the argument runs, was sat uselessly behind the line, eating its way through a vast amount of shipping resources which would have been better disposed winning the war. Statistics to support this view can be extracted from official figures. That the tonnage of fodder (5.8 million tons) shipped to France during the war exceeded even the tonnage of ammunition (5.2 million tons)³⁴ is a statistic so often quoted as to have become something of an old chestnut. However the comprehensive demolition of this myth by several writers seems to have passed largely unnoticed by historians. Badsey provides convincing chapter and verse (and statistics) in his unpublished thesis of 1981,³⁵ and while a published version of the same arguments was presented by

Anglesey in 1997,³⁶ a tone of resignation is detectable in the latter's comments on this topic:

There is one particularly pernicious myth that needs banishing from the minds of future historians. Even the most authoritative and reliable of those who have written about the Western Front repeat time and time again the fallacious idea that vast quantities of shipping had to be devoted to the provision of forage for the cavalry's horses. This is nonsense. If the disquisition on p.286 will not dismiss once and for all this too often propagated falsehood, the present author presumes to believe that nothing will.³⁷

Sadly one is inclined to agree with this depressing forecast. In the recent work by Ian Malcolm Brown *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919* (1998) one might expect to find a detailed account of the fodder question. This is not the case, Brown offers only one paragraph in the whole book on the question of cavalry supply.³⁸ Indeed this serves only to muddy the waters as the relative statistics quoted relate only to the much smaller B.E.F. of 1914. He is no doubt correct that in October 1914 the cavalry represented 16.7% of the manpower and 34.4% of the equine strength of the army in France. However, this ignores the fact that the vast growth of the army after 1915 saw a decline in the relative strength of the cavalry to as little as 1.1% of overall B.E.F. manpower³⁹ and 6% of its horses⁴⁰ by 1918. The figures offered by Brown are therefore misleading by omission if nothing else. Ironically, Brown's most telling comment on the question is probably the very lack of any further discussion of the cavalry in his work. The absence of cavalry supply questions from his wider analysis of the supply problems of the B.E.F., and their solutions, allows the inference that these were simply not an issue. It is, however, a reflection of the state of the cavalry debate that a book of this sort can be considered complete without a proper examination of supply questions relating to an entire arm of service. It is also unfortunate that such a work, which might otherwise justly be considered the 'last word' on the subject, at least for the present, shies away from a significant and controversial aspect of its principal subject.

The tenacity not only of the fodder question, but of all three great (Edmonds inspired) myths concerning the cavalry is reflected in the work of Steven Badsey. His thesis of 1981⁴¹ offered a comprehensive critique of all three. In his contribution to Griffith's *British Fighting Methods In The Great War* (1996)⁴² he was obliged to reiterate, at least

in *precis* in his opening pages, all that he had previously argued fifteen years before. His earlier observation concerning the deep roots of these prejudices, quoted at the outset of this chapter, seems painfully apt.

Technology and Tanks

Reference has already been made to the use of the cavalry as a metaphor for the obsolescent, in contrast to new 'modern' methods of warfare. This practice has become particularly prevalent among writers examining the rôle of tanks in the First World War. A school of thought has developed that sees victory on the Western Front gained through technological advance; the new tanks are the instrument that breaks the trench deadlock, supported by aircraft, new artillery shells, wireless, and other new-fangled devices.⁴³ In this brave new world there is no place for the outdated horseman or his medieval *arme blanche*. This 'technological determinism' has been subject to a thorough critique in Gervaise Phillips' recent article (2002), where he observed:

The rôle played by cavalry in the First World War has been obscured by the appearance of an (allegedly) alternative weapon system, combining mobility, firepower and the potential for undertaking shock action: the tank. Naturally the technologically minded military historian has seized upon the tank as the obvious replacement for the horse.⁴⁴

Once again the mounted arm has provided an easy target for criticism, or more specifically, a place to lay the blame for some of the failures of the new technology. For example much has been made of the faltering progress, or for some commentators, outright failure of cavalry-tank co-operation in the latter stages of the war. Terraine commented "Much had been expected of the collaboration between the Whippets and the cavalry, but this proved to be an illusion. ...By themselves the Whippets were very successful."⁴⁵ Prior and Wilson went further to suggest that the concept "made no sense at all",⁴⁶ and that when attempted it was a "predictable fiasco... Cavalry soon outdistanced the tanks and proceeded on their own. Fortunately for the horse-soldiers, by this stage most German resistance had collapsed."⁴⁷ This statement is open to

challenge on a number of points, but in this context it is their placing of the blame for this failure firmly on the cavalry which is most noteworthy.

The argument continues that not only were the cavalry incapable of co-operation with tanks, but at a higher level ‘Cavalry Generals’ (in particular Haig) failed to properly exploit the potential of the new technology. Phillips observed “For Tim Travers the tank’s impact on the conflict was only limited by the lack of imagination of cavalry generals, who were unable to grasp the potential for waging mechanised warfare.”⁴⁸ Thus the failure of tanks to play a more decisive rôle was not inherent in their technological immaturity, but imposed upon them by a ‘rival’ arm of service in the form of the cavalry. Griffith summarised this tendency:

If the tank’s experience on the Western Front was unfortunate and rather disappointing, that of the horsed cavalry was sadder still. They actually enjoyed little less battlefield success than tanks, but found themselves heaped with unjustified vilification in proportion as the latter were accorded unjustified accolades. This was doubly irksome since the pre-war cavalry had actually been tactically more aware and more advanced than the infantry.⁴⁹

His last point is particularly significant as rather than the cavalry failing to embrace the new technology, the reverse was true, large numbers of tank officers had come from the cavalry. Badsey has pointed out that this trend had been specifically encouraged at the time of the introduction of the ‘Whippet’ tank, with precisely such co-operation in mind.⁵⁰

The battles of Cambrai in 1917 and Amiens in 1918 both had a significant cavalry, and tank components. These two offensives form the subjects of Chapters 4 and 5 of this study, and the relationship between horses and armour will be examined in some detail. However, in order to produce a balanced picture of the rôle of the cavalry in this context it is necessary to overcome a substantial weight of technologically driven prejudice, and to filter the large mass of armour-focused writing on these battles, to draw out the parallel, but to date largely untold story of the cavalry.

Explaining the Cavalry

Many of the writers who have been considered in this chapter are viewed by those concerned with topics other than the cavalry as important progressive thinkers. However, starting from a position of conscious or unconscious disregard for the relevance or usefulness of cavalry, these writers of the new 'External' school of thought on the Western Front (as it has become known),⁵¹ are confronted with a significant difficulty. One of the major platforms of their position is that the generals of the period, and Haig in particular, were possessed of more understanding of the military realities of their situation than history had latterly given them credit. And yet it was these same generals who persisted in retaining a cavalry force and building it into their plans for attack year after year, in spite of its repeated failure to play a decisive rôle. If these commanders were to be fully exonerated, the continued presence of cavalry must be accounted for, or to put it more bluntly 'explained away'. Once again John Terraine serves as an exemplar, as it was he who set the tone for much of the following debate.

Despite his frequent repetition of the obsolescence and uselessness of cavalry, Terraine had no doubt that in the absence of a suitable alternative, cavalry was a vital part of offensive planning during the war:

Cavalry were always held in readiness behind every large scale attack... Since the attacks failed, time after time, to break through the German defences, the Cavalry found little opportunity for mounted action, and their presence has been the subject of much derisive comment. The fact remains that, with all its evident weaknesses, cavalry was the *only* mobile arm available during the First World War. What comment would be appropriate for a high command, which planned and launched great assaults, without making any provision for mobile exploitation, is not difficult to see.⁵²

He leaves us in no doubt what that 'comment' would be in his scathing criticism of the German high command for their failure to support the offensive of 21 March 1918 with any mounted troops. (The remaining German cavalry divisions in the West having been dismounted, the reasons for this will be examined in a Chapter 5): "To launch an offensive intended to win the war with none at all was not just foolish: it was

criminal.”⁵³ Similar strong language occurs elsewhere: “A general who launches what he hopes will be a decisive offensive without an arm of exploitation (as Ludendorf did in 1918) strikes me as criminally culpable.”⁵⁴ It is curious that he should make specific reference to ‘derisive comment’ about the cavalry when he himself is the author of a good deal of it. He also makes no reference to the inherent contradiction contained in his view that cavalry was both a vital component of a decisive effort, and an arm which he variously dismisses elsewhere as ‘feeble’, ‘incapable’, and ultimately ‘obsolete’.

Terraine never fully resolved this dichotomy, while reluctant to dismiss the cavalry entirely acknowledgement of its usefulness ran counter to the ‘modernist’ argument. One solution to this lay in the manipulation of terminology:

In the crisis of March [1918] the cavalry proved useful by virtue of its mobility, and its dismounted brigades, though weak...gave great help in putting gaps and supporting counter attacks. Thus they won great credit in the capacity that cavalry had always affected to despise – mounted infantry.⁵⁵

The underlying argument supporting this statement runs that ‘Cavalry’ are an *arme blanche* shock weapon, and that as soon as they are engaged in a firepower based rôle, they cease to be ‘Cavalry’ proper and become merely a more mobile offshoot of the infantry. By extension, this argument continues, the rôle of ‘mounted infantry’ could have been filled equally satisfactorily by the infantry themselves. Badsey has thoroughly demonstrated the falseness of this hypothesis,⁵⁶ showing that the British Cavalry were able to absorb firepower doctrine and combine it with shock tactics to produce a highly flexible and effective tactical method, and that by contrast, simply putting infantry on horses was never a satisfactory solution. Arguably, the fact that cavalrymen were able to fulfil a firepower (or ‘mounted infantry’) rôle, as well as a more traditional shock (or ‘cavalry’) function, should be weighed in their favour when balancing their overall usefulness. Many historians, including Terraine have, however sought to argue for the removal of these achievements from the scales, as somehow outside the cavalry’s formal brief. This kind of sophistry would have meant little to the cavalrymen doing the fighting.

Models for the Future

In recent years there has been some new progress in studies of the cavalry. Both Griffith,⁵⁷ Badsey,⁵⁸ and most recently Sheffield⁵⁹ have identified the embryonic, but significant rôle of horse-mounted troops in the development of mobile warfare. It has been recognised that, in spite of the efforts of the propagandists of the 1930s to argue the contrary, the roots of 'modern' mobile warfare doctrine lay not in the tanks of the Western Front but in what could be termed in modern parlance 'softskin' transport. That the tanks of the day were not capable of the exploitation rôle that many have postulated for them is slowly becoming more widely accepted. These historians have gone further to consider the development of what Griffith calls the 'cavalry brigade battlegroup',⁶⁰ an all arms force consisting not only of cavalry and horse artillery, but also of motor machine-guns, lorry mounted infantry, and mobile medical and other supporting services. Badsey pursued this line further still, to make the analogy between cavalry and parachute forces, in their capacity to seize by *coup de main* positions ahead of the main force.⁶¹ These views are indeed a breath of fresh air in the cavalry debate, and it is arguable that they represent the *start* of the real debate on cavalry, rather than the old myth-based arguments.

There is a danger, however, that this sort of thought can result in what J.P Harris (in relation to the armour debate) terms 'reading history backwards.'⁶² The application of late twentieth-century terminology and doctrine as a model for interpreting the Western Front immediately encounters the problem that Haig, and Kavanagh, the Cavalry Corps commander, probably seldom used the word 'battlegroup', and could hardly have dreamed of paratroops. In order to evaluate the doctrines of the time these must be viewed from within their own contemporary framework. Haig has been subject to years of unjustified vilification because he failed to be prescient enough to discern the roots of Rommel's Panzer Divisions or operation *Desert Storm* in the faltering progress of the Mark I tanks at Flers. Travers is a particular proponent of this critique, observing:

... the greatest problem was the way in which the late nineteenth-century paradigm failed to come to grips with the twentieth-century paradigm - one set of ideas simply did not engage the other emerging set of ideas.⁶³

Yet it was not Haig's concern to explore ideas that might win wars in twenty or seventy-five years' time, he had to win the war he was fighting then, and with the tools immediately available. To suggest that the shape warfare would take in the later twentieth century was apparent to observers living in its first decades is quite unreasonable, despite the hindsight-driven protestations of Fuller or Liddell Hart. In any case, even if Haig had been able to develop in theory a late twentieth-century style armoured warfare doctrine, the tanks at his disposal were simply not up to the job.

Thus, while interesting with the benefit of hindsight, the 'birth of later doctrine' argument misses the real point. The overall question which this argument fails to address, is not whether seeds for the future were sown, but whether the retention of an (albeit by 1918 pitifully weak) force of cavalry on the Western Front was a reasonable decision by the high command at the time. Alternatively, was it, as has so often been argued, a failure to understand the prevailing conditions of the fighting? The answer to this lies not in teasing out the roots of mobile warfare developments which would not fully develop until later conflicts, but in determining whether the cavalry soldiers there and then were able to fight effectively in a mounted rôle when called upon to do so.

Research Questions

The various issues outlined in this chapter leave a basic overall question about the cavalry yet to be answered by historians of the Western Front:

- How significant was the contribution of British and Dominion mounted troops, firstly to the period of *trench fighting* from Christmas 1914 to August 1918? and secondly to the winning of the war in the later months of that year?

It is answering this question which forms the principal research objective of this study. Within this broader question a series of subsidiary themes and questions can be defined, and these can in turn be used as tools of measurement to assess the broader performance of the arm.

Effectiveness

The first of these is the most basic, and relates in part to the old 'Machine-gun' myth. That is, how did mounted troops fight? Not only against machine guns, but also against the whole range of opposition, artillery and wire, and with what degree of effectiveness? That is, to what extent were they able to manoeuvre and survive within the prevailing battlefield environment, inflict casualties on the enemy, and obtain battlefield objectives? Many of the answers to this are somewhat counter-intuitive, as episodes of cavalry galloping enemy positions with swords drawn were neither as rare, nor as suicidally ineffective as it has suited some critics to assume. Nor was the ground over which many of the battles took place the wilderness of wire and shell-holes, as typified by the latter stages of Third Ypres, which fills the popular imagination. For example, large portions of the Somme front in 1916 had yet to be fought over at the outset of the offensive, and the ground over which the Cambrai offensive was launched was specifically chosen for its lack of shell damage. In spite of this, trench lines did form a significant obstacle that taxed those wishing to see a cavalry advance. This obstacle was, however, by no means insurmountable and thought was given to the means, technical and logistical, of overcoming it. While previous writers have referred in passing to 'cavalry tracks' and mobile trench bridging⁶⁴ no detailed study of these developments has yet been made. The sheer size of even a brigade of cavalry in terms of road space, (although more often confined to cross country routes,) and its requirements in terms of shelter and water behind the line must also have provided a major challenge to those developing offensives. Thus the fact that it was possible for any mounted troops to reach the scene of action at all must indicate a significant level of planning and 'behind the scenes' work not yet adequately explored by historians.

This question inevitably has its focus at the tactical level, in the activities of brigade-sized formations and below, and in some cases in the exploits of individual regiments, squadrons and even troops of cavalry. It is only at this level that the true texture of the fighting, and the effectiveness or otherwise of various weapons and techniques becomes apparent. Griffith⁶⁵ and others have already demonstrated the crucial importance of tactical and technical changes at this low level of command to the outcome of infantry and artillery fighting. The attitude taken to Lewis guns at platoon level, or the exact weight and speed of a creeping barrage have been shown to make the difference

between success and costly failure. A similar level of analysis remains to be undertaken for the mounted arm.

Evolution

Many modern studies of the Great War, and in particular those concerned more at the tactical rather than strategic level, have also stressed the importance of 'evolution' in the development of the B.E.F. and in its ultimate success.⁶⁶ This process is often described in terms of a 'Learning curve' along which the British army moved, developing its equipment and fighting methods with each new offensive. This raises the question to what extent the cavalry underwent a similar process, and this forms one of the themes of this study. It will be shown that while a variety of changes were made in the planning of cavalry operations at the divisional and corps level, and in the planning of army level offensives as a whole, there was a remarkable consistency in lower level cavalry tactics. The fighting methods spelt out in pre-war manuals, in particular *Cavalry Training*, published in 1912 continued to be applied by junior commanders, and continued to be effective. This was increasingly the case in the later stages of the war. However, this was not a result of an evolution in tactics by the cavalry themselves. It will be argued that instead the character of the war had evolved around the cavalry, and in particular the changes in German defensive systems, and the adoption of deep defence, made existing cavalry methods ever more appropriate on the battlefield.

Command control and communications

If, as will be argued in this study, cavalry were more effective tactically during the Great War than they have hitherto been given credit, their failure to make a larger overall contribution to the fighting needs to be explained. The answer to this lies in the major factor hindering greater cavalry effectiveness, and the key to so many missed opportunities on the Western Front, Command, Control, and Communications. The attitude of army and corps commanders, and of the Commander-in-Chief, to cavalry operations will be examined in some detail. It will be argued that the slowness of these men to grasp the potential (and indeed the limitations) of cavalry forces in the set-piece offensives of 1916-18, was a major factor in their performance. The rôle of Haig in

particular, as Commander-in-Chief, and his enthusiasm for the arm, but his fundamental misunderstanding of their rôle will also form a key theme of this study.

It will also be apparent that failures of communications, and a failure to appreciate the limitations of what communication methods were available was a critical factor in hindering cavalry operations. Attempts were made to address these difficulties by practical solutions in the form of increased use of wireless, of RFC and RAF contact patrols, for example. However, more important was the re-ordering of the chain of command to allow those nearer the ‘sharp end’ of the fighting a greater degree of control over the resources deployed on their battlefield. The degree to which this was achieved will be examined.

Another key factor in the effectiveness or otherwise of the cavalry in the period under consideration was the rôle of the Cavalry Corps as an institution, and of its commander Lt. Gen. Kavanagh. He was to play a significant part in the functioning of the chain of command, and to exert a powerful influence over the effectiveness of the Corps. Examination of this also leads to the question of what exactly the Cavalry Corps Headquarters was supposed to do, and indeed whether it even needed to exist in the form it took from the end of 1916 onwards, or whether it was a hindrance to operations, and should have modelled itself after the fashion of the newly created Tank Corps.

Technology

Mention of the Tank Corps raises the question of cavalry-tank co-operation, and of new technology more generally. The significant anti-cavalry, and pro-armour bias of much of the existing literature has already been discussed in an earlier section. The examination of this relationship in detail will form another key theme of this study. The tank forms only one part of this picture, as armour in the form of armoured cars served alongside the cavalry from the outset of the war. These vehicles were to fight alongside the cavalry both in the Somme battles examined in Chapter 2, as well as in the operations of spring 1917 described in chapter 3. Tanks themselves co-operated with the cavalry at Cambrai in 1917, and particularly significantly at Amiens in 1918 (described in Chapters 4 and 5). The relative performance of the two arms, horsed and mechanical, will be examined, and their degree of compatibility considered. It will be shown that far from being a replacement for the cavalry, tanks had at best a complimentary rôle on the

battlefield, and in some cases performed an entirely different function. Thus the relationship between the two is far more complex than simply the 'new' taking over from the 'old'.

Success?

The final aspect of the contribution of the cavalry to the conflict considered in this study, and one that draws together the conclusions of all the earlier themes, is operational success. Were the cavalry able to accomplish the tasks set forth for them by their higher commanders? Or were they ultimately unsuccessful when measured against these goals? Typically this analysis is undertaken at the 'operational' level, that of offensives as a whole, at the command level of corps and army, as often the lower level tactical effectiveness of the arm was neutralised by poor command and control or other factors. Tactical battlefield effectiveness is only relevant, and command and control systems function well only when they bring the troops concerned into contact with the enemy at the right place and time. In each of the case studies in this thesis it is necessary to make a judgment on the success of the cavalry operations therein.

It will be argued that in most cases the cavalry failed to obtain the objectives set out for them by their commanders, and to that extent they were unsuccessful. However, this conclusion has to be balanced by consideration of the objectives set out by the commanders themselves. It will be argued that in many cases the objectives set out for the cavalry by army commanders, and by Haig, the Commander-in-Chief, in particular, were unrealistic, and provide a poor yardstick for assessment of the success of the arm. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, this has also been compounded by the keenness of many historians to use these objectives to denigrate not only the arm but also the commanders, notwithstanding the circular character of this argument.

Methodology

In order to answer the questions outlined above this study will focus on four major periods of operations, each forming a separate case study, and a chapter in the text:

- The Somme offensive beginning in July 1916 and continuing until November 1916.
- The German retreat of Spring 1917, and the subsequent Arras offensive in April 1917.
- The ‘tank’ battle of Cambrai in 1917, and the subsequent German counter-attack.
- The German offensive in March 1918, the allied offensive at Amiens in August 1918, and the fighting of the ‘Hundred Days’ up to November 1918.

The nature of much of the fighting in 1914, prior to the development of trench warfare, means that the rôle of the cavalry during that period, while interesting, bears little on the questions raised by the later offensives, thus this period will not be studied in detail. Equally, although the Cavalry played a vital and costly part, largely on foot, in a defensive capacity at Ypres in 1915, they were not significantly involved in the major offensives attempted earlier that year.

Some consideration will be given in Chapter 2 to Loos in September 1915, the first of the B.E.F.’s large scale set piece trench offensives, however thereafter the focus of attention is narrowed to a field which encompasses the principal attempts by the British to break the deadlock from 1916 onwards. Third Ypres, in 1917 although crucial to the understanding of the evolution of other arms, will receive only brief examination in Chapter 4 as the Cavalry Corps was rapidly excluded from that battle as the true nature of the fighting became evident, and mounted forces played little significant rôle in it.

The amount of mounted activity the research for this study revealed was something of a surprise. Indeed particularly with the fighting of 1918 it became impossible to deal exhaustively with every mounted cavalry action in a work of this length. However rather than narrowing the focus of the study, it was felt that a broader, if slightly less detailed overview of the whole period was critical to the understanding of the subject. When Donald R. Morris set out to write his classic account of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, he discovered that the story, in order to make sense, had to start in 1807.⁶⁷ Similarly, a stand alone study of 1918, or indeed consideration of only one of the earlier offensives would suffer from the lack of context provided by earlier battles, and the progress and continuity between them. The same might be argued for the pre-war cavalry debates, and for 1914, but the detailed examination of both these topics by

Badsey, and Holmes respectively (in works quoted earlier, as well as others⁶⁸) allow this study to take as its starting point late 1915 and 1916.

It would have been possible to structure this study on a thematic basis, however it was felt that unlike some other aspects of Great War studies, the history of the cavalry has been so little investigated that a statement of the basic narrative history was required in order to provide a context for the analytical parts of the study. Also in a number of cases the narratives of events offered by previous writers are simply factually incorrect, so a retelling of the course of events was required. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, many of the conclusions of these earlier scholars were also based on little or no analysis of events, or on the hearsay opinions of participants in the war whose position could hardly be considered neutral.

The narratives contained in each of the case studies here were constructed to a great extent from contemporary unit *War Diaries*. These documents, consulted in the original in the National Archives, have the advantage of being written very close to the events described, and contain a significant amount of hard data, texts of messages and operations orders, times, map locations and grid references, and casualty figures. Comparison of the diaries from different participating units and levels of command was also instructive. Reference was also made to the diaries of individuals and published memoirs, particularly those in positions of command, as well as other eye-witnesses. However, the difficulties of taking some of this material at face-value are examined in Chapter 2.

Secondary sources of particular importance were the *Official History* of the conflict, (although this too is not without its own faults and internal biases) and the inter-war volumes of *Cavalry Journal*. The latter was a particularly important source as during the period 1919-39 a significant body of not only personal accounts of the war, but also analytical articles appeared in its pages. These pieces were also subject to peer review and discussion published in the letters pages of subsequent editions, much of which could be highly illuminating. From these various sources a narrative of events has been created that forms the core of each chapter. This then serves as a basis for analysis of the performance of the cavalry, judged against the various criteria laid out above.

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CHAPTER 2

THE SOMME BATTLES, JULY-SEPTEMBER 1916

It's like staying somewhere for Ascot and not going to the races.

Lt Lascelles, Bedfordshire Yeomanry,

4 July 1916 ¹

Introduction

This chapter deals with the part played by the cavalry in the Somme offensive of 1916, commencing with their planned rôle in the opening day of the battle on 1 July and continuing through the renewed attack on 14 July, and the later battles in September. Mounted troops played little or no part in much of the Somme fighting, and none in the famous first day. However examination of the plans made for them, and the part in the fighting envisaged for them by Haig, and by the army commanders, in particular Rawlinson at Fourth Army, is instructive in highlighting the command and control problems which were to blight, and largely negate, any chance of operational success by the cavalry in that campaign.

By contrast, the two occasions when mounted troops were able to enter battle in 1916 show a force which was not only well prepared for the battle it was to fight, but also surprisingly tactically effective, able to move around the battlefield with a degree of flexibility, without taking catastrophic casualties, and able to inflict both physical loss and psychological effect on the enemy. Cavalry units were also able to take on German machine-guns with their own firepower, and win the duel for fire superiority. As was outlined in Chapter 1, the 14 July battle in particular has been used by many historians as a shorthand for the vulnerability and ineffectiveness of the cavalry. This argument is frequently supported in the literature by accounts of events which characterize them as late into battle and quickly killed. A detailed study of this action forms the core of this chapter. This is intended to provide detailed evidence to refute these previous accounts, and to demonstrate the tactical effectiveness of the arm.

Background: 1914 - 1915

The activities of the cavalry in 1914 and 1915 fall outside the main focus of this study. However, it is helpful to examine the organization of the arm in these earlier years and to touch briefly on events in 1915 as these set the scene for the battles of 1916. The sources of some of the command and control problems the arm suffered can also be traced in its evolving structure, and lack of pre-existing divisional and corps level command elements.

At the outset of the war in 1914, the B.E.F. included five brigades of cavalry. Of these four were under the command of the newly created Cavalry Division, while one; 5th Cavalry Brigade under Brig. Gen. Chetwoode was nominally independent.² This provided a force of fifteen regiments, along with a further two regiments broken up by squadrons among the six infantry divisions of the B.E.F. as divisional cavalry. All of these units including those forming the divisional squadrons were regular, rather than yeomanry regiments.*

A problem facing the B.E.F. as a whole at this period was the lack of any sort of pre-existing higher command structure. The infantry was divided into two corps, but headquarters for these had to be created *ad-hoc* as no higher formation than the division had previously existed. In the cavalry the situation was worse, only brigade staffs had existed pre-war, and when Maj. Gen. Allenby was given command of the Cavalry Division he had to create a staff essentially by co-opting officers he knew to be available and suitably qualified.³ In any case a four brigade division was too large to handle effectively, and as the summer of 1914 wore on the division became split into two groups. In part this was prompted by rivalries amongst the senior cavalrymen themselves. The controversy over the rôle of the cavalry in the 'Curragh Incident' of earlier in 1914 had left scars on the relationships between many of these men, in particular Hubert Gough, initially commanding 3rd Cavalry Brigade, and Allenby.⁴ These personal difficulties also extended beyond the Cavalry Division to the higher levels of command. There was little love lost between the two senior cavalrymen in France, Douglas Haig, now commanding I Corps, and the C-in-C Sir John French. If

* One Regiment of Special Reserve, the North Irish Horse, was also attached to the B.E.F. at Army level.

nothing else, these rivalries give the lie to the idea that there was a club of ‘Cavalry generals’ in the B.E.F. helping one-another.

By Christmas 1914 the command situation was exacerbated as more cavalry arrived in France. The existing force was split into two divisions, and a third, initially commanded by Julian Byng was created. A Cavalry Corps was formed in October 1914, initially commanded by Allenby, and briefly by Byng, before in the course of 1915 the former was moved sideways to command of an infantry corps and the latter departed for Gallipoli.⁵ Two divisions of cavalry also arrived from India in November and December of 1914, forming a separate ‘Indian Cavalry Corps’ under Maj. Gen. Frederic Rimington.⁶ (These included a mix of Indian and British regiments.) Counted together these two corps represented a force of 45 regiments of cavalry, or around 20,000 men, however few of its leaders had commanded more than a regiment in combat prior to 1914, and none more than a brigade even under peacetime conditions.

No specific criticism of these men is implied by the observation that they lacked experience, Allenby, Byng, and Gough all rose to Army command and their performance in that capacity will be considered in later chapters of this study. However taken in conjunction with the fact that there were no pre-existing administrative or logistical structures for the cavalry at even divisional, let alone corps level, and (in spite of years of debate on the matter)⁷ no clear doctrinal model for how such large forces of horsemen should be used operationally, it is clear that those planning the rôle of cavalry in the coming set-piece offensives of 1915 onwards were working essentially in the dark. The extent to which a consistent operational method was ever developed by these commanders is one of the key themes of this study.

Both cavalry corps were engaged in significant fighting both in the winter of 1914-15 and in the first half of the following year. They played a major part in resisting the German thrusts which became known as the First and Second Battles of Ypres. However this fighting was almost entirely of a defensive nature and took place on foot in trenches. The cavalry were able to demonstrate that they were a match for their colleagues in the infantry in shooting and fighting, but at a heavy cost in casualties.⁸ Horses were used to provide mobility for reserves which could be rushed to whichever part of the British line was threatened, but no opportunity for mounted action as such arose. This practice became known as ‘fire brigade’ work, and ‘Kavanagh’s Fire

Brigade', the 7th Cavalry Brigade, developed a particular reputation for it, under the command of Brig. Gen. George Kavanagh, who would rise to command the re-formed Cavalry Corps in 1916.⁹ Kavanagh seems to have been a popular and successful brigade commander. Unfortunately, as will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4, and later, these skills did not necessarily translate to the command of the Corps as a whole in the later part of the war.

The first opportunity for the cavalry to look forward to genuine mounted offensive action was in the attack around Loos planned for September 1915. Although this offensive does not form part of the main focus of this chapter, it is worthy of brief consideration as it offers an insight into Gen. Haig's thinking about cavalry in offensive planning at a point when he was still an Army commander and had yet to step up the rôle of Commander-in-Chief. Here he was to spell out some of the ideas on the function of cavalry, and indeed some of the contradictions in his thinking, which were to remain with him for the remainder of the war.

The Loos operation was mounted at the behest of the French, (in support of a larger offensive planned on two sections of the front further south,) and many of the British higher commanders were skeptical of its chances of success. The resources of the B.E.F. in terms of men and materiel were inadequate, and the chosen battlefield unsuitable, however allied co-operative strategy made it necessary and an attack plan was produced which tried to make the best of a bad situation.¹⁰

The plan for the attack called for First Army, under Gen. Haig, to attack with two corps, (a total of six divisions in the first attack) on a front of about 7km (4.5 miles) between Lens in the south and the canal at La Bassée in the north. Once the initial German defences had been pierced, First Army, supported by a division of cavalry would push on to the crossings of the Haute Deule Canal some 8km (5 miles) from the start line.¹¹ Although the attack did not reach its intended objectives, and was widely considered to have been disappointing in its results, the plan drawn up for the involvement of the cavalry is worthy of examination in detail.

What is notable about the rôle of the cavalry at Loos is that it was multi-layered. Mounted troops were intended to participate in the battle at a number of levels of command, from local divisional control to directly under G.H.Q. Each of the six attacking divisions already had an attached divisional cavalry squadron. This was a rôle

taken by Yeomanry regiments, as the Regular divisional cavalry had been withdrawn into the Cavalry Corps in April 1915.¹² Normally during an offensive, the greater part of each of these squadrons would be busy with a variety of jobs, for example as messengers, traffic controllers, and escorts to commanders and prisoners, thus few of them would be available as a unified fighting force. Haig ordered that one squadron of Yeomanry in each of the lead divisions, (1st and 9th Divs) should be retained intact in order to provide a mobile element for each of the leading divisional commanders, these were to work in concert with an attached battery of motor machine-guns and the cyclist companies of the infantry divisions, and "...be sent forward as circumstances permit."¹³ Rawlinson, at that time a Lieutenant General commanding IV Corps in Haig's First Army, requested a more senior cavalry officer to command each of these forces than would otherwise have been present, pointing out that a Yeomanry squadron commander (a captain) would lack sufficient experience. Haig supported this idea, which strongly suggests both men saw this force acting substantially on its own initiative once the battle had started.¹⁴ This devolution of cavalry forces to front line infantry divisions is one of the more significant aspects of the planning for Loos. As will be shown in later chapters, Haig was to argue for a similar use of mounted troops on numerous subsequent occasions. Once he had advanced beyond army command to become C-in-C, however, few of his subordinates seem to have seen fit to apply the idea in practice.

Thus cavalry was available at divisional level at the head of the attack. No cavalry was controlled by Rawlinson directly at Corps level, the next tier of cavalry command being First Army. Two brigades of 3^d Cavalry Division (6th and 8th Brigades) were placed under (Haig's) First Army Headquarters, with the task of supporting and exploiting the First Army attack between Loos and La Bassée.¹⁵ They were to form up before the attack at the Bois des Dames, west of B ethune and about 14km (9 miles) from the attack front, and were given the objective of Carvin, the same distance again beyond the front, and across the Haute Deule Canal.¹⁶ The remainder of the Cavalry Corps (two divisions) and the two divisions of the Indian Cavalry Corps were retained at the highest level of command, under G.H.Q. control, with the rather grandiose idea that they would be used either to exploit the gains of First Army, or to work in concert with the French cavalry to exploit their allies' gains possibly as far south as Vimy. To support these sweeping cavalry moves the bus companies of First and Second Armies

were concentrated under G.H.Q. control, providing motor transport for up to a brigade of infantry.¹⁷ This latter idea is notable as it prefigured developments which were to become more widespread in 1918, Haig was to advocate infantry in buses to support the Cavalry Corps in September of that year (discussed in Chapter 5) but these ideas seem to have been neglected in the intervening years, possibly due to their lack of success on this earlier occasion.

It is possible that the C-in-C, Sir John French retained direct control of the bulk of the Cavalry Corps because he lacked confidence in Haig's ability to judge when best to use it. Haig seems to have thought so, remarking in his diary on 22 September "He seemed afraid that I might push the cavalry forward too soon."¹⁸ It was perhaps understandable for French as a cavalryman to wish to retain control over his own arm. If so, he was not alone in these attachments. Haig himself was to be equally guilty of keeping cavalry 'under his hand' when he became C-in-C. This tendency for commanders at corps, army and even G.H.Q. level to hold on to the power to determine the advance of the cavalry was first seen at Loos, but it was to be a feature of nearly all subsequent offensives by the B.E.F. right up to 1918. It was to be a significant brake on the success of the cavalry on each occasion, and is one of the themes of this study.

Among the rank-and-file of the cavalry there was much optimism about the attack Col. Preston, who at the time was a machine-gun officer serving with the Essex Yeomanry recorded in his diary "Everyone was very optimistic about the 'Push'; our Brigade Major (Bethell) told us 'it was all worked out from A to Z.'"¹⁹ Unfortunately as was to be so often the case in the future, although the 3rd Cavalry Division closed up behind the attack front, no significant breach in the German defences was achieved on the first day of the attack (25 September) and the cavalry could get no further forward. 6th and 8th Cavalry Brigades were to see a good deal of action over the following days (26-28 September) as lack of reserves in First Army forced Haig to commit them as infantry to the defence of the captured village of Loos, a job the brigades performed with some distinction,²⁰ however it was not a particularly appropriate use for specialist cavalry soldiers. This too set a pattern that was to be repeated in later offensives, particularly at Cambrai in 1917, when 1st Cavalry Division was to suffer significant loss on foot in Bournon Wood (see Chapter 4).

Inevitably the two cavalry corps under G.H.Q. control made no contribution to the battle, they were too far away, and at the wrong end of too long a chain of command to serve any useful purpose. Loos then, set the tone for much that was to follow. An over-optimistic vision of what the infantry battle would achieve led to the conception of a rôle for the cavalry which it could never fulfill. Secondly control of the cavalry's movements was placed in the hands of G.H.Q. and Army headquarters who were inadequately informed about the progress on the ongoing battle, and were unable to respond to events. Finally the cavalry were thrown into battle as an emergency stop-gap in a dismounted, defensive rôle, which although they were quite capable of carrying it out efficiently, was a waste of their wider specialist talents. As will be shown in the following chapters, each of these mistakes was to be repeated, in varying combinations throughout 1916 and 1917. In spite of these hindrances, however, the cavalry was able to show on numerous occasions that given the right opportunity it continued to be a formidable fighting force.

The Cavalry in 1916

Following, and possibly reflecting the lack of mounted action by the cavalry at Loos, on 3 March 1916 both the British and the Indian Cavalry Corps were broken up and the divisions were attached to the headquarters of the individual Armies.²¹ Badsey has interpreted this as a change in Haig's conception of the rôle of the cavalry, a move towards more devolved forces exploiting local advantages rather than a decisive, multi division cavalry breakthrough.²² It should also be seen, however, in the context of the political pressure Haig was under to reduce his cavalry force in France, and it may have been a way of making cosmetic changes without losing actual fighting power. Notable in the orders for the abolition of the two corps is the retention of a skeleton corps headquarters staff, available to allow its rapid re-creation if required (as indeed happened in September 1916).²³

On 1 April 1916 Haig also appointed Gen. Gough as Temporary Inspector General of Training of Cavalry Divisions.²⁴ Haig urged Gough to be vigorous in instilling his combined-arms ideas through the ranks of the cavalry, recording in his diary "Above all

he is to spread the 'doctrine', and get cavalry officers to believe in the power of their arm when acting in co-operation with guns and infantry."²⁵ Any officers who were deemed insufficiently flexible were removed.²⁶ The question arises what exactly Haig meant by this co-operation with other arms. There is no doubt that he believed in the tactical combination of dismounted firepower from rifles and machine-guns, and support from artillery in the cavalry battle. Chapter 10 of *Cavalry Training*, "General Principles of Cavalry Tactics" makes this point explicitly.²⁷ This manual was drafted at least in part by Haig himself. However, it is implicit in *Cavalry Training* that these dismounted elements are subordinate parts of what is essentially a separate *cavalry* battle. There is little in the pre-war manual to suggest that Haig and the cavalry considered the possibility of fighting as subordinate players in an *infantry* battle. Thus the combined-arms ideas of the Commander-in-chief should always be viewed in the context of his conception of a mounted breakthrough which was the keynote of his thinking throughout the war. As Loos had demonstrated, however, this thinking was always combined with (or possibly clouded by) an idea of integrating the cavalry into the battle at an early stage. Haig would never satisfactorily address this dichotomy.

An interesting by-product of this proposal was that in placing all the cavalry divisions back under a single (cavalry) commander, a corps was formed almost by default, this would have implications for Rawlinson's plan for the coming offensive. Gough himself referred to "the whole Cavalry Corps"²⁸ when describing his rôle during this period. Clearly while advocating localised, combined arms fighting, Haig had still not entirely lost his vision of large scale cavalry operations, as the subsequent creation of the 'Reserve Army' under Gough was to indicate.

Meanwhile, undismayed by the disappointments of Loos, preparations were made at lower levels within the cavalry divisions through the spring and summer of 1916, in the form of reorganisation, new equipment, and training, for a renewed offensive which was expected in the course of the year. Many of the new techniques prepared for the 1 July 1916 attack were successfully applied on a small scale on 14 July and later in September. These battles served to vindicate in practice many of the ideas developed during this training period, and show that contrary to popular belief, the cavalry arm was, at a regimental level at least, far from unprepared for the conditions of warfare it was to meet on the Western Front, and tactically highly effective. A variety of

organisational changes had already taken place by March 1916, and others were to follow during the period leading up to the Somme offensive. This reorganisation took place within all five cavalry divisions (mirroring in some cases similar changes in the infantry), but will be examined with reference to one division in particular; 2nd Indian Division, as this formation was later to play a key rôle in the fighting on 14 July.

Preparations in the division began in the spring of 1916. The first of these changes took place in February. This was the withdrawal of the regimental machine gun sections and the establishment of centralised Brigade Machine Gun Squadrons. These squadrons were formed into the separate Machine Gun Corps (Cavalry) or MGC(C). This mirrored an equivalent process taking place in the infantry brigades to form the MGC Companies. Initially these squadrons consisted simply of the guns, horses and men detached from the regiments, but over time their establishments were made up by drafts, and horses as well as other equipment could be returned to the parent regiments.²⁹ These squadrons had a final establishment of six sections, each consisting of two Vickers machine-guns, carried on pack horses and commanded by a lieutenant. In addition Hotchkiss machine-guns were issued to the Regiments themselves along the same lines as the issue of Lewis guns in the infantry. This was a gradual process but by the time of the 1 July attack the 2nd Indian Division had been brought up to strength with 16 Hotchkiss guns per Regiment.³⁰ The machine guns in the Brigade MG Squadrons, combined with the Hotchkiss guns integral to the regiments, represented a marked increase in the firepower available to cavalry, both defensively, and offensively since the guns were all pack mounted, and were as mobile as the regiments themselves. The guns also served to counter the lack of firepower available to cavalry regiments due to the relatively small number of men available to form a dismounted firing line. One MGC(C) section was to play a notable rôle in the battle on 14 July, and the integral Hotchkiss of the 19th Lancers were to prove valuable in September.

Secondly towards the end of June the 9th Light Armoured Car battery was attached to 2nd Indian Division with its six Rolls Royce armoured cars.³¹ Again this represented a boost to the firepower available to the Division, and this asset was devolved down to brigade level as the cars were divided in pairs between the individual brigades. Unfortunately the armoured cars found difficulties dealing with the mud, and even on roads were unable to live up to their full potential. In spite of this, however, the addition

of the 'Lambs' (as they became known) to the cavalry can be seen as representative of the forward thinking combined-arms culture evolving within the cavalry arm, and which Haig was at pains to develop. Also, much has been made of the supposed miss-match between cavalry and armour by supporters of the latter. This will be examined in more detail in chapters 4, 5, and 6 in connection with tanks, but it should not be forgotten that cavalry-armour co-operation had its roots in working with armoured cars long before the first tank made its appearance. Further, when these changes are considered alongside the other existing assets within each cavalry brigade, including a battery of horse artillery, and integral mounted signal and engineer troops, it can be seen that these formations were becoming increasingly mobile and potent units.

In addition to the organisational changes, Gough instituted a vigorous training programme, which was carried out both in divisional level manoeuvres, and at regimental level. The *War Diaries* of the 2nd Indian Division record this process; on 9 May a divisional 'Scheme' was undertaken including "Practice in passing through Trench system and concentrating beyond." On subsequent days exercises included the (perhaps a little optimistic) "Action against a beaten enemy", as well as "Tactical exercise against an enemy in position", and "Practice in crossing trenches by blowing up with explosive and by filling in with picks and shovels."³² The Secunderabad Brigade diary for May also records "Training in mounted and dismounted work, bomb throwing, trench warfare, Hotchkiss gun, bayonet fighting and physical training continued throughout the month."³³ A feature of this training that shows the new seriousness with which it was undertaken, was that for the first time on exercise troops were allowed to ride through standing crops.³⁴ It is perhaps more surprising that such constraints on training had earlier been enforced, even after nearly two years of war.

At divisional level, exercises in 'liaison with RFC' were also carried out on 2 and 3 June.³⁵ The rôle that aircraft could fulfil in keeping forward troops in contact with headquarters, and in the direction of supporting artillery, was quickly recognised, and training with lamps and wireless was undertaken. Officers from the Cavalry were detached to the RFC and *vice-versa*.³⁶ The usefulness of this training, as well as some of its limitations were to be demonstrated in the course of the 14 July battle.

A further change to the organisation and training of 2nd Indian Cavalry Division was the addition of the Canadians. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was briefly attached to the

division in March, then reverted to direct command from G.H.Q. before being permanently allocated to 2nd Indian Division in June (after the removal from the division of the Meerut Brigade).³⁷ The Canadian cavalry had been formed into a mounted brigade in the UK in 1915, but were initially sent to France on foot to reinforce the depleted Canadian infantry after losses during the German attack at Ypres in April of that year.³⁸ Only in January of 1916 was the brigade reconstituted as a mounted unit.³⁹ Prior to their permanent attachment to the division the Canadian Brigade had been a part of Gough's training regime, and they took to one aspect of their training with particular vigour. This was the question of trench crossing. On 27 May "Experiments were made in the various methods of crossing trenches with cavalry and guns, by bridging and filling in."⁴⁰ This led on the 31 May to the testing of two specially designed portable bridges; an 'RCHA Bridge' weighing 550lbs (250kg), constructed for use by guns or wagons, and a 'Fort Garry Bridge', with a weight of 202lbs (90kg) devised for horses in single file. Tests were carried out and times recorded; the artillery bridge could be assembled and in position in just under three and a half minutes, while the Fort Garry Bridge could be thrown across a trench in less than 45 seconds. Both bridges were formally demonstrated before Haig at Helfaut on 3 June.⁴¹ His response is not recorded but it is likely to have been favourable as the Fort Garry Horse was adapted as a specialist bridging unit and its squadrons dispersed among the individual brigades of 2nd Indian Division.

Besides training, specific preparations for the upcoming offensive were also carried out. It was necessary for the cavalry to have a properly reconnoitred and prepared line of advance in the event of an attack. To this end the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division spent the latter part of June preparing and marking two tracks from their assembly areas, around Meaulte, north-eastwards around either side of Bécourt Château woods, and on up to the British front line in Sausage Valley.⁴² This task was not made any easier by the fact that they were specifically proscribed from using any roads usable by wheeled traffic, but had to cut a new track across country. On the day of the offensive these tracks were to be extended across the British and German trenches as far as just beyond Pozières. Secunderabad Brigade, forming the advanced guard of the division was to be specifically responsible for establishing and manning four trench crossing points suitable for both cavalry and guns in Sausage Valley. In this they were to be assisted by

detachments of Canadians equipped with their mobile bridges, to “make and indicate” trench crossings and to handle any prisoners.⁴³

It is clear from this wealth of training and logistical preparation that the cavalry divisions were far from idle in the period leading up to the Somme battles. Inevitably the limitations of this preparation became apparent when battle was joined, but many of these faults were only readily apparent in hindsight. At a regimental level the cavalry should be seen as at least as well prepared for the Somme battles as its infantry counterparts, and in some respects more sanguine and realistic about forthcoming events. Unlike many of the ‘New Army’ divisions for whom the Somme would be their first taste of offensive fighting, many of the cavalry had been ‘out since ‘14’ and had significant combat experience. It should also be remembered that many cavalymen were not only training behind the lines but also spent periods dismounted in the front line, such service would have provided a good understanding of the prevailing realities of the war.

1916 – Four Battles

Cavalry played no part in the fighting on the first day of the Somme offensive. Writers on the battle have not generally examined the rôle of these mounted forces, or their lack of one, in any more detail than this. The cavalry tend only to appear in narratives of the Somme battles waiting hopefully behind the lines, their presence serving as a metaphor for the wider failures and ‘loss of innocence’ which the offensive has come to represent. For example, John Keegan observed “Haig had three cavalry divisions brought up to the Somme front, but they were neither expected to, nor did they, play any part on July 1st or any other day in 1916.”⁴⁴ This simplistic view, however, ignores the fact that cavalry forces did become involved in the fighting as the campaign progressed, and that although they did not play a major part in the final outcome, they were not entirely idle.

Where more detailed accounts of the campaign do refer to the activities of the cavalry this coverage has also tended to be highly critical of the arm, and of those who defined its rôle. As has been discussed in the preceding chapter, these criticisms start at the top, with the implication that the senior commanders’ inclusion of cavalry in their plans was

characteristic of their wider lack of understanding of the nature of the battle being fought. At a lower level, the part in the fighting played by mounted troops is offered as evidence both of their inherent obsolescence and unsuitability for the war being fought, and perhaps more surprisingly, of their own lack of appreciation of this.

The rôle of the cavalry in the Somme fighting, as envisaged by the C-in-C, Haig, and by Gen. Rawlinson (as commander of Fourth Army) may be explored through examination of the four principal occasions on which cavalry forces were incorporated in the plans of attack; the initial 1 July offensive, the fighting at High Wood on 14 July, and the battles of Flers-Courcelette on 15 September and Morval on 25-26 September. Examination of the overall strategic plan for each attack, as well as the detailed planning within the cavalry formations themselves, reveals the faltering progress of the senior commanders in understanding how to use mounted troops in the prevailing conditions. This question of senior officers' grasp of the prevailing difficulties of command, control and communications is one of the key themes of this study. The differences in attitude between Haig and Rawlinson towards the function of cavalry also become apparent. It will be evident in later chapters that Haig was remarkably consistent in his views of what the cavalry should do, clinging on, right up until November 1918, to a vision of a large scale breakthrough and pursuit. Rawlinson, by contrast, was initially sceptical of the value of cavalry, but learned later to incorporate them into his operations. In 1916, however, his views had yet to soften towards the mounted arm, and his plans for them reflected that early scepticism.

In only two of these four battles did cavalry become involved in the fighting; in brigade strength at High Wood on 14 July, and in squadron strength at Gueudecourt on 26 September. Neither action was decisive in the outcome of the offensive, and the Gueudecourt action formed only a minute fraction of the fighting on that day. However, through detailed examination of these two episodes it is possible to evaluate the effectiveness of mounted troops in action, and to compare this with the aspirations of their commanders, and the criticism which has been made of the arm, both by its contemporaries and by later historians.

Planning for 1 July

(Figure 2.1 overleaf)

The planning for the 1 July offensive on the Somme has been characterised as a conflict between the conservative 'Bite and Hold' tactics of Rawlinson as Fourth Army commander, and the more ambitious 'Breakthrough' objectives of Haig as C-in-C.⁴⁵ The difference between the two commanders' thinking with regard to mounted forces tends to be seen in a similar light, with Rawlinson, an infantryman, making no provision in his plan for cavalry, and Haig, the cavalryman, eagerly awaiting the 'G in Gap'.⁴⁶ With the benefit of hindsight some historians have tended to favour Rawlinson's less ambitious plan, seeing in it a more realistic appraisal of the likely outcome of events, as opposed to Haig's over optimism. Liddell Hart commented "The very belief in such far-reaching possibilities suggests a failure to diagnose the actual conditions."⁴⁷ Others by contrast, have castigated Rawlinson for his timidity and for opportunities missed, especially on the southern flank of the attack, where a rapid follow-up of the successes of Congreve's XIII Corps might have reaped significant rewards.⁴⁸

In fact the difference between the two views is more subtle. As is outlined below, Rawlinson was prepared to permit the cavalry exploitation which Haig urged, but saw it essentially as a second, separate phase of battle from the breaking into and through the German main positions, which was primarily a matter for infantry and artillery. Only when a clear hole had been made in the enemy line would the cavalry advance, (and Rawlinson, frankly, did not expect such a gap to be easily or quickly produced). This view was, paradoxically, in line with much pre-war thinking within the cavalry, in which the arm had seen itself, assisted by integral machine guns and accompanied by horse artillery, as an increasingly mobile force, independent of the support of other arms.⁴⁹

Haig, even before the war, as discussed earlier in this chapter had advocated this independent rôle for the cavalry, exploiting the success of a separate infantry battle. At the same time he was keen to see mounted forces involved in each offensive at an early stage. This had been reflected the year before in the plan for the Loos offensive examined earlier. His own thinking was thus irreconcilably split. Thus his proposals for

the Somme offensive were shot through with recommendations that the cavalry be brought into the fighting at as early a stage as possible. Unfortunately his thinking about this combined-arms doctrine was obscured by his optimism about the outcome of the offensive as a whole. His advocacy of the early commitment of cavalry to the battle was increasingly overtaken by visions of a substantial breakthrough of the German position and exploitation beyond the trench lines into open country. It was difficult for Rawlinson to devise a strategy that reconciled both of these ideas, and in the end he opted for a plan that relegated the cavalry to the more traditional independent exploitation rôle, at the expense of combined-arms fighting.

This difference of view can be followed through the sequence of plans for the attack produced by Rawlinson and Fourth Army, and Haig's comments on those plans. Rawlinson took command of the newly formed Fourth Army in March 1916. On 26 March he was formally requested by Robertson (CGS) to produce a plan of attack on his Army frontage for a force of approximately 15 divisions, supported by one cavalry division.⁵⁰ This was no great surprise as discussions of such an offensive had been in train since the New Year, and Fourth Army had been formed with this attack in mind.

Rawlinson and Maj. Gen. Montgomery, his Chief of Staff, produced their first formal plan for the Somme attack on 3 April 1916.⁵¹ This envisaged an attack on a front of some 20,000 yards (18km) with a penetration of the German line to a depth of between 2,000 and 5,000 yards (1.8-4.5km). This was quite a conservative plan but reflected concerns about the range up to which infantry could be supported by artillery, and the manpower and guns available.

Haig was disappointed by what he saw as the lack of ambition in this plan. He recorded in his diary of 5 April:

I studied Sir H. Rawlinson's proposals for attack. His intention is merely to take the Enemy's first and second system of trenches and 'kill Germans'. He looks upon the gaining of 3 or 4 kilometers more or less of ground [as] immaterial. I think we can do better than this by aiming at getting as large a combined force of French and British across the Somme and fighting the enemy in the open!⁵²

In particular the 5,000-yard maximum advance took in the whole of the German first line of defence, but only about two-thirds of the second, and offered no prospect of outright penetration of the enemy position. Indeed Rawlinson's plan explicitly stated "I

do not therefore propose to include the Second Line south of Pozières in the objectives allotted to corps.”⁵³ Haig criticised Rawlinson’s strictly limited objectives, commenting: “It is therefore usually wiser to act boldly in order to secure, at the outset, points of tactical value it may be possible to reach, rather than to determine beforehand to stop short of what may prove to be possible, in order to avoid risks.”⁵⁴

Nor had any rôle been defined for cavalry, beyond a general position in reserve behind the attack. At this stage however, Rawlinson had at his disposal only the single division of cavalry allocated to Fourth Army when the Cavalry Corps was dissolved at the beginning of March.⁵⁵ No additional cavalry had been specially earmarked for the attack, although reserve divisions were available under the command of Haig at G.H.Q.. Rawlinson might therefore be forgiven for failing to consider a single cavalry division (with a rifle strength equivalent only to an infantry brigade), among a force of fifteen infantry divisions, as the decisive force at his disposal.

In spite of this, Haig demanded a larger rôle for mounted troops in the plan: “Opportunities to use cavalry, supported by guns, machine guns etc, and infantry, should be sought for, both during the early stages of the attack and subsequently.”⁵⁶ Two parts of this remark are significant. The first is that the cavalry are not expected to act alone, but in concert with all arms, and secondly that their involvement should not await the eventual hoped for breakthrough, but should take place ‘during the early stages’. This reflected the combined-arms part of Haig’s view of the rôle of the cavalry. In his eyes the cavalry was not only to serve in exploiting the breakthrough but also in making it, and the subsequent mission he provided for them beyond the German lines was also intended to be carried out in conjunction with supporting arms.

Rawlinson, by contrast still envisioned an infantry and artillery battle, followed, if successful, by a cavalry phase. He responded to Haig’s remarks on 19 April with revisions to his plan of attack:

As regards the employment of cavalry, it appears to me that the best use we can make of them is immediately after the attack on the line Grandcourt – Pozières has been successful, and that they may be of the greatest assistance in enabling us to reach the further objectives, if we succeed in inflicting upon the enemy a serious state of demoralisation.⁵⁷

The final part of this remark is revealing. In Rawlinson's mind the cavalry were only to be used to pursue a beaten and fleeing enemy. He continued to see the cavalry battle as a separate phase following on from a successful infantry and artillery attack, and furthermore was sceptical of such an opportune moment arising. A manuscript note alongside this paragraph in Haig's own hand argues for an earlier and more integrated involvement of the horse "This seems to indicate the use of 'the Cavalry' as one unit, this is not my view of its involvement during the fight. Certain corps commanders ought to have some cav. regts at their disposal."⁵⁸ Here Haig can be seen advocating a multi-layered cavalry battle similar to that proposed at Loos the year before, with some units operating locally in concert with the infantry to create the break, and others subsequently exploiting it.

The two men met again on 6 May.⁵⁹ Haig once again pressed his case for a deeper attack into at least the German second line, and for the first time outlined specific geographical objectives for the cavalry, proposing a thrust as far as Bapaume, followed by a turning movement to the north towards Arras. At the same time, however, Haig still expected these ambitious objectives to be reached by a single division of cavalry: "One division of cavalry, (the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division) will be at your disposal during the operations."⁶⁰

Significantly, much of the debate over the nature of the offensive was conducted at this stage in rather abstract terms. Haig in particular may be criticised for advocating the use of cavalry, without ever defining what exactly they should do, or indeed whether they should fight at an early stage, or be retained for exploitation (reflecting his own divided thinking). This problem had its root in the wider flaw within the whole offensive, which was the lack of any serious strategic objective behind the relevant portion of the front. The attack was to be made north of the Somme in order to cooperate with the French to the south, but otherwise had no particular goal in sight.

Rawlinson does not seem to have been unduly troubled by this as his objectives had always been limited to the destruction of the German positions immediately in front of him, rather than a more sweeping strategic mission. In his formal Fourth Army Operation Order of 14 June, the objectives were defined simply as "breaking up the enemy's defensive system" and "defeating his forces within reach".⁶¹ The detailed plans that followed outlined a relatively modest 'Bite and Hold' mission. Indeed Rawlinson

stressed the need to consolidate on early objectives and not get carried away by ideas of deep penetration:

...the success of the operations as a whole largely depends on the consolidation of the definite objectives which have been allotted to each corps. Beyond these objectives no serious advance is to be made until preparations have been completed for entering on the next phase of the operations.⁶²

Haig's response to these plans seems to reflect a view of the battle that was sharply different from that of Rawlinson, but at the same time did not acknowledge this difference. On 16 June he suggested that "The enemy's resistance may break down, in which case our advance will be pressed eastwards far enough to enable our cavalry to push through into the open country beyond the enemy's prepared lines of defence."⁶³ In addition, in a note of 21 June he went on to propose not only "...pushing the cavalry through to seize Bapaume and establish itself in good positions in that neighbourhood."⁶⁴ but subsequently "When the cavalry has reached Bapaume it should be relieved there by the supporting troops so that it may be set free for co-operation in a further move northward."⁶⁵

To Haig's credit, he no longer expected a breakout on this scale to be achieved by a single division of cavalry, in addition to the 2nd Indian Division, 1st and 3rd (British) Cavalry Divisions were placed at the disposal of Fourth Army under the command of Gen. Gough.⁶⁶ Significantly, the troops allotted to Gough, ultimately to become the 'Reserve Army' also included three divisions of infantry from II Corps, whom Haig no doubt intended would fulfil a combined arms rôle in support of the cavalry breakout. (In an interesting aside, Badsey notes that it was at this time that one of these infantry divisions, the 25th, adopted the horseshoe as its divisional sign.⁶⁷) The dissolution of the two cavalry corps headquarters (British and Indian) earlier in the year has already been discussed. In the creation of a separate layer of command for the three cavalry divisions used in the opening Somme attack, (in this case in the form of Reserve Army Headquarters) the reconstitution of the Cavalry Corps was prefigured. It may be argued from this that the specific exploitation rôle allocated to Gough's force would colour the conception of the rôle of the later Cavalry Corps, by those both within it and under whose command it was placed. This will be examined in more detail in a later chapter.

Rawlinson never supported this addition to the chain of command, and he later succeeded in detaching II Corps from Gough's control.⁶⁸ Even without the loss of the infantry, Gough was set a stiff task with the resources available to him, he later observed:

When the very comprehensive task which was set me in these orders is considered, in conjunction with the fact that I had only three cavalry and two infantry divisions with which to carry it out, I certainly think that I should have required early reinforcements!⁶⁹

Nonetheless it is difficult to see how even with three divisions of cavalry available these strategic opportunities would arise out of Rawlinson's limited offensive plans. Also, in spite of setting these grandiose goals for the cavalry, as late as the G.H.Q. letter of the 16 June, Haig continued to define the objectives of the offensive as a whole in only the loosest terms. He described the objective simply as "relieving the pressure on the French at Verdun and inflicting loss on the enemy".⁷⁰

Rawlinson was extremely skeptical of the ever more ambitious cavalry objectives. At a command conference on 22 June he observed:

An opportunity may occur to push the cavalry through...and in this connection I will read you the orders I have received on the subject from the Commander-in-Chief this morning. But before I read them I had better make it quite clear that it may not be possible to break the enemy's line and push the cavalry through at the first rush...A situation may supervene later...for pushing the cavalry through; but until we can see what is the course of the battle, it is impossible to predict at what moment we shall be able to undertake this, and the decision will rest in my hands to say when it can be carried out.⁷¹

Rawlinson acknowledged the possibility of Haig's wider vision coming to fruition in a memorandum 'With regard to action to be taken if the Enemy's resistance breaks down' issued on 28 June.⁷² In this, however, he reiterated the point that any immediate exploitation of gaps in the German resistance was to be the job of the infantry. Indeed the cavalry are obliged to "Remain in their places of assembly until these [infantry] divisions have moved forward and cleared their line of advance."⁷³ Thus the rôle of the cavalry in Rawlinson's eyes remained confined to a secondary phase of the battle, after the initial infantry combat had been fought and won.

The other major question debated by Rawlinson and Haig was the precise line of advance along which any cavalry operation would proceed. This was not a matter that could be decided once the offensive had begun. Not only would it be necessary to bridge the enemy trenches once the attack was under way, but also routes had to be prepared and marked on the British side of the line to allow the cavalry to move up through the mass of men and materiel behind the attack. Any moves would also have to take place over ground already disturbed by German shelling. These factors significantly constrained the location and direction of any proposed cavalry breakthrough.

Haig had initially envisioned an attack northwards from the right (south) end of the Fourth Army front through Montauban, taking advantage of the eastward turn of the German line north of the Somme to roll up their position from south to north.⁷⁴ Unfortunately two factors mitigated against this. The first was the presence of French troops north of the river, with the boundary between the national armies passing through Maricourt. This made the area south of Mametz and Montauban very crowded and the insertion of cavalry forces from their forming-up areas in the west, into this area across the line of advance of the reserves already there would have been extremely difficult. Secondly the German Second Line position in this southern sector of the front was set back from the First Line, and did not fall within Rawlinson's immediate objectives for the infantry attack. The axis of any cavalry exploitation had therefore to be placed both somewhere that could be reached sufficiently easily by the cavalry without interfering with other troops, and where the infantry attack was expected to penetrate sufficiently far into the German position for a breakthrough to be possible.

The potentially rather unimaginative answer to this was to define the cavalry axis of advance straight through the middle of the offensive front, along the Albert to Bapaume road. 2nd Indian Division was given the initial objective of Bapaume, with a line of advance south of the road, while 1st Cavalry Division was given the objective of Achiet-le-Grand, 5km (3 miles) north-west of Bapaume, with a line of advance north of the road. The 3rd Cavalry Division was to remain in reserve east of Albert.⁷⁵ It was also made clear not only in the Fourth Army Operation Orders⁷⁶ but also in Divisional orders that the assault was to be primarily an infantry affair right up as far as Courcellette and Martinpuich. Only when a substantial hole had been punched in the German lines and

the Infantry reserves of III and X Corps had been pushed through would the cavalry advance begin.⁷⁷

What becomes apparent from this is that the cavalry divisions, although described as a 'Reserve' force, were committed to battle before the offensive started. While Rawlinson retained the decision over *when* they were to move off, their objectives and line of advance were pre-determined, and to attempt to change these 'on the hoof' during the course of the battle would have been a recipe for chaos. Unlike commanders of previous eras who were able to retain a large force of reserve cavalry, and, as Napoleon demonstrated at Eylau in 1807,⁷⁸ launch it both at a time, and on a part of the battlefield of their choosing Rawlinson had to decide in advance where he thought this critical point would be. A flaw in his plan was that having reached this conclusion over the axis of potential cavalry breakthrough, he did not focus the strength of his initial infantry attack in this area in order to facilitate it. Instead he retained an even, broad front attack all along the line. This made a critical collapse of part of the German defences not only less likely, but also less predictable in terms of where the line might break. This lack of offensive focus is another sign that Rawlinson did not really believe that such a collapse of enemy resistance would actually occur, and that his plan anticipated only limited 'Bite and Hold' gains over a wide front. Rawlinson's conservative attitude to the likely outcome of the attack was probably born of his experiences as a corps commander in 1915. He had seen the limited gains achieved in the attacks of that year, and indeed as early as March 1915 had himself coined the term 'Bite and Hold' in response to the results of the battle of Neuve Chapelle.⁷⁹

It is arguable that Rawlinson could have partially overcome this problem by dividing his cavalry force. As he was distributing guns and infantry along the twenty miles of his attacking front, he could have been distributing cavalry, either as complete divisions, or in brigade strength, to his infantry commanders at Corps level. This would have had the effect of multiplying his chances for success, albeit in each case on a smaller scale. It would also have fulfilled the 'small print' of Haig's ideas for the use of cavalry "supported by guns, machine guns etcetera, and infantry... during the early stages of the attack",⁸⁰ even if it was at the cost of the great turning movement through Bapaume which was the Commander-in-Chief's wider objective.

In the event, under Rawlinson's 'Bite and Hold' plan, other assets such as infantry and artillery were distributed more or less evenly along the front, and given relatively modest operational objectives. Meanwhile his plan for the cavalry was a response to Haig's vision of a strategic breakthrough, albeit filtered through his own traditional ideas of the rôle of cavalry. He collected all the cavalry together as an old-style 'Mass of Decision' at a single point behind the front. Haig's appointment of Gough, and the assembling of the Reserve Army, allowed the three cavalry divisions on the Somme front to coalesce informally into a corps-like cavalry formation. Rawlinson's plan, placing all three divisions together on one axis of attack, did nothing to prevent or dilute this effect. As a result the offensive for which the cavalry was prepared was quite different in character from the offensive which the infantry and guns actually carried out.

The 1 July Attack

On the morning of 1 July the three cavalry divisions left their billets at 3.30am and were in place in their positions of assembly behind the III and X Corps front by 5.30 am. Rawlinson had originally intended to keep the cavalry very much 'under his hand', holding them in a position near to his own Fourth Army headquarters at Querrieu. This would have left them more than 20km (12 miles) from the infantry start-line at Zero-hour. This was altered after the intervention of Haig on 21 June and the 1st Cavalry and 2nd Indian Divisions were advanced during the night of the 30/1 to positions around Bresle and Buire-sur-Ancre.⁸¹ This left them some 9km (5 miles) behind the start-line. As soon as the offensive began, at 7.30, patrols were sent to Bécourt and to Sausage Valley to monitor the progress of the infantry attack.⁸² Sadly this progress was negligible, and by 8.30am it was clear that this part of the offensive had failed. Orders were received from General Gough (at Fourth Army HQ) at 11.30am that no move would be made before 2.30pm. Meanwhile Rawlinson, the Fourth Army commander, had decided by midday that there was no chance for the cavalry, recording in his diary at 12.15pm "There is of course no hope of getting the cavalry through today."⁸³ At 3.00pm the cavalry were stood down, and by 6.00pm had withdrawn to billets further to

the west. In short, when the particular portion of the offensive which was intended to open the door to a cavalry advance, failed, all three cavalry divisions were left with no other option but to return, frustrated, to their billets.

Meanwhile, opportunities for mounted exploitation on other parts of the front withered for lack of cavalry support. A collapse of enemy resistance did occur opposite XIII Corps in the south (ironically where Haig had initially proposed), but since this was not anticipated in the plan, nothing could be done to exploit it. Middlebrook suggests that “Two or three cavalry regiments boldly handled could have achieved results out of all proportion to their numbers”⁸⁴ if they had been available to exploit XIII Corps’ success. While theoretically this was true, it neglects the fact that once the cavalry had been committed to another part of the battle little could be done to divert them. It has been suggested that “...reserves included 2nd Indian Cavalry Division, saddled-up three miles behind XIII Corps jumping-off point”.⁸⁵ In fact the bulk of the cavalry remained around Buire and Bresle, some 14km (or nine miles) from Montauban as the crow flies, but this suggestion also ignores the fact that this distance was measured diagonally across the British Front line in the midst of a major attack. Three miles or twenty, such a move was not practical for the cavalry except along previously prepared and reconnoitred lines of advance, and those lines of advance had been prepared towards another part of the battle.

Once again, as at Loos ten months before, the initial infantry and artillery assault had failed to create a breach in the German defences for the cavalry to exploit, or at least not on a part of the line where cavalry were available. This failure was so complete that any critique of the cavalry’s plans and preparations is rendered somewhat irrelevant. No alterations in the command arrangements or planning within the cavalry could have changed the outcome of the infantry battle, and without that, the mounted arm was powerless. However the cavalry did not have long to wait before a successful infantry attack would present a potential opportunity for them to show their worth.

Planning for 14 July

After 1 July the cavalry remained hopeful of a rôle in the fighting. 2nd Indian Division remained at four hours' notice to move until 7 July.⁸⁶ However, no advance was ordered. It was not until Rawlinson mounted his next large-scale set-piece attack that a rôle for mounted troops would once again be proposed. On this next occasion the cavalry would come to grips with the enemy; at High Wood during what has become known as the 'Battle of Bazentin Ridge' on 14 July. The small part played by the cavalry in this battle was probably no more significant in terms of the overall outcome of the Somme campaign than their part in the 1 July attack, but a detailed examination of this action sheds light on the tactical effectiveness or otherwise of the arm, and on the appropriateness of their preparations. In particular a detailed analysis of the movements of the cavalry forces involved demonstrates their battle field mobility, which was a key part of their overall tactical effectiveness.

Detailed reconstruction of the course of events on that day is also salutary in demonstrating how the actions of the cavalry have been misrepresented in many subsequent accounts of the battle, a topic which forms one of the subsidiary themes of this study. As early as 1938 the *Official History* painted an erroneous picture of the cavalry, stuck in the mud, unable to arrive at the scene of the action until the evening.⁸⁷ This image has been accepted uncritically by most of those subsequently dealing with the battle.⁸⁸

On the basis of this supposed immobility and ineffectiveness, many historians have gone on to criticise the senior commanders for having unrealistic expectations of what the cavalry could achieve. Others have gone even further and suggested that Rawlinson's inclusion of any cavalry in his plans was a grave error. Prior and Wilson argue that:

These orders [for the cavalry] do no credit to Rawlinson's command. ... The result could only be a slaughter of the mounted force. Rawlinson's orders therefore only make any sense if he was expecting the enemy to flee. And if that was his expectation then the boundaries of cloud cuckoo-land should be moved down a stage from their usual location around G.H.Q..⁸⁹

Harsh words indeed, and as will be shown, not an observation borne out by the facts of the battle.

In the aftermath of 1 July Haig and Rawlinson seem to have continued to hold divergent views of the nature of the battle. The infantry attacks along the proposed cavalry line of advance, those of X and III Corps had failed completely. Rawlinson was keen to renew these failed attacks from the British centre and left, possibly in order to try to wipe away the embarrassment of complete failure on this part of the front. Haig on the other hand, was keen to exploit the success on the right, in particular Congreve's XIII Corps gains around Montauban. In due course Rawlinson accepted this latter line of attack. (Although Haig was to have a much harder job selling the idea to the French, on whose immediate flank the attack would take place.)⁹⁰

Curiously a form of rôle reversal seems to have followed Rawlinson's acceptance of a renewed attack on the British right. His plan for this offensive, was both tactically inventive, and incorporated his chief's vision of a significant cavalry rôle at the early stages.⁹¹ It also made provision for a complete breakthrough of the German position. Indeed Rawlinson wrote in his diary "...if we are wholly successful, it will have far reaching results – especially if I can get the cavalry through and catch the guns and break up their commands."⁹² This was a far cry from his pessimistic forecasts of the prospects for mounted troops before 1 July. Possibly Rawlinson was starting to succumb to the constant pressure for a larger rôle for the cavalry placed upon him over the past months by the commander-in-chief. Equally, he may have recognised that in an attack on the German second and third lines of defence, even a shallow 'bite' might fully penetrate the formal defensive system. Haig meanwhile, seems to have become increasingly conservative. In particular he was skeptical of the ability of his relatively untrained troops to carry out the complex form up by night in no-man's land envisaged in Rawlinson's new scheme of attack, and saw altogether too much risk in the plan as a whole.⁹³ He was also worried that the cavalry might be committed too early before the time was quite right, arguing, somewhat uncharacteristically that "The divisions were not to go forward until we had got through the enemy's fortifications, except a few squadrons to take 'High Wood'."⁹⁴ (His earlier remarks about Sir John French before Loos come to mind in this context.) True to form, however, Haig did eventually let his subordinate have his way and the attack proposed by Rawlinson and his corps

commanders went ahead. Interestingly, Liddell Hart suggested that “For once, Horne, who was usually as apt to agree with Haig’s views as he was dependable in other ways, agreed instead with his immediate superior [Rawlinson], and this fact may have helped tilt the scales.”⁹⁵ (Indeed the influence of Lt. Gen. Horne, commander of XV Corps, not only on the planning but also the outcome of the battle will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.)

In brief, the overall plan for the attack on 14 July comprised an attack northwards from Montauban (captured on 1 July), into and through the German Second Line position on the Ginchy–Pozières ridge.⁹⁶ The main attacking front was to be approximately 3,500 yards (3.2km) wide, with its flanks defined by Mametz Wood to the east, and Trones and Delville Woods to the west. The initial objective was the German Second Line itself, followed by the villages of Bazentin-le-Petit to the west, Bazentin-le-Grand in the centre, and Longueval in the east. These three villages lay immediately behind the German line. If the attack was successful up to this point, cavalry would be pushed through with the immediate objective of High Wood, in order to make a lodgement in the as yet only partially constructed German Third (or ‘Switch’) Line. Potential further exploitation by additional divisions of cavalry was also postulated.

The initial infantry attack would be conducted by four divisions, from right to left: 9th and 3rd Divisions of XIII Corps, and 7th and 21st Divisions of XV Corps. An additional supporting attack would be made on the left beyond Mametz Wood by III Corps. The initial assault would be made at first light of dawn, 3.25am, from forming up positions out in no-man’s land, as close to the German positions as possible. To reinforce the element of surprise this would be preceded by only 5 minutes of ‘Hurricane’ bombardment (although a less intense wire-cutting bombardment had already been taking place for several days).⁹⁷

The cavalry force to take part in the attack was the same as for 1 July, 2nd Indian Division, and 1st and 3rd Cavalry Divisions. The 2nd Indian Division was to start immediately to the south of Albert, in the vicinity of Meaulte (9km (5 miles) from Montauban), but by ‘Zero’ (ie. 3.25am on the 14th) would have one brigade immediately behind the infantry attack to the south of Montauban. One regiment of this brigade was to support each of XIII and XV Corps in their attacks on their second objectives, the

villages behind the line, and the third regiment was to be ready to seize High Wood by ‘coup de main’ as soon as an opportunity arose. The other two divisions were assembled further away, 1st Division at Buire, (14km (9 miles) from Montauban) and 3rd Division at La Neuville (22km (13 miles) from Montauban).⁹⁸

Further clarification of the cavalry orders was issued by Fourth Army on 12 July: “In the event of our attack on the enemy’s second line being successful...”⁹⁹ the three cavalry divisions would advance sequentially through the German Second Line, 2nd Indian leading and 1st and 3rd following. 1st Division would form a flank guard towards Leuze Wood to the south-east, and 3rd Division similarly towards Martinpuich to the north-west, while 2nd Indian pushed on towards Flers and Le Sars. Significantly, these advances would take place under the control of XIII and XV Corps rather than Fourth Army, thus not only would cavalry be immediately available behind the infantry attack, but the local corps commanders would have control of it. This devolution of control of the cavalry from army to corps level was a vital first step in improving their effectiveness, but as will be shown, it still did not provide the local flexibility required to allow local commanders to fully exploit their tactical potential.

Subsequently it would appear that Rawlinson became uncomfortable with the placing of his entire cavalry force beyond his own immediate control, and a further ‘Memorandum’ was issued on 13 July. In this he reclaimed 1st and 3rd Divisions under his own hand:

The Army Commander does not consider that the entire responsibility for launching the 1st and 3rd Cavalry Divisions should rest on the Commanders of the XIII. and XV. Corps. He has decided therefore that although the actual orders for the advance of these two divisions will be issued by the XIII. and XV. Corps, the final decision as to whether the suitable time has come for launching them will rest in his hands.¹⁰⁰

Events would prove that the immediate effect of this change was to write the two British cavalry divisions out of the battle entirely, as a “suitable time” never presented itself to Fourth Army. In the case of the 2nd Indian Division, however, Rawlinson used the Memorandum to reiterate their vital rôle:

He [Rawlinson] places the greatest importance on the seizure of High Wood and the enemy's new line to the east and west of it, as a stepping stone to a further advance.

The G.O.C. XIII. Corps will therefore issue orders for the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division to advance, on his own responsibility, when he considers the situation permits of it.¹⁰¹

Thus not only would Congreve, G.O.C. XIII Corps, have at least one regiment of cavalry under his hand from the outset of the battle, he would in due course acquire control over a whole Indian cavalry division. The possibility of a true combined arms attack thus presented itself. The criticism of this plan has been made that the cavalry division was under XIII Corps control while their objective, High Wood, was in XV Corps area.¹⁰² This objection neglects the fact that the cavalry line of advance in order to get to High Wood crossed the portion of the German Second Line attacked by XIII Corps. Thus only XIII Corps would be able to judge when such an advance was practical. This confusion of command and objectives was, however, to become a significant factor in the failures of the attack.

Such were the broad outlines of the attack ordered by Fourth Army. How this was to be carried out by the troops involved is revealed in the orders issued lower down the chain of command at corps, division and brigade level. As always on the Western Front the primary difficulty was communications. Rawlinson and Fourth Army HQ were 25km (15 miles) behind the front at Querrieu. General Congreve in command of XIII Corps was based at Chipilly, some 14km (9 miles) from Montauban, while XV Corps HQ was at Heilly, roughly between the two. In turn the headquarters of the three cavalry divisions would start the battle in their points of concentration, but the commanders would soon be on the move with their divisions. In order to overcome this problem the headquarters of the 3^d (infantry) Division, was nominated as an advanced reporting centre. This division, under Maj. Gen. Haldane, formed the left of XIII Corps' line, roughly in the centre of the attack. Haldane's Main Headquarters was initially located about 1km (1,100 yards) north-east of Bray-sur-Somme.¹⁰³ Subsequently, an Advanced Headquarters was established at Billon Farm 1km (1,100 yards) south of Carnoy.¹⁰⁴ This placed it only about 4km (5,000 yards) behind the start line of the attack. As the attack began, the commander of the Cavalry Advanced Guard, Brig. Gen. Gregory, and

subsequently the G.O.C. 2nd Indian Division, Maj. Gen. MacAndrew were both to establish themselves at these headquarters. Cavalry liaison officers were also sent to all the other attacking infantry divisions, (with motor cyclists and mounted despatch riders) with orders to report to MacAndrew at 3rd Division Headquarters. It was at the Advanced Headquarters that much of the immediate business of fighting the battle was conducted through ad-hoc conferences among the commanders at divisional and brigade level.

The second difficulty faced by the cavalry divisions was their line of advance. As on the 1 July the route to be taken up to the start line of the attack was prepared in advance by the construction of cavalry tracks. These were formally defined in 2nd Indian Division operation orders of 12 July:

Four new routes across country have been marked by flags from the new bivouack towards Carnoy and thence towards Montauban. ... It is extremely important that all units should be thoroughly familiar with these tracks. They will be referred to in future orders as A, B, C, and D from south to north. ¹⁰⁵

This must have been substantial undertaking as each track ran for between 10 and 15km across country. Much of the route in the rear areas would have required relatively little repair, but the portions between Carnoy and Montauban would have crossed the former British and German front lines of 1 July, and the devastated area resulting from the British bombardment. The Secunderabad Brigade, at least, must have been 'thoroughly familiar' with the tracks as working parties detailed for their construction are recorded in the brigade *War Diary* on 7, 9, 10 and 11 July. ¹⁰⁶

Once the start line of the attack had been crossed, similar provision was to be made for the cavalry advance over the German Second Line trenches, and it was the responsibility of the attacking infantry to provide this. The attack orders for Haldane's 3rd Division include;

The 8th Inf. Brigade will arrange to cut ramps 12 feet wide down to the captured German trenches in two places for the passage of cavalry in such a way as not to block the passageway in the trenches. The wire opposite these ramps will be cleared away by the infantry and the gaps clearly marked by flags. ¹⁰⁷

In addition the leading cavalry brigade would once again be accompanied by the Canadians with their portable bridges. Thus comprehensive preparations had been made

to get the cavalry into position for their rôle in the attack, all that remained was for the infantry corps commanders to launch them forward into battle.

The 'Battle of Bazentin Ridge'

(Figure 2.2 Overleaf)

The infantry attack began, on schedule at 3.25am on 14 July. The part played by mounted troops in the battle can be reconstructed from reports contained within the *War Diaries* of the formations concerned. Although at times vague and contradictory these accounts, taken as a whole, provide a fairly comprehensive narrative of the events of the day. This narrative is somewhat at variance with that typically appearing in published accounts of the battle. During the battle itself there was a good deal of confusion among the other arms concerning the progress of the cavalry. Bodies of horsemen were reported in various locations when in fact these were only patrols, or in some cases no cavalry were present at all. This confusion has been perpetuated in accounts of the action which refer loosely and interchangeably to the 7th Dragoon Guards, the Secunderabad Brigade, 2nd Indian Division, or even simply 'the Cavalry' as if these terms represented a single body of troops. This was not the case. Operational orders split the Division into a series of separated bodies,¹⁰⁸ each moving on a different timetable and by different routes, only when the path of each is followed does the situation become clear.

On 13 July two of the three cavalry divisions allocated to the attack were in reserve to the west of Albert, the closer of the two being the 1st Cavalry Division around Buire-Sur-Ancre, some 14km (9 miles) from the front line at Montauban. These divisions were held directly under Rawlinson's hand, under Fourth Army command. As has been discussed above, Rawlinson never issued orders for these forces to move from their points of concentration. It is sufficient to say therefore, that these divisions took no part in the battle and no further reference need be made to them in this narrative.

At midnight on the night of 13-14 July, the 2nd Indian Division was in billets around Meaulte, to the south of Albert and perhaps 5km (3 miles) closer to the front than the other two wholly British divisions. The infantry attack was scheduled to begin at 3.25am, but deployment by the lead infantry brigades into no-man's land began several

hours before. In keeping with this the first elements of 2nd Indian Division were also on the move soon after midnight, so as to be as close to the front line as possible at the moment when they might be needed. It is something of a misrepresentation to refer to the location of large forces in precise terms: ‘the *Xth* Division was at map reference *0.0.0*’, as these formations took up large amounts of ground. For example a cavalry division moving in road column (half sections) is estimated to have formed a column up to 12 miles (19km) long.¹⁰⁹ It is possible, however to break down the 2nd Indian Division into some of its component parts and follow these parts individually, recording the locations of the head of each column at various times. The division was divided up as follows,¹¹⁰

- The 2nd Indian Division Headquarters party, including Maj. Gen. MacAndrew (G.O.C. 2nd Ind. Div.)
- Secunderabad Brigade Headquarters party, including Brig. Gen. Gregory (G.O.C. Sec. Brig.)
- The ‘Vanguard’ formed from elements of Secunderabad Brigade, consisting of;
 - 7th Dragoon Guards
 - 1 squadron Fort Garry Horse (with trench bridges)
 - 2 sections Brigade MG Squadron (with 4 Vickers guns)
- The ‘Advanced Guard’, formed of the remainder of Secunderabad Brigade, consisting of;
 - 20th Deccan Horse
 - 34th Poona Horse
 - 4 sections Brigade MG Squadron (with 8 Vickers guns)
 - ‘N’ Battery RHA (with 6 13pdr guns)
 - 1 Field Troop RE
 - 2 Rolls Royce armoured cars from 9th LAC Battery
 - 1 Squadron Fort Garry Horse (with portable trench bridges)

- The remainder of 2nd Indian Cavalry Division, consisting of;
 - Ambala Cavalry Brigade
 - Canadian Cavalry Brigade (less two Squadrons)
 - Remainder 9th LAC Battery (4 cars)

At some time shortly after midnight, the Ambala Brigade, and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade moved from billets to their divisional point of concentration at Morlancourt. This was 4km (2.5 miles) south of Meulte, and actually marginally further from the front line. This assembly was complete by 3.30am. Here they were to stay until around 8.00am.¹¹¹

Also at around midnight the two HQ parties set out from Meulte, MacAndrew arrived at Main HQ 3rd Division, just outside Bray, at 3.30am.¹¹² Gregory went ahead arriving at Advanced HQ 3rd Division at Billon Farm by about the same time.¹¹³ At about 1.30am the two portions of the Secunderabad Brigade completed their assembly at Meulte and moved off, Vanguard leading, towards Bray. The Advanced Guard halted just to the north-west of Bray, near 3rd Div. Main HQ. Arriving at about 3.45am.¹¹⁴ The Vanguard pushed on, crossing the Albert-Peronne road (just south of Carnoy) at 5.05am and moving on to a position in a valley immediately to the south of Montauban. Once across the old front lines the 7th Dragoon Guards (part of the Vanguard) closed up into column of Squadrons, (B Squadron leading) and advanced through moderate shelling, four horses being wounded.¹¹⁵ It is not clear at what time the Vanguard reached Montauban, but it is not likely to have been later than about 7.00am. In due course after resting and watering the horses at Bray, the Advanced Guard moved off at 6.15am and had arrived at 3rd Division advanced HQ at Billon Farm by 7.15am.¹¹⁶

Thus by 7.00am the cavalry advance was proceeding on schedule, with the various portions of the 2nd Indian Division advancing by stages along its prepared routes. The Vanguard of the division had crossed the old 1 July front lines without difficulty and was in a position of support behind the infantry attack at Montauban, the remainder of the Advanced guard was 4km (2.5 miles) to the rear at Billon Farm, and the balance of the division still at Morlancourt. At this stage the Infantry attack was proceeding well on many parts of the front, and for the first time that day a report reached Rawlinson (at

around 7.00am) that Longueval, the key objective on the right hand side of the attack, had been captured.¹¹⁷

Eager to begin the next phase of the battle, Rawlinson (via XIII Corps) ordered the remainder of the 2nd Indian Division to close up to the front and for the Advanced Guard to proceed with its attack towards High Wood. These orders were received at 7.40am and the Advanced Guard moved up from Billon Farm across the old front lines to the position south of Montauban occupied by the Vanguard, mostly arriving probably around 8.30am. Meanwhile the other Brigades of the division, at Morlancourt, received orders at around 7.45 and were on the move by 8.20, advancing through Bray to positions in the vicinity of Billon Farm.¹¹⁸ It was at this stage that the Division encountered its first difficulties, The two armoured cars attached to the Advanced Guard, commanded by 2nd Lieutenants Williams and Pocock set off from Billon at about 9.00am. Unfortunately the road across the old front lines was bad, a situation no doubt made worse by the recent bad weather and the passage a few minutes before of the hooves of a brigade of cavalry, and the two armoured cars became hopelessly bogged in the mud. It was to be midday before the two cars had been dug free and returned to Billon.¹¹⁹ Some wheeled transport was, however, able to make the passage as 'N' Battery RHA was able to join the brigade concentrated behind Montauban by 9.30am.¹²⁰ At about this time MacAndrew and the 2nd Indian Division HQ group also moved up from Bray to the 3rd Division Advanced HQ. at Billon Farm, joining Gregory and the Secunderabad Brigade HQ.¹²¹

Sadly, the reports reaching Fourth Army did not reflect the real situation, as a see-saw battle was taking place for the possession of Longueval, which would last all day, reports of capture or loss coming in every few hours, usually hopelessly out of date by the time they were read. Also from about 8.00am onwards there occurred one of the fatal breakdowns of communications and confidence which were the hallmark of British attacks on the Western Front. At about 8.15am, as the struggle for Longueval continued, 7th Dragoon Guards sent out two patrols under Lieutenants Malone and Hastings to reconnoitre their route towards High Wood.¹²² Unfortunately the route proposed for the advance was via the trench crossings prepared immediately to the west of Longueval, and on approaching the village the patrols came under machine-gun fire from it, and from machine guns surviving in the German Second line trenches to the west. These

patrols returned reporting the route impassable to the brigade, and on this information reaching Congreve at XIII Corps “it was decided by the Corps Commander not to push on to the allotted objectives until the situation became more favourable.”¹²³ At this point the XIII Corps attack was effectively halted, halting the cavalry with it, waiting for the complete capture of Longueval.

On the left flank of the attack, on XV Corps front, however, the situation was rather different. By 9.00am all of the first and second phase objectives had been secured and the ground between Bazentin-le-Grand and High Wood was mostly clear of Germans. Indeed at about 10.00am Brig. Gen. Potter of 9th Brigade was able to make his famous walk, unmolested up the hill to High Wood.¹²⁴ In the course of the morning several of the Infantry divisional commanders proposed attacks into this gap, both Watts, commanding 7th Division (XV Corps) and Haldane, commanding 3^d Division (XIII Corps) offered their reserve brigades, but were told by their respective Corps and by Fourth Army that these brigades were required as a reserve in case of counter attack, and to ‘wait for the cavalry.’¹²⁵ Ironically, that very cavalry was also waiting, behind Montauban, for renewed orders to advance from XIII Corps.

Further cavalry patrols were sent out in the course of the morning to the west around Bazentin-le-Grand and into Bazentin-le-Petit. These patrols under Lieutenants Adair and Struben (7th Drg. Gds.) were able to witness a German counter-attack on the north end of Bazentin-le-Petit at around 11.45am,¹²⁶ but must also have been able to determine the viability of an attack along the more westerly line, still, no orders were given. Indeed the presence of mounted men advancing and then withdrawing in the vicinity of the Bazentins was reported to XV Corps as the failure of the Cavalry Advanced Guard attack.¹²⁷ Meanwhile the Secunderabad Brigade itself, with elements of 7th Dragoon Guards out patrolling, occupied its Indian regiments by sending work parties to repair the cavalry tracks across the old front lines.¹²⁸

By noon it seems to have become apparent to Rawlinson at Fourth Army that no cavalry advance had taken place on High Wood. Indeed no advance of any sort had taken place beyond that of a lone brigadier at around 10.00am. He therefore authorised the infantry attack on High Wood by 7th Division (XV Corps) originally proposed by its commander Maj. Gen. Watts earlier that morning. It was now the turn of Lt. Gen. Horne, commanding XV Corps, to develop the same concern over Longueval that had

constrained Congreve at XIII Corps from ordering the cavalry forward in the morning. Horne delayed 7th division's attack on XV Corps' front until such time as Longueval had fallen to XIII Corps.¹²⁹ It is difficult to see the justification for this decision. Horne may have felt that with German troops still in positions immediately to the north and west of Bazentin-le-Petit, as well as in Longueval, an attack on High Wood would be exposed to fire from both flanks. On the other hand, the capture of High Wood could equally be seen as a method of outflanking and rendering untenable the position of the German forces in Longueval itself. Either way, Horne's decision once again stalled the attack as a whole, while 9th Division on the right continued to struggle for Longueval.

At 3.10pm reports of the capture of Longueval by XIII Corps, reached XV Corps. Once again these reports were out of date, as the struggle for the village continued.¹³⁰ Nonetheless Horne authorised the attack on High Wood by 7th Division for 5.15pm. Word of this attack reached Gregory, who was with Secunderabad Brigade behind Montauban, at 4.35pm, via a telephone line laid by the Brigade Signal Squadron from 3rd Division Advanced HQ at Billon Farm to the brigade position at Montauban.¹³¹ He returned to Billon Farm, and was briefed by MacAndrew on the attack orders passed down by XIII Corps. Secunderabad Brigade was to provide flank protection to 7th Division's attack, with the objective of the German Third Line trenches east of High Wood, while the infantry attacked into the wood itself. During the briefing orders were received that the attack was postponed until 6.15pm. Gregory had returned to the Brigade by 5.40pm at which time he received a final version of his orders. Under these, he was to take two regiments, 7th Dragoon Guards, and the 20th Deccan Horse (plus the machine guns and the Canadian bridging squadron) north-west to Sabot Copse, where they would be placed under command of XV Corps. From that point they would move on their objectives to the east of High Wood. The third regiment, 34th Poona Horse would stay at Montauban.¹³²

The two regiments left Montauban at 6.00pm, crossing the British front line of that morning in 'Montauban alley' via ramps prepared during the day by the Brigade Field Squadron RE. The regiments had arrived at Sabot Copse, some 3km (2 miles) away in a straight line, by 6.25pm. Here Gregory attended further briefings with Br. Gen. Minshull-Ford, the commander of 91st Brigade, 7th Division, and the whole force moved off at around 7.00pm.¹³³ The advance was conducted with 91st Brigade on the left,

advancing on High Wood. On their right came 7th Dragoon Guards, in column of squadrons, 'B' Squadron leading. (Column of squadrons was such a common attacking formation in the operations covered by this study that it is described in detail in Appendix 1.1.) In turn on the right of the Dragoons was the Deccan Horse in similar order (with 'A' squadron leading).¹³⁴ 'N' Battery RHA deployed in support on a reverse slope to the south of the German Second Line position, with a forward observer in the German reserve trench. However, although the first round was fired by the battery at 8.10pm, failing light restricted observation and only 21 rounds were fired in total in support of the cavalry.¹³⁵

As the cavalry advanced across the broad valley behind the German Second Line they were visible to observers on the ridge behind, and to the Germans in Longueval and Delville Wood, as well as to scattered parties of the enemy in the fields between. The regiments came under machine-gun and rifle fire, but sustained relatively few casualties. The lead squadron of 7th Dragoon Guards came abreast of the eastern side of High Wood at about 8.00pm. Here a larger concentration of Germans was encountered sheltering in shell holes within a crop of standing corn. The lead squadron, under Lieutenant Pope, charged these troops, who immediately fled. Sixteen Germans were ridden down and 'speared', (the leading squadron of all Indian based regiments being lance armed), while another 32 were made prisoner.¹³⁶ In order to retain contact with the infantry attack the Dragoons then halted and taking advantage of a bank along the side of the road from the southern corner of High Wood to Longueval established a defensive line. This position came under machine gun fire from Longueval at about 9.00pm, and the brigade machine guns were pushed out to the right flank to deal with this. The German guns were silenced, but not before one gun horse had been hit. 2nd Lt. Hartley, commanding one of the sections made an attempt to retrieve the gun, but was killed in the process, while the gun itself was found to be damaged beyond repair. 2nd Lt. Anson, who took over command of the party was also wounded while withdrawing the remainder of the Machine-gun Squadron.¹³⁷

The Deccan Horse advanced on the right of the Dragoons. Meanwhile the true situation in Longueval had become clear as the High Wood attack was being prepared, and new orders were issued to the Deccan Horse at 7.30pm.¹³⁸ According to these, while the regiment was to maintain contact with the Dragoon Guards on the left, their

new objective was to support a renewed attack by 9th Division into Longueval village and Delville Wood. The Deccan Horse were to advance right around the north end of Delville wood as far as the German Third Line towards Flers. This manoeuvre was carried out successfully, and 10 prisoners (of the 16th Bavarian Regt.) were captured. This advance, and its moral effect on the enemy, was described by a participant, Lt. Col. Tennant:

As each squadron cleared the defile it formed line and advanced at a gallop in the direction taken by the advanced guard, which lay through a broad belt of standing corn, in which small parties of the enemy lay concealed. Individual Germans now commenced popping up on all sides, throwing up their arms and shouting “Kamerad” and not a few, evidently under the impression that no quarter would be given, flung their arms around the horses necks and begged for mercy – all of which impeded the advance.¹³⁹

A notable feature of this account is the exaggerated fear that a few mounted men could inspire in the enemy. This is was an additional factor in the tactical effectiveness of cavalry which should not be underestimated, and which was to be significant in the fighting of 1918 discussed in Chapter 5.

Due to enemy fire from Flers and from Delville Wood the regiment could not advance further than about 500m short of the German Third Line trenches, also as no sign of progress into Delville Wood by 9th Division was evident, to attack it unsupported would have been useless. In due course as darkness fell at around 9.30pm the Deccan Horse withdrew and took up a defensive position extending the line already established by 7th Dragoon Guards along the High Wood to Longueval road.¹⁴⁰

Earlier in the evening, 7th Dragoon Guards had come under fire from German troops and machine guns in a sunken road extending from the eastern corner of High Wood. An RFC contact aircraft spotted these troops and by firing on them with tracer identified their position to the cavalry. The observer was also able to make a sketch of the situation and drop it onto ‘N’ Battery. The Secunderabad Brigade narrative records that: “An endeavour was made to communicate with the plane by lamp, to find its identity, but without success.”¹⁴¹ Further light is shed on this incident by the Brigade Signal Squadron *War Diary*, which includes the complaint that the drills and codes for liaison with RFC contact aircraft had only been taught to the signallers attached to the

Divisional headquarters, (back at Billon Farm). The Brigade signallers at Gregory's advanced headquarters in the fields behind the 7th Dragoon Guards thus had no means of communicating intelligently with the aircraft.¹⁴² This episode demonstrates once again the problem of lack of devolution to lower levels of command not only the authority to take command decisions, but also the means of communication in order to do so. The purpose of contact aircraft was surely to provide up-to-date, or even real time reconnaissance information, however if this information was required to travel along a long and unreliable chain of command before it could be acted upon, much of its value would be negated.

In the course of the night the Secunderabad Brigade was relieved, and the position taken over by infantry. The 7th Dragoon Guards and the Deccan Horse began a gradual withdrawal at 3.30am on the 15th, and were able to depart without further loss.¹⁴³ Meanwhile the remainder of the division had also been withdrawn. Ambala Brigade was ordered up to Sabot Copse in the early hours of the 15th to be available to support the renewed infantry attack on High Wood, but as the day wore on the impracticality of any further cavalry action became apparent and the 2nd Indian Division was stood down at 6.15pm on the 15 July.¹⁴⁴

The 'History' of 14 July

It is instructive to compare the course of events contained in this narrative with the way the battle has been described in published accounts. It rapidly becomes clear that preconceptions about the capabilities and vulnerabilities of cavalry have clouded these accounts from the outset. In short, the tactical effectiveness of the cavalry has been ignored. Some of these preconceptions have been touched on earlier, however two in particular stand out. The first of these is the lack of mobility of cavalry in the face of trenches and shell-damaged ground. The *Official History* stated that:

At 7.40am the XIII. Corps had ordered forward the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division from its place of assembly around Morlancourt (4 miles south of Albert). The division moved at 8.20am, but its progress across slippery ground cut up by trenches and pitted with shell holes proved very slow: it was well past noon

when its advanced guard, the Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade (Br.-General C. L. Gregory) with attached troops, arrived in the valley south of Montauban.¹⁴⁵

It is true that the weather had deteriorated since 1 July, a factor which was to halt the advance of the armoured cars, but there is no evidence that it interfered with the planned timetable of cavalry movement. The above account conflates the movement of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division main body, which left Morlancourt at 8.20am but only to march as far as Billon Farm, where it was formed up and halted as ordered by about 9.30am, and the Secunderabad Brigade, which had its Vanguard (7th Dragoon Guards) 'south of Montauban' by 7.00am and was closed up in that location as a complete brigade including supporting artillery, by 9.30am. The *Official History* also observes that "...the brigade did not begin to cross the old British front line until the evening."¹⁴⁶ Assuming this remark refers to the front line of 14 July, not 1 July, this is strictly true, but it fails to point out that this was after the whole day had been spent waiting behind Montauban. Taken in the context of the previous quoted statement it is easy to infer that this late advance was due to difficulties experienced in the cavalry getting forward. It was not.

Sadly once errors of this sort reach print, they tend to be replicated. Anglesey falls into this trap, suggesting:

It was now that the daunting nature of progress by mounted troops across soft and slippery terrain cut up by the elaborate trench system and pitted with innumerable shell-holes made itself painfully clear. It was a long time past midday before the leading squadrons began to show near Montauban.¹⁴⁷

Similarly, Liddle suggests that "...it took the Deccan Horse four hours to move the six-seven miles [from Bray] to Montauban."¹⁴⁸ In fact this move was done in two stages; 3.5km (2 miles) from Bray to Billon Farm, achieved in under an hour (6.15am-7.15am) and 4.5km (3 miles) Billon Farm to Montauban, carried out in 50 minutes (7.40am-8.30am). Unfortunately, this erroneous picture of the cavalry stuck in the mud continues to recur, appearing most recently in Peter Hart's work on the Somme, published in 2005.¹⁴⁹

It should not be inferred from these movement schedules that the cavalry were free to roam over the battlefield unhindered. All of the above writers were correct to state that shell holes, trenches, and particularly wire, were a serious obstacle to cavalry. What is

incorrect is to suggest that somehow the cavalry commanders were surprised by this, and were seriously delayed by it. Liddle also suggests that “During the morning infantry commanders were waiting for the cavalry to arrive, although nothing had been done to speed up their movement for example, by clearing the road.”¹⁵⁰ On the contrary, the cavalry had spent most of the previous fortnight clearing a road, and on the day of the attack infantry battalions were specifically tasked with continuing this work through the German line. After its arrival at Montauban, Secunderabad Brigade also spent much of the day dispersed in working parties. The result of this detailed preparation was a relatively smooth and timely advance. The success of this work on trench crossings carried out by the cavalry itself and by the infantry is indicated by the fact that the squadron of the Fort Garry Horse attached to Secunderabad Brigade specifically to provide trench bridging returned to billets on 15 July with its portable bridges unused.¹⁵¹

Such an advance, however, could only take place along lines predicted and prepared before the battle. The significant difference between the 14 July attack and the failures on the 1 July lay in the fact that with a relatively narrow offensive front, it was easy for the cavalry commanders to predict where the cavalry might be needed, and to construct an access route to that point. On 1 July the construction of a cavalry track to cover every contingency would have been logistically impossible, and as has been shown, the point of breakthrough selected and prepared for by Rawlinson proved to be the wrong one.

The second aspect of the battle which has been frequently misrepresented is the extent to which the cavalry were vulnerable to enemy machine gun fire, and the casualties they suffered in their advance across the open ground towards High Wood. The casualties suffered by the Secunderabad Brigade were not high. A breakdown of these is included in the Brigade *War Diary*.¹⁵² The 7th Dragoon Guards suffered the wounds to Lt. Anson, sustained rescuing the machine-gunners, and two other ranks killed and 20 wounded. Sixteen horses were killed or missing with a further 23 wounded. 20th Deccan Horse suffered a higher loss, mostly probably when bumping up against the German Third Line trenches; two Indian officers were wounded, and three other ranks killed and fifty wounded. Eighteen horses were killed or missing and 52 wounded. The MG Squadron lost Lt. Hartley killed, ten other ranks wounded and lost 12 horses. ‘N’ battery was shelled briefly at around 11.00pm three shells falling on the wagon lines killing two

men and wounding twelve, and killing twelve horses.¹⁵³ Two other men in the brigade were wounded.

When compared with an initial brigade strength of probably in excess of 1500 men, eight killed and slightly fewer than 100 wounded might be considered a trifling loss by Western Front standards. The loss in horses was slightly greater, with roughly 50 killed and 100 wounded. It must be considered, however that in the absence of horse ambulances, a wounded horse is one sufficiently lightly injured to keep up with the regiment on its own feet. Many of these are therefore likely to have recovered and returned to service. Horses wounded more seriously would have been destroyed in the field by regimental farriers, and thus fall under the 'killed' totals. This situation is a long way from the outcome for cavalry in the open on the Western Front, both as predicted at the time and assumed by subsequent historians. Prior and Wilson's remark that "The cavalry were soon dealt with by the German machine-gunners"¹⁵⁴ is clearly wide of the mark, to say the least. Indeed, on the basis of the successful suppression of German fire from Longueval by the cavalry MG sections, it is tempting to suggest that the reverse was true.

It might be argued that the brigade was not very seriously engaged, the enemy soldiers charged by the 7th Dragoon Guards seem to have been mostly occupied in surrendering and running away. The two regiments were, however, deployed under fire and in sight of the enemy for at least two hours, from around 7.00pm until it got dark at around 9.30. They also occupied a position that was not entrenched, at least initially, and had to rely for cover on folds in the rolling ground, and the height of the standing crops.

Yet the idea that cavalry were somehow doomed to fail seems to have become rooted in popular imagination. One eye-witness, Lt. Beadle, an artillery observer with 33rd Division (XV Corps Reserve) allegedly observed the cavalry attack on High Wood:

It was an incredible sight, an unbelievable sight. They galloped up with their lances and with pennants [*sic*] flying, up the slope to High Wood and straight into it. Of course they were falling all the way... I've never seen anything like it! They simply galloped on through all that and horses and men dropping on the ground, with no hope against machine guns, because the Germans up on the ridge were firing down into the valley where the soldiers were. It was an absolute rout, a magnificent sight. Tragic.¹⁵⁵

This account appeared originally in Lyn Macdonald's *Somme*, and was subsequently quoted in a number of published sources where it was accorded the weight due to eye-witness testimony.¹⁵⁶ It should be noted however that Lt. Beadle was listed by Macdonald as a 'Direct contributor' to her work, ie. an interviewee recalling events around 60 years later, and the 'Valley of death' tone of his account is notable, especially when the number of casualties in the overall operation is considered. With all due respect to a veteran of the battle, it would appear that Lt. Beadle was letting his preconceptions and his poetic imagination get in the way of his powers of recollection. A clue to this is the fact that he saw 'pennants flying' when lance pennons had been discontinued for active service since before 1914,¹⁵⁷ and that the horsemen are described riding *into* the woods, a feat which was never attempted. To be charitable the squadrons may have been carrying trench crossing marker and signal flags, but the impression is of a recollection coloured by romantic expectations of what a cavalry charge on the Western Front *ought* to have been like, rather than the reality. Other historians have found the romantic idea of senseless cavalry sacrifice equally hard to resist, A. J. P. Taylor described "...a sight unique on the Western Front; cavalry riding into action through the waving corn with bugles blowing and lances glittering. The glorious vision crumbled into slaughter as the German machine guns opened fire."¹⁵⁸ A powerful image, but not one borne out by the facts.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the descriptions of the fighting that day comes from another supposed eye-witness, Lt. Col. G. Seton Hutchison, who in his memoirs recorded the advance of the Deccan Horse:

I descried a squadron of Indian cavalry, dark faces under glistening helmets, galloping across the valley towards the slope. No troops could have presented a more inspiring sight than these natives of India with lance and sword, tearing in mad cavalcade onto the skyline. A few disappeared over it: they never came back. The remainder became the target of every gun and rifle. Turning the horses heads with shrill cries these masters of horsemanship galloped through a hell of fire, lifting their mounts lightly over yawning shell holes; turning and twisting through the barrage of great shells: the ranks thinned, not a man escaped. Months later the wail of the dying was re-echoed among the Himalayan foothills... "weeping for her children and would not be comforted."¹⁵⁹

The assertion that ‘...not a man escaped’ is a poor description of an engagement where the regiment in question suffered only three fatal casualties.

Other contemporary observers were influenced by their own experience of the fighting, and without seeing the cavalry actually in action, were cynical of their prospects. L/Cpl. Crask (of 8th Bn. Suffolk Regiment) was passed by the cavalry on its way to the front: “Unfortunately they are of no use and suffer very heavy casualties without getting near the Bosche from the fact that their horses cannot pass over the debris and the barbed wire that is lying about.”¹⁶⁰ It is not difficult to appreciate in what terms infantry soldiers would come to view a force that, in their eyes, had spent most of the war thus far in ‘comfort’ behind the lines, waiting for a moment which the infantry no longer believed would arrive. It is however, potentially misleading to place too much emphasis on the clearly rather jaundiced viewpoint of such a primary source. Caught between cynicism within other arms of the B.E.F. itself, and the popular demand for tragic heroism it is easy to see how an exaggerated idea of cavalry casualties could develop, and become embedded in subsequent interpretation of their rôle.

This erroneous view of the vulnerability of men on horseback, appears to have been quite widely held by those on foot, including infantry officers who might otherwise have chosen to ride. At least one cavalryman, however, considered that this was a misapprehension. The Ambala brigade, although never committed to action, spent a large part of 14-15 July in the forward area in support of the Secunderabad Brigade, and the 18th Lancers in particular remained in readiness about Sabot Copse through the 15 July until the division as a whole was stood down that evening. An (anonymous) officer of the 18th considered that:

Infantry officers should have made more use of their horses; the experience of the regiment in these days goes to prove that a man on a horse stands a better chance of getting through a hostile barrage than a man on foot. At the same time one feels extraordinarily naked and vulnerable when mounted and heavy shelling is going on, but that is only when standing still!¹⁶¹

Clearly when shells began to fall the advantages of the ability to move rapidly somewhere else were not lost on at least one participant in the battle.

An Opportunity Missed?

It has been demonstrated that at least part of the cavalry force was available behind Montauban early in the battle on 14 July, and also that when this force was finally released it was able to operate effectively in the battle zone without catastrophic loss. In spite of this there is little doubt that a tactical opportunity for cavalry exploitation was missed that morning, the arm was operationally unsuccessful. Whether this opportunity had wider implications for the offensive as a whole is more difficult to prove one way or the other, although the early capture of High Wood, would undoubtedly have lowered the price paid in casualties for this objective over the weeks that followed. With these points in view it must be asked why the moment was missed, and why the early opportunities were not seized upon.

As so often on the Western Front the answer lies in command and communications, in all arms including the cavalry, and at all levels. At the highest level Rawlinson must bear some responsibility. His decision to retain direct control over two of the three available cavalry divisions excluded them from the battle from the start. The 2nd Indian Division was able to participate in the battle from a relatively early stage, but this was only possible because these troops were on the move towards pre-determined objectives several hours before the infantry attack even started. The idea that cavalry could be moved up from rear areas after the battle had begun, and in response to front line events was clearly unrealistic. As later chapters will show this continued to be a problem throughout the war, Only cavalry already on the move towards pre-determined objectives prior to 'Zero-hour' would ever play a part in the fighting.

At the next level down the corps commanders are also culpable. The decision to place the Indians under the command of XIII Corps was an admirable start, as was the decision to deploy them forward at an early stage. XIII Corps, however, was in no better position to understand the unfolding events on the battlefield than was Fourth Army. There was also a significant breakdown in communications between XIII Corps and XV Corps in the course of the morning. The result was that when the cavalry was held up on the XIII Corps front opposite Longueval, neither they, nor Congreve at XIII Corps was aware of the 'Gap' developing on XV Corps front around the Bazentins. The divisions

on XV Corps front meanwhile, dug in awaiting the imminent arrival of cavalry from XIII Corps. But the time this had been resolved and cavalry made available to XV Corps, at around noon (although the two regiments of Secunderabad Brigade were not formally assigned to XV Corps until around 6.00pm), the commander of XV Corps, Horne, had become so obsessed with the battle for Longueval, *on XIII Corps front*, that he did not sanction an attack towards High Wood until nearly 4.00pm. This in spite of Rawlinson's eagerness for the attack to be pressed on from midday onwards. By the time the assault began in the evening not only had the German Third Line been significantly deepened and reinforced, but the attacking forces simply ran out of daylight.

At divisional and brigade level command seems to have been more effective. The infantry commanders were near enough to the battle to know what was actually going on, and seem to have been prepared to improvise and develop any opportunities that arose. There are also a number of examples of these commanders getting together for *ad-hoc* conferences to develop combined operations between their units. The meetings at Haldane's 3rd Division Advanced Headquarters, and between Gregory and Minshull-Ford at Sabot Copse are examples of this. Unfortunately this initiative seems to have been hamstrung by the necessity to clear all plans through Corps and Army commanders, whose understanding of the battle was out of date, and whose offensive attitude deeply cautious. 'Bite and Hold' with the emphasis on 'Hold' seems to have been the watchword at Corps and above.

Ironically, if two commanders at divisional level stand out from their more flexible peers they are Gregory and MacAndrew. Contrary to Haig's demands that cavalry commanders think ever more flexibly, on 14 July these two seem to have become quite narrow minded and unimaginative, unable literally to think outside the tracks built for them across the battlefield and the terms of their formal operation orders. The move up to Montauban was well executed. At that point orders prescribed a move across the German Second Line immediately to the west of Longueval. When patrols found these crossings to be impracticable, at around 7.00am, there seems to have been little urgency in exploring an alternative, despite the possibilities available further west near Bazentin-le-Grand Wood. Rather, Secunderabad Brigade seems to have been content to wait for the infantry to finish its battle, and then call upon them in accordance with the plan. Patrols did not report back from the western side of the field until mid morning, by

which time the German defences, especially around Bazentin-le-Petit, had hardened significantly. Thus the force that was potentially best placed to take advantage of any fleeting chances to regain the momentum of the offensive, was the least well-led. It has been argued that two years of inactivity had resulted in a tactical stagnation of the cavalry officer corps, and the loss of its best talents to other arms.¹⁶² If so, 14 July stands as an example of that phenomenon.

In defence of these commanders, the difficulties presented by the available means of communication must be taken into account. Although miles of telephone cable were laid before the attack, this was vulnerable to shelling, and laborious to extend beyond the forward positions as units advanced. Curiously, it was also vulnerable to damage from friendly troops. Almost all cavalry movement orders for the battle include a post-script enjoining troops to watch out for and avoid telephone cables, and where they crossed the line of advance, these had to be specially buried by the parties building cavalry tracks.¹⁶³ The telephone system also tended to follow the command hierarchy, with the result that adjacent brigades in the front line might have to pass messages through several higher formations in the rear in order to communicate laterally along the front. This also tended to be necessary because corps headquarters wished to retain tactical command over events on the battlefield. The consequences of this in terms of confusion and delay have already been discussed.

As far as the cavalry were concerned these problems were spelled out by an anonymous, but clearly disgruntled signals officer of the Secunderabad Brigade Signal Squadron in their *War Diary*.¹⁶⁴ During the time the various parts of the brigade were on the move in the morning, communication was maintained up and down the various columns, and with Gregory at Billon Farm, by motor cycle and horse-mounted despatch riders. When the Brigade assembled behind Montauban it was found that although this location had been determined in advance, and lay behind the British front line, no telephone link had been provided for communication by the cavalry between Secunderabad Brigade itself, and its commander still at Billon Farm. Telephone lines existed between 3rd Division Headquarters at Billon and Montauban and beyond, but these all belonged to infantry and artillery formations who were busy with their own signal traffic. The cavalry brigade signallers laid a telephone line to link these two positions, but in so doing used up their entire stock of cable. The consequence of this

was that when the brigade moved off to Sabot Copse, and subsequently out towards High Wood, runners and lamps had to be used to communicate with the end of the telephone line at Montauban. This was to become a significant problem when the 7th Dragoon Guards and the Deccan Horse established their positions to the east of High Wood and night fell. Communications after that time rapidly deteriorated as runners and despatch riders got lost in the dark.

Fourth Army also issued orders for the use of wireless communications between XIII and XV Corps Headquarters and the cavalry divisions,¹⁶⁵ but there is no evidence that significant use was made of this. The headquarters of 1st and 3rd Divisions never advanced, and MacAndrew and 2nd Indian Division headquarters remained with 3rd (Infantry) Division headquarters, which was in direct touch with XIII Corps by land-line. It is arguable that wireless would have been more useful further down the chain of command at brigade level, but the bulk and complexity of the available equipment, and its unreliability, may have made this difficult. One wireless message concerning the movements of the cavalry was broadcast on the 14 July; at around 10:30am an aircraft was used to broadcast the message that “Enemy second line of defence has been captured on a front of 6,000 yards. British cavalry is now passing through in pursuit of the demoralised enemy”. Sadly this did not reflect the real situation on the ground but was rather a (possibly slightly naïve) attempt at signals deception, intended to confuse and alarm German wireless listening stations.¹⁶⁶ Whether any Germans were actually deceived by this is not recorded.

Planning the September Battles

After the the missed opportunities of 14 July, the Somme fighting degenerated once again into a period of smaller scale attacks, and small areas of ground won at great cost. By mid-August, however, Haig started to feel that this ‘wearing-out battle’ was reaching a critical stage, at which a final decisive blow might be possible to end the campaign. In his view a renewed offensive in mid-September offered the possibility of finally breaking entirely through the German prepared defences and into open country beyond. It was this offensive initiative that was to form the basis for the ‘Battle of Flers-

Courcelette' on 15 September, and its follow-up the 'Battle of Morval' on 25-26 of that month. These battles are considered here as the themes of 1 and 14 July, of limited tactical effectiveness, but of a failure of higher command and control are once again apparent.

Haig's vision was spelled out in a G.H.Q. memorandum of 19 August, calling for plans of attack to be prepared by Fourth and Reserve Armies: "with the object of securing the enemy's last line of prepared defences between Morval and Le Sars, with a view to opening the way for the cavalry."¹⁶⁷ The main thrust of this attack was to be the responsibility of Fourth Army, with Gough's Reserve Army in a supporting rôle on the northern flank. Rawlinson responded with a characteristically conservative plan, involving a series of sequential limited 'Bite and Hold' attacks, conducted by night. Haig did not feel that these were decisive enough and spelled out his own more expansive scheme in a further memorandum of 31 August. Once again the attack was to be "planned as a decisive operation."¹⁶⁸ In particular, once the main defensive lines had been broken, "...as strong as possible a force of cavalry, supported by other arms, will be passed through..."¹⁶⁹ with the aim of making a grand strategic sweep through Bapaume and rolling up the German lines to the north, in the fashion first proposed back in June.

To this end the Cavalry Corps, dissolved back in March, was to be re-formed under Lt. Gen. Kavanagh, and all five divisions of cavalry available in France were to be included within it. This was intended as a temporary measure, but in fact the corps was to continue in being, (albeit at reduced strength after 1917,) until the end of the war. This was a larger force of cavalry than was assembled for the 1 July attack, and shows Haig's determination to exploit fully any opportunity that might be created. But while other arms were urged to support the cavalry advance, Haig did not specifically allocate any infantry to the Cavalry Corps as had been attempted in June when he had initially conceived the Reserve Army. He may have felt that in the light of 14 July his 'combined arms' vision was starting to be absorbed anyway and did not need to be specifically reiterated, if so he was to be disappointed.

Rawlinson issued his detailed orders for this attack on 11 September.¹⁷⁰ In these he specified that once the infantry had reached the last line of German defences, (an advance in four timed bounds over a total of around 4000m (2.5 miles)) cavalry would

be pushed through to secure objectives on the high ground beyond the Bapaume–Peronne road. However he once again entirely separated the cavalry from the initial infantry battle. None of the cavalry divisions were to move until the infantry were firmly established on their final objectives:

The Cavalry Divisions will not move forward to where they will mask the guns or interfere with the advance of the infantry supports and reserves, until the infantry have secured a sufficiently strong hold of the villages of Morval, Lesboeufts, and Flers to admit of the Cavalry Divisions advancing to their objectives.¹⁷¹

Indeed on 13 September Rawlinson went even further to restrict the freedom of movement of the cavalry. His ‘Instruction on the event of a general advance’¹⁷² reiterated the necessity of avoiding clogging the rear areas and masking the guns with advancing cavalry. It insisted not only that the cavalry should wait until the infantry were established on the ‘Red Line’ final objectives, but also that they should wait until the artillery had been leap-frogged forward into supporting positions behind the new infantry line. Only after that were the rôles reversed and the infantry tasked to support the further advance of the cavalry “... the rapidity of whose advance at this period of the battle is all important.”¹⁷³ It is hard to see how any rapidity of advance would be achieved by forces queuing up behind the advancing artillery. Indeed it is hard to read in Rawlinson’s orders for the cavalry any sense that he saw them as anything other than a bulky inconvenience and even a liability, his tone is clear in the last paragraph of the ‘Instructions’:

The Cavalry Corps must ensure that the forward areas now in our hands are not blocked with cavalry prematurely... The cavalry advance must be continuous, but it must also be very methodical, any attempt to push too much cavalry through at one time will only lead to confusion and consequent delay.¹⁷⁴

Despite the reservations of the Fourth Army commander, the newly re-formed Cavalry Corps began life in buoyant mood. Archibald Home, newly appointed as Kavanagh’s Chief-of-Staff wrote “I wonder if the old Cavalry will come into its own at last. To be with it if it does will be stupendous.”¹⁷⁵ Nonetheless he cannot have been alone in feeling that the corps was under scrutiny by many of its opponents, both in France and in the government at home, and success was potentially vital to their future.

As the battle progressed on 15 September his tone was less optimistic “It would appear that if the cavalry does not get a chance this time it will be the end of them.”¹⁷⁶ On 10 September Kavanagh himself issued an upbeat assessment of the prospects for the corps. Besides setting out the divisional objectives for the coming attack he urged his subordinates to make the most of the opportunity to show their worth:

Everything points to the probability of the Cavalry having its long wished for chance of proving its value in the near future, but in order to do so it must be used with the greatest boldness, and all risks must be taken and heavy losses occasionally expected, which will be amply repaid by the great results that will almost certainly be obtained.¹⁷⁷

He was, however restrained by the strictures of the Fourth Army Commander concerning his movements, and a memorandum was attached to the formal operation order issued by Cavalry Corps Headquarters on 13 September. This highlighted Kavanagh’s concern not to upset other arms:

The Corps Commander wishes Divisions to be very careful as regards questions of traffic and water. They must remember that they are only guests in the different Corps areas, and a great deal of tact is required to avoid friction.¹⁷⁸

The appearance of words like ‘guests’ and ‘tact’ are curious in the context of a military operational order. The Cavalry Corps thus began the September battles on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand they had been given the opportunity finally to participate in the battle in strength and potentially show their true fighting value, but on the other they were not to be permitted even to advance until Rawlinson’s infantry and artillery battle had been fought and won. Indeed their mere appearance in the rear areas prior to the appointed moment would be seriously frowned upon by Fourth Army. It is difficult to see how any meaningful exploitation of successes by infantry could be obtained under these circumstances.

Flers

(Figure 2.3 overleaf)

‘Zero-hour’ on 15 September was set for 6.20am.¹⁷⁹ The four phases of infantry attack, and the associated artillery barrages were timed to place the infantry on their

final objectives by approximately 11.00am (Zero plus 4.30). The lead Cavalry Divisions were therefore in position ready to advance by 10.00am.¹⁸⁰ However it was not intended that all five divisions should come into action immediately. 1st Cavalry Division and 2nd Indian Division were in place between Mametz and Carnoy, some 6km (3.5 miles) behind the infantry start-line and around 10km (6 miles) from the 'Red Line' objectives at Gueudecourt. On receiving the order to advance these divisions were to move on parallel tracks either side of Delville Wood to objectives beyond the Bapaume-Peronne road, to the south east of Bapaume and around 5km (3 miles) in advance of the infantry objectives. Cavalry Corps Forward Reporting Centre was located a little to their rear at Billon Farm (familiar to the Indians from 14 July). The remaining divisions were strung out in the rear and would only advance sequentially as each of their predecessors cleared the narrow line of advance. 2nd Cavalry Division had two brigades at Bray, 5km (3 miles) behind the lead divisions, with orders to move off at around noon, the remainder of this division and 1st Indian Division were concentrated at Dernancourt, to the south west of Albert. Finally 3rd Cavalry Division was assembled at Bonnay, 12km (7.5 miles) from Albert and nearly 30km (19 miles) from the Infantry objectives at Gueudecourt. It is difficult to see how any decisive exploitation of the infantry's gains could be developed by means of this stately progress of the cavalry from deep behind their own lines, without taking into account the priority given by Rawlinson to artillery movements ahead of the cavalry advance.

When the infantry attack went in these difficulties became academic. In spite of the maiden use of 'Tanks' and the associated public rejoicing at their modest successes, in the laconic words of the Cavalry Corps *War Diary* "the attack did not develop sufficiently for the cavalry to advance."¹⁸¹ Flers, Courcellette, and Martinpuich all fell, but the strongpoint villages behind the German third line, Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt all remained in enemy hands, and "until these three localities could be occupied there could be no question of a breakthrough."¹⁸² The weather also deteriorated on the evening of the 15th and hopes for any cavalry advance faded. On 16 September 1st Cavalry, 3rd Cavalry, and 2nd Indian Divisions were stood down and withdrawn from the battle area.¹⁸³ Later in the month, although still nominally under Cavalry Corps command, two of these divisions would be posted out of Fourth Army area, 1st Cavalry going to Third Army, and 3rd Cavalry to G.H.Q. Reserve.¹⁸⁴ Kavanagh

could not have known, but 15 September 1916 was to be the only operation in the whole war where all five cavalry divisions operated within the Corps under his direct command. Although they remained within the Cavalry Corps, divisions were to be detached to other Armies or fight under direct infantry corps command in later battles such that he never again had direct control of more than three. Home was therefore probably correct to consider the day something of a high-water mark in the aspirations of the arm.

The diminished Cavalry Corps continued to await its chance. Corps advanced H.Q. remained at Billon Farm, and 2nd Cavalry and 1st Indian Divisions remained in readiness at Dernancourt, in support of XIV and XV Corps respectively. During this period of waiting one significant step was taken, from 18 September onwards each division was ordered to provide a daily duty squadron in support of its respective infantry corps. These squadrons were held in the vicinity of Carnoy and were directly on call from the XIV and XV Corps, although any orders would be repeated to the Cavalry Corps for information.¹⁸⁵ A single squadron was not a large force, but this marked a return to the principle of cavalry formations directly controlled by the attacking infantry commanders, as had been the case on 14 July, (or as far back as Loos) and circumvented the lengthy chain of command resulting from the recreation of the Cavalry Corps. It was one of these squadrons that would see action on 26 September.

Morval

Rawlinson renewed the offensive on 25 September. By this time, however the tone was quite different. The infantry objectives remained only those parts of the 15 September objectives not yet obtained, Morval, Lesboeufts, and Gueudecourt, an advance of around 1500 metres (1 mile). 'Bite and Hold' was once again the guiding principle. The influence of this on the Cavalry Corps is apparent from the Corps orders issued on 20 September.¹⁸⁶ Of the three divisions available to Kavanagh, only one, 1st Indian, was given formal orders to participate in the attack. 2nd Cavalry and 2nd Indian Divisions would remain in their billets at Dernancourt at two hours' notice to move. Only two brigades of 1st Indian Division were moved up behind the attack, the Mhow

and Sialkhot brigades taking up positions around Mametz and as far forward as Montauban (around 5km (3 miles) from the infantry start-line). Their objectives were stated as Ligny-Thillois and La Barque, a modest 3km (2 miles) beyond the infantry final objectives. Also whereas on 15 September Corps orders had urged the cavalry on to attack German headquarters and rail termini as far away as Marcoing, 25km (16 miles) beyond the enemy front,¹⁸⁷ the new orders contained the following pessimistic prediction:

In the event of the Cavalry advance contemplated above being possible, two situations may arise:-

(a). The advanced cavalry troops may successfully seize part or all of the above villages.

(b). These villages may be strongly held and the Cavalry forced to retire.¹⁸⁸

Clearly the new-found optimism of early September had been short lived. There was also an additional factor constraining the ambitions of the cavalry. In order to conform with an attack by the French to the south-east at Comblès, Zero-hour was set for 12.35pm.¹⁸⁹ This meant that in contrast to the dawn start on 15 September, the infantry were unlikely to be on their final objectives before 3.00pm at the earliest, leaving little of the autumn daylight for the cavalry. Corps orders acknowledged this stating that if the lead brigades could not pass the final 'Blue line' by 6.30pm at the latest, no large scale move should be attempted.¹⁹⁰

The 'Battle of Morval' as it became known, followed a now familiar pattern. Initial reports were good and the Mhow Brigade, lead brigade of 1st Indian Division, sent squadrons of the 6th Dragoons (Inniskillings), and 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse), as far as the 110th Infantry Brigade headquarters at Flers.¹⁹¹ However a situation now developed which was to bear striking similarities to the delays and failures of 14 July. The right of the British attack was a complete success. 5th, 6th and Guards Divisions of XIV Corps captured the villages of Morval and Lesboeufs on schedule. Word of this success reached the Corps commander Lord Cavan in the course of the afternoon, but due to uncertainty concerning the progress of both XV Corps on his left, and the French on his right, he chose to take no further action to exploit this, choosing instead simply to consolidate the positions gained.¹⁹² In fairness to Cavan, no cavalry had been allocated to this portion of the attack (apart from the daily corps duty squadron, and his integral

corps cavalry regiment). The line of advance prescribed for 1st Indian Division was through Gueudecourt in XV Corps area, and this part of the attack was held up. Thus no mounted exploitation of the successes of XIV Corps took place.

XV Corps meanwhile had made good initial progress into the German Third Line position in front of Gueudecourt, but parties of Germans remained in the 'Gird' trench line and no advance to the village itself was possible. At 4.00pm 1st Indian Division "received definite orders not to advance until the whole village was in our hands."¹⁹³ And by 7.00pm:

Owing to the fact that the whole of Gueudecourt was not captured, and that a party of Germans still held out in Gird Trench, which was in the direct route of the proposed cavalry advance, it was not possible to get the cavalry through... and the 1st Indian cavalry division was ordered back to billets near Dernancourt.¹⁹⁴

This was easier said than done in the dark, on the congested routes behind the attack front and it was not until past midnight that the division reached Dernancourt.¹⁹⁵ Once again a battle plan that restricted all the cavalry to a single line of advance had prevented flexible exploitation of the day's successes on XIV Corps front, while the cavalry waited behind the day's failures on that of XV Corps.

The attack was renewed on 26 September, but only with the aim of capturing the final objectives of the previous day, and no large-scale cavalry involvement was proposed.¹⁹⁶ Starting at about 6.30am, the 110th Brigade, assisted by a single tank began clearing the final pockets of German resistance out of Gird Trench in front of Gueudecourt. This was completed by around 11.00am. At this point the situation became uncertain, Gueudecourt village lay about 500m (550 yards) beyond Gird and Gird Support trenches, and no enemy could be seen, but it was not known whether the Germans continued to hold the village. Lt. Gen. Horne, commanding XV Corps now took an unusually imaginative step and called up all the cavalry available to him to advance into the gap and explore the situation, with the aim of securing the village and taking up defensive positions on the ridge to the north-east.¹⁹⁷ Unfortunately, the only cavalry remaining in the battle area were the daily duty squadron allocated to his corps from 1st Indian Division; 'D' Squadron, 19th Lancers (Fane's Horse), under Capt. Fitzgerald, and

a single troop of the Corps Cavalry Regiment, the South Irish Horse, a force amounting to no more than about 100 men.

Fitzgerald's personal account of subsequent events is contained in his official report to the Cavalry Corps.¹⁹⁸ Leaving Mametz at 11.55am, the squadron advanced, east of Flers and across the open ground towards Gueudecourt. They crossed the two Gird trenches "without any difficulty" and moved on at a trot "in line of troop columns in half sections" (ie four parallel columns each two men abreast), reaching the sunken road at the south-western corner of the village by 2.15pm. The squadron was "heavily shelled" and fired on by at least one machine-gun during this advance but suffered only a single casualty. Basing himself in the cover of the sunken road at the entrance to the village, Fitzgerald then sent mounted patrols of his own squadron around the north side of the village, and of the South Irish Horse around the southern side. The latter made little progress due to machine-gun fire from the east, and returned. The northern patrol got as far as a sunken road running east to west into the northern corner of the village. This was occupied by battalions of the King's Liverpool Regt. of the neighbouring 165th Brigade who had advanced to this point on the previous day. Heavy shelling prevented any further advance, and the patrol returned to the south-west of the village. Fitzgerald then dismounted the remainder of the force and advanced into the village on foot, taking up a line in extension of that of the 165th Brigade, through the centre of the village and facing roughly north-east. Using the squadron's four Hotchkiss Machine-guns, and rifle fire he was able to repel a series of probes by German forces from the north-east, aiming at retaking the village, and held on until around 6.00pm when infantry of 110th Brigade took over his positions.

'D' Squadron suffered total human casualties of three killed and seven wounded, a surprisingly modest loss. Unfortunately the German artillery was able to locate the horse lines in the sunken road to the south-west of the village, and shelling killed 35 horses and wounded a further 24, equivalent to more than half the equine strength of the force. Fitzgerald felt in hindsight that the horses might have been safer dispersed in the open, rather than concentrated out of sight but vulnerable to shelling.¹⁹⁹

Although a small-scale affair overall, Kavanagh expressed himself "thoroughly satisfied" with this operation, Fitzgerald was called to report to the Corps Commander in person and subsequently received the Military Cross.²⁰⁰ In many respects Kavanagh

was entitled to be satisfied. Once again mounted forces had demonstrated the characteristics first apparent at High Wood. Cavalry had been able to move relatively speedily up to the front line (Fitzgerald managed the 12km (7.5 miles) from Mametz to Gueudecourt in a little over two hours), cross the front line trenches without difficulty, and advance in the face of shelling and machine-gun fire without sustaining significant casualties. Furthermore the force had been able to improvise a defensive position on its objective, and using integral machine-guns repel enemy counter-attacks until relieved by supporting infantry. Unfortunately, while the horses provided the key to reducing losses by speed of movement, as soon as the force halted they became a vulnerable impediment, and suffered accordingly.

The Gueudecourt action can be viewed as an exemplar of a key rôle cavalry could have adopted on the Western Front, and towards which it moved gradually, particularly in 1918. Small forces, at the disposal of front line commanders, used to seize advanced positions and exploit small tactical advantages. This point was evident to some as early as 14 July, the anonymous officer of the 18th Lancers quoted earlier also wrote:

It is an interesting speculation whether it would not have been sounder at this stage of the war to have split up say, one, of the five cavalry Divisions in being, and to have increased the numbers of Corps and Divisional cavalry.²⁰¹

It is unlikely, however that Kavanagh would have seen it that way, he would more probably have taken the success of 26 September as vindication of the larger *strategic* rôle of cavalry as a force of wider exploitation, a concept which the offensives of 1916 had so far shown to be beyond reach.

Assessment

The involvement of the cavalry in the Somme campaign can be judged against the three key themes set out at the opening of this study.

Firstly, a close examination of the two occasions when cavalry became involved in fighting during the Somme battles has served largely to vindicate them at a tactical level. Their combination of mobility and firepower made them tactically effective.

Much of the criticism levelled at the arm, both at the time and since, is seen to be unfounded.

Secondly, however, at a higher operational and strategic level, it is difficult to detect any clear understanding by their commanders of their capabilities, or indeed their shortcomings. This led to a failure to achieve the wider operational objectives allocated to the arm.

Nor, thirdly, at this stage of the war was any particular process of evolution or development apparent in the thinking of the senior commanders, although as will be demonstrated in later chapters, it is arguable that this did develop later in the war.

When the four offensive operations considered in this chapter are viewed together, a series of observations may be made. Haig appears remarkably single minded in his thinking. He laid out his objectives for the campaign in June, and in his G.H.Q. Instructions as late as September he was able simply to refer his subordinates to these earlier orders.²⁰² The same villages recur as cavalry objectives; Ligny-Thillois, Achiet le Grand, and Bapaume itself, the main strategic prize of the offensive (although its value was largely psychological rather than strategic). The main change was that as the Fourth Army painfully advanced these objectives became closer to the attacking front. The holding positions in which the cavalry divisions awaited the orders to advance also become familiar – the villages in the valley of the Ancre to the south-west of Albert; Dernancourt, Morlancourt, Buire, and Bonnaville. Haig seems throughout to have been wedded to the concept of a breakthrough and cavalry exploitation. He was constantly anticipating a decisive collapse of the German defences. This was a keynote of his attitude throughout the remainder of the war, despite the fact that even up to November 1918 arguably it never took place.

A distinction may be drawn however, between the two occasions when the Commander-in-Chief was able to insist on his vision of a decisive stroke; 1 July and 15 September, and the two more limited attacks of 14 July and 25 September. On 1 July, the contrast between Haig's strategic breakthrough vision, and Rawlinson's own plans for a 'Bite and Hold' attack have already been discussed. In addition it has been shown that Rawlinson expected to win each battle with infantry and artillery before allowing the cavalry to participate. Thus where he was asked by Haig to plan a deep thrust into the enemy position he did so by setting ever deeper objectives for the infantry, and

thereby delaying ever further the involvement of the cavalry, rather than following Haig's vision of early cavalry action. An example of this can be seen in Rawlinson's plans for III and X Corps on 1 July. In the event that they achieved their initial objective of Pozières, (an advance of around 4km (2.5 miles)) this would not be followed by cavalry exploitation, but by a further infantry push as far as Courcellette and Martinpuich (another 4km (2.5 miles)). Equally in the plans for 15 September, when the 'Red Line' was reached, the cavalry had to wait until the artillery had advanced and the infantry attack began again before they were allowed to move.

By contrast, where Rawlinson set more limited objectives, and the whole scale of the battle was smaller, such as at Bazentin Ridge or Morval, an opportunity arose not only for the cavalry to begin the battle closer to the infantry start-line, but also for the possibility of their becoming involved in the battle at an earlier stage. It is not clear at this stage of the war whether this was a deliberate policy on Rawlinson's part, he still planned these offensives as essentially two-stage, infantry, then cavalry affairs. It will be shown in later chapters that as his conception of the 'Bite and Hold' battle developed, particularly in 1918, the integration of cavalry into the early stages became more pronounced, however there was only shadowy evidence of this in 1916.

A second recurring feature of these attacks was the narrowness and rigidity of the cavalry line of advance. Again this has been examined in relation to 1 July, but the same difficulty arose on the 14th, where it has been shown that 2nd Indian Division became stalled behind the failing attack on Longueval on the British right while opportunities for exploitation withered on the left of the attack. The same phenomenon is discernible on 25 September; the cavalry waited for Gueudecourt and Gird Trench to be captured on the left, while Cavan's XIV Corps on the right was content to consolidate on captured trenches while the ground ahead was essentially clear of Germans. Clearly large scale strategic diversions of the cavalry as some have advocated in relation to 1 July were not viable, but the case for more flexibility on a smaller scale at Bazentin Ridge or Morval/Gueudecourt is harder to refute.

The difficulties of cavalry movement behind the lines, and the need for cleared tracks has been examined, but it has also been shown that the cavalry were not nearly as constrained in their movements as has often been suggested. Their lack of flexibility has thus to be accounted for elsewhere, and it would seem likely that these constraints must

have been mental rather than physical. These may have been imposed from above by Rawlinson's repeated strictures concerning the risk of clogging the rear areas, which seem to have severely curbed any aggressive spirit that Kavanagh and the Cavalry corps might otherwise have possessed. They may also have been self-imposed by a lack of tactical imagination on the part of more junior cavalry commanders. Most critically, however, any tactical imagination which might have been shown at lower levels was stifled by a system of command that required decisions to be referred up a slow and unreliable chain of command before they could be acted upon. Thus any possibility of rapid or spontaneous action was denied to local commanders.

Finally, apart from Haig himself, who was inevitably too divorced from the direct control of battles to greatly influence their progress, it must be asked whether any commanders fully grasped their Commander-in-Chief's ideas of combined arms doctrine, that is the insertion of smaller mounted forces into the infantry/artillery battle at a stage prior to a complete 'breakthrough', and sought to apply them on the field of battle. Only one commander shows any evidence of such an understanding; Lt Gen. Horne, commander of XV Corps. It is surely more than coincidence that the only two occasions when mounted troops were committed to battle during the Somme campaign were on his Corps front. Significantly in neither case were the cavalry committed to battle in precisely the manner predicted in their orders. The evening attack on High Wood by 7th Division and the Secunderabad Brigade was broadly in line with earlier stated objectives, but was at least in part developed *ad-hoc*, in the course of the fighting. Equally on 26 September, after the capture of Gird Trench an opportunity opened-up for mounted troops, not perhaps to ride for a gap in the traditional sense, but certainly to explore and possibly exploit a fluid and uncertain situation. Again despite the fact that this was not specifically provided for in the battle plan, Horne was to be seen reaching out for cavalry. Unfortunately on this occasion the cavalry divisions available a day earlier had been stood down and he had to settle for a scratch force of a little over a squadron.

Horne went on to command First Army in 1917. He was also well acquainted with Haig, having been his C.R.A. (Commander Royal Artillery) when Haig commanded I Corps at the beginning of the war.²⁰³ He was not a 'Cavalry general' (a term whose validity has already been challenged elsewhere in this study), having served his earlier

career in the Royal Horse Artillery.²⁰⁴ However, were his branch of service to be considered relevant to his grasp of combined-arms fighting, it would perhaps be more significant to note that, unlike his commander at Fourth Army Headquarters, he was *not* an infantryman.

References – Chapter 2

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CHAPTER 3

THE HINDENBURG LINE AND ARRAS, NOVEMBER 1916–APRIL 1917

It seems rather a pity to lose all these chaps who were perfect cavalymen for the sake of a village which is a complete shell-trap for the British side.

Julian Byng May 1917¹

Introduction

This chapter examines the British cavalry, (both the re-formed Cavalry Corps, and the regiments of corps cavalry serving with the infantry,) from the close of the Somme fighting in November 1916, through their rôle in the advance to the Hindenburg Line, up to and including the Arras offensive of Easter 1917. It will be apparent that during this period the arm suffered a number of hardships and difficulties, resulting from a poor supply situation, and an unusually hard winter, but that in spite of these it continued to evolve, and played a larger part in events than that for which it has hitherto been given credit.

The part played by the cavalry in the German retreat to the Hindenburg line, examined in the first half of the chapter, is of particular interest in that not only did the cavalry continue to show the local tactical effectiveness it had shown in 1916, but that this was achieved largely through the use of established pre-war tactical principles. Moreover during this period the Corps was set realistic and achievable operational objectives by its senior commanders, which it was able to fulfil entirely successfully. Sadly this achievement has been obscured in much of the literature by historians seeking to set much wider objectives for the cavalry, and in turn point out that these were not reached, in spite of the fact that no such objectives were defined at the time. The fighting during this period also demonstrated the potential of co-operation between horsemen and armoured cars, prefiguring their more controversial relationship with tanks later in 1917.

The Arras offensive, and the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux on 11 April, will also be examined in detail. By contrast with the operations in March this attack was to be

influenced by many of the command failures which had previously been evident in 1916, only small improvements are discernible in the operational handling of the cavalry. Again, however, when brought into combat, albeit in accidental and unfavourable circumstances at Monchy-le-Preux, the cavalry was to prove itself tactically effective, in particular by the use of the machine-gun.

Views of 1917

The usefulness of cavalry in the spring of 1917 has typically been characterised in much the same vein as their efforts the year before. Terraine commented of Arras “The astonishing spectacle was seen of cavalry trying to charge in crater fields; the result, as one might suppose, was high mounds of dead horses, much wasted gallantry, and no progress worth mentioning.”² Nor is this a recent phenomenon. The propagation of this view can be detected as early as 1920 when J.F.C. Fuller (never a friend to cavalry) observed “...in 1917 Cavalry, though used in the battles of Arras and Cambrai accomplished practically nothing save on foot.”³ Even Richard Holmes, who generally offers a more positive view of the mounted arm, describes how at Arras “...cavalry loyally trotted off to calamity in the crater fields around Monchy-le-Preux: some sang the Eton Boating Song as they disappeared into a blizzard.”⁴ The latter part of this remark, although true, tends to create the familiar image of cavalry as socially elite, but out of touch with reality, gallantly riding to their inevitable doom. (It also neglects the fact that the regiment referred to was the Royal Horse Guards (Blues), which might be expected to include more Old Etonians than most, and the ironic humour of the B.E.F. which would inevitably prompt soldiers to sing of ‘jolly boating weather’ in the middle of a snowstorm.) As will be shown, none of these comments does justice to the part played by the cavalry in these battles.

A more specific charge levelled at the cavalry is that the static warfare of the preceding years had dulled their senses and led to a tactical staleness which left them unable to exploit fully the opportunities created in 1917, in particular the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line. Terraine observed “... cavalry and infantry alike, after years of trench warfare, had lost the habit and art of movement. Broad horizons and empty

country bewildered and frightened them; long dependence on massive artillery support created another inhibition, and further delays occurred as the guns struggled forward along the mined and miry roads.’⁵ Again this will be shown to be a significant misrepresentation of the success of the cavalry in these operations.

Another factor seriously restricting the effectiveness of the cavalry in the spring of 1917 has been suggested, although more in mitigation for their poor performance than as a criticism. This was that a combination of lack of supplies and reinforcements, and one of the worst winters of the century, left the arm weak in manpower, and sickly in horsepower, and thus unable to live up to the rôle proposed for it. As Anglesey put it “... the B.E.F.’s mounted arm entered the year of *L’Affaire Nivelle*, and the battles of Arras and Cambrai noticeably weak.’⁶ This difficulty will be examined first.

The Winter – Training, Reinforcements, and Fodder

As the autumn of 1916 progressed the weather became progressively worse, and it became evident that no opportunity for mounted work by the cavalry would arise until the following year.⁷ In mid-November the five divisions of the re-formed Cavalry Corps were withdrawn to winter billets on the Channel coast. These billets stretched from Boulogne in the north, 80km (50 miles) south as far as Le Treport at the mouth of the River Bresle. 1st, 3rd, and 2nd Cavalry Divisions respectively were allocated areas from Boulogne as far south as the mouth of the River Somme, north-west of Abbeville, while the two Indian divisions were billeted south of the Somme.⁸ The wide dispersal of the Corps was intended both to provide space for training and to reduce the load on the various billeting areas. Positions near the coast were also intended to ease the logistical difficulties of forage supply,⁹ although problems with this were to arise nonetheless, as will be examined below.

Brig. Gen. Home, B.G.G.S. (Brigadier General, General Staff) of the Cavalry Corps was concerned at the end of the Somme battles that the cavalry had lost their edge: “Our cavalry has got slow, it wants speeding up. They want ginger and to forget that such things as trenches exist.”¹⁰ While his own preference was for front line action, even in

the infantry, he recognised that training was vital over the winter if the cavalry were to make an impression when the weather improved:

It is very dull back here with the Cavalry. We have got all our Divisions back now and they are busy settling into their winter quarters – then we shall be able to commence some training. A great deal will be required from the Cavalry next Spring and I hope that they all realise it.¹¹

The nature of what would be required of the Corps, at least in the minds of its commanders and of G.H.Q. had been spelled out as early as September 1916, in a document signed by Home, entitled *Winter Training*.¹² This stated that a ‘clear task for the cavalry’ had been laid down by the Commander-in-Chief (Haig). And that unlike the previous winter where much training was devoted to the conversion of mounted troops to trench fighting on foot (described in the previous chapter), the reverse was now true. The ‘mission-statement’ (in modern parlance) embodied in this document merits quotation at length:

Up to the present the Cavalry in France has played a dual rôle – trained as Cavalry but at the same time has had the shadow of trench warfare continually hanging over its head. The result has been that attempts were made to have the Cavalry equally good for both these rôles, and trench warfare being the nearest, a great deal of time and labour was devoted to fitting Cavalry to take its place in the trenches, and fighting equally well as infantry.

There is no doubt that this training has left its mark on the Cavalry. The horizon has been narrowed, movement and suitable ground for training have been non-existent, men have been away from their horses for long periods, and the characteristics of Cavalry, laid down in Cavalry Training 1916, namely “the power to move with rapidity, to fight when moving, to seize fleeting opportunities, and to cover long distances in a short time” have been sometimes forgotten.

The task laid down by the Commander-in-Chief for the Cavalry embodies all the characteristics quoted above, and all training must work towards this end.¹³

In short, mobile warfare remained the vision towards which training should be focused. In the Commander in Chief’s (ie. Haig’s) mind the breakthrough remained a dominant motif, despite the disappointments of 1916. The document acknowledged that service in

the trenches was likely, but discouraged undue time spent on preparation for this, the implication being that time in the line was inherently a suitable education. It was in this spirit that the cavalry divisions began their winter training programmes.

In spite of the dogged ambitions of their overall commander, however, a subtle but significant change had taken place in the emphasis of this training, and the type of operations for which the Corps was preparing. This was described by Maj. Darling, serving with the 20th Hussars (5th Cavalry Brigade):

It was known that a great Allied offensive was to take place in the spring, so we had once more to prepare to go through the “gap”. Officially the expression “gap” had long since been dropped as it had become almost a term of derision. We had been told to speak of “operations beyond the trench system,” or some such phrase. However “gap” was shorter and the term continued to be used to describe the cavalry’s share in the offensive.¹⁴

Training was carried out in co-operation with infantry, the cavalry practising the capture of relatively nearby objectives, which were then consolidated and handed over to supporting troops. Darling continued:

We were not to pursue blindly whooping and yelling through the night, as the Prussian cavalry are said to have done after Waterloo. Nor were we to make raids on distant aerodromes, railway junctions and headquarters, as we were to have done on the Somme in 1916. Every detail was cut and dried, but I do not remember that anyone was told off to bring back the Kaiser’s head on a charger. On the whole, it was a modest programme compared to former ones.¹⁵

It is possible to discern in these remarks a transition in cavalry thinking away from an optimistic, but ultimately unrealistic ambition of a distant breakthrough rôle, as had been postulated in 1916, towards more limited local tactical objectives. It is this transition which forms one of the key themes of this study, and it is important to note the appearance in embryonic form in the winter of 1916-17, of concepts which were to become key in 1918. At this stage, however, while it is important to acknowledge that this change in thinking was taking place, it was not yet fully understood or reflected in the organisation, command and tactical handling of the cavalry. Nor were combined-arms operations in co-operation with infantry, and in particular artillery well enough developed. The situation was further complicated by the changes in the defensive battle

the Germans were to fight in 1917. The Arras offensive, as will be explored later in this chapter, demonstrated the gap between the development of these new tactical ideas on paper and in training, and their practical application on the battlefield.

Winter Training also contained more detailed training objectives, and several of these are noteworthy. The first of these was communications: “The question of communications requires a great deal of attention. Trench warfare has wedded us to the telephone, and when moving the telephone will hardly be used.”¹⁶ Training of despatch riders, both horse and motor-cycle mounted was urged. Secondly co-operation with armoured cars was to be practised: “The Corps Commander is of the opinion that these cars should be used with troops both in reconnaissance and attack and that they seldom – if ever – be employed on distant expeditions by themselves.”¹⁷ (The latter part of this instruction may reflect Home’s own scepticism. In January 1917 he recorded: “[I] Went down to inspect the 5th Cav. Div armoured cars today. They want some brushing-up, I think.”¹⁸) The failure of combined cavalry/armour operations on the Somme has already been examined, but such operations were also to be a feature of the fighting of spring 1917, with varying degrees of success.

Several organisational changes were also carried out over the winter. The first of these was simply of nomenclature, 1st and 2nd Indian Divisions becoming respectively 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions.¹⁹ This acknowledged their presence within a unified Cavalry Corps, but also reflected the fact that in the 5th Division in particular, Indians were in a minority; the division contained four Indian regiments, two British, and three (a brigade) of Canadians. Secondly in the spring sufficient specially trained reinforcements were received to start posting men directly to the Cavalry Machine Gun Squadrons, allowing some cavalymen to return to their parent units. The Indian brigades’ squadrons in particular were entirely re-manned with British troops sent as formed units from the M.G.C.(C) training centre at Maresfield in Sussex, both British and Indian officers and Indian other ranks being returned to their regiments.²⁰

These reinforcements, however, should be considered the exception rather than the rule. More generally an ongoing man-power crisis was developing in the B.E.F.²¹ Trained British reinforcements were at a premium and Robertson (C.I.G.S.) started to send trained men from the cavalry reserve to the Infantry and Engineers in France, blocking reinforcement of the Cavalry.²² This left many regiments below strength.

Indeed the reinforcement of the M.G.C.(C) may be seen in this light as a ploy to circumvent this block and free more cavalymen to return to the ranks of the regiments.

This general shortage of men was not the only obstacle to Home and Kavanagh's vision of winter training. From October 1916, each cavalry brigade was required to furnish a pioneer battalion for dismounted service.²³ Theoretically only two of these battalions would be formed within each division at any one time, leaving one brigade free for mounted training, and they were to be disbanded at the end of January. In fact most of the pioneer battalions continued work until March, at which point although nominally disbanded, working parties were required to start on construction of cavalry tracks for the Arras battle.²⁴ Add to this the fact that the remaining men in each brigade were obliged to tend the horses of their dismounted colleagues, and the impact on training as formed units must have been significant. Further, virtually all of the machine-gun squadrons were required to spend periods in the front line,²⁵ and the corps R.H.A. batteries were all removed over the winter and sent to support infantry formations, not returning until mid March.²⁶ Thus despite the pious hopes of *Winter Training*, the "...shadow of trench warfare" continued to loom darkly over any preparations for a mobile battle that the cavalry might attempt.

Already short of men, and burdened by this range of extra responsibilities, the Cavalry was further hindered by a lack of forage. Towards the end of the Somme fighting concern was starting to be expressed about the condition of the horses. This can be followed in the *War Diary* of the Deputy Director Veterinary Services (D.D.V.S) of the Cavalry Corps, Col. Harris. Early in October he inspected the 18th Hussars and 9th Lancers (2nd Cav. Brig.), commenting "There were a large number of thin horses in both these units."²⁷ Similarly a few weeks later he saw the Hampshire (Carbineers) Yeomanry: "There was a large percentage of thin horses, I recommended grazing and ordered some special tonic balls."²⁸ By November shipping problems exacerbated the problem and hard feed, particularly oats started to become scarce. Harris visited the 5th Army Artillery School at the end of November, and commented that the horses were getting only 6lb of oats rather than the official ration of 12lb, and as a result were "...looking very poor."²⁹ Similarly, hay was running short, 1st Cavalry Division halved the ration to 6lb in November, and the 15th Hussars reported difficulty in finding even this much, feeding only 5lb per day.³⁰ It was not until 13 April, two days after the

Monchy battle that the full ration of 12lb of oats and 12lb of hay was restored. Harris commented rather ruefully “It is a pity this was not done when they were in the back area during the spell of very cold weather. There would have been fewer debilitated animals and, as we have seen by experience, fewer casualties.”³¹

The latter remark also alludes to the other great problem suffered by the cavalry, and indeed all combatants in France, the very cold winter of 1916-17. Frost and snow continued from November through until April. The combination of cold weather and short rations had a severe impact on the condition of the horses, and was to be a significant factor in losses during the Arras battle in April. A measure of the severity of the conditions is shown in the use of petrol to wash cuts and wounds to horses’ legs, as water simply froze over the wound.³² Opinion was divided in the cavalry over the best response to the cold. Some units worked their horses hard in an effort to acclimatise them, suffering in the process a higher casualty rate, other units kept their mounts as far as possible under shelter. The latter policy produced fatter horses for brigade inspections but proved to be the downfall of several regiments as these animals were unprepared for the shock of work and weather when the attacks began in the spring. Either way, as Darling observed, “I can only repeat that when we finally left for the battle, we were far from satisfied with the condition of the horses.”³³

On top of all this, sarcoptic mange, widespread among the French civilian horse population, broke out within the Cavalry Corps in January 1917.³⁴ While not necessarily fatal, this disease created the need to constantly re-billet troops out of villages where the cases occurred, and the temporary quarantining of large numbers of horses. This led to congestion of the veterinary hospitals, already coping with the large volume of ‘Debilitated’ horses resulting from the forage shortage.³⁵ A number of equine casualties were also suffered due to the necessity of clipping the winter coats of mange cases, which subsequently left them vulnerable to the extreme wintry weather.³⁶

In the light of all these difficulties it is hard to see how very much useful preparation for the up-coming campaign could have been achieved over the winter within the Cavalry Corps. Hunger, the weather, and the constant demand for labour to support the troops in the front line would all have taken their toll, and it is unlikely that overall the corps was in any better shape to fight than it had been at the close of the Somme battles. No doubt the cavalry remained keen to take their long-awaited opportunity to prove

themselves, and some have interpreted this as reflecting the preparedness of the corps as a whole for the fight ahead. Preston describing Arras and Monchy in the *Cavalry Journal* asserted that “The cavalry regiments had had no serious casualties since the Second Battle of Ypres; [in 1915] their standard of training had reached a high level; if the day of the ‘Gap’ was indeed at hand, all ranks were ready for it.”³⁷ However will-power alone would not be sufficient. As will be seen although the cavalry showed themselves keen and courageous in the battles of March and April, the cost among tired, overloaded horses in atrocious weather was tragically high.

The Hindenburg Line: March 1917

As early as September 1916, while the Somme battle was still in progress the Germans began preparations for a new defensive position in the rear behind the battlefield. A network of reserve positions was mapped out stretching along the whole of the German line from the Belgian coast to the Moselle. Construction of the first of these ‘Siegfried’ running from Arras to south of Laon, was begun on 27 September. This position, and its northern neighbour, the ‘Wotan’ position were to become more commonly known both by the British and Germans, as the Hindenburg Line. While originally intended as a position of last resort, a decision was taken by the German high command in February 1917 in the light of the territorial and manpower losses of the Somme battles, to make an organised and voluntary withdrawal to the Siegfried position.

The full detail of this new defensive system, and the thinking behind it was examined by G.C. Wynne in his 1940 work *If Germany Attacks*.³⁸ Key to understanding this new defensive method was the idea that ground may, temporarily at least, be traded for tactical advantage. Rather than seeking to halt an allied attack against a heavily defended front line, the German plan allowed attacking troops to be absorbed within a much deeper defensive network. Once inside, the attackers would be caught in previously devised killing zones, between individual strong-points, before ultimately the *status quo* was restored by specially trained counter-attack units. This had the incidental effect of creating a battlefield which was much deeper than previously (up to 10km (6

miles) rather than 2km (1.5 miles)), but at the same time less densely defended. Also the effects of artillery would inevitably be dispersed across a wider area. Thus while the British cavalry were narrowing their horizons to look for a more limited and integrated tactical rôle on the battlefield, the Germans were simultaneously creating a defensive system which allowed the horsemen greater local offensive opportunities. It is the development of this new 'deep' battlefield, and the evolution of British offensive tactics to deal with it, both in the cavalry and in other arms, during 1917 and 1918 which forms one of the themes of this study.

Operation 'Alberich'; a staged withdrawal to the new position via a series of intermediate defensive positions began on 14 March 1917. This was combined with a 'scorched earth' policy in the areas abandoned, including the mining of roads, demolition of villages, and destruction of anything perceived to be of use to the advancing allies. The withdrawal may be compared to the swinging of a door, with its hinge at Arras in the north, and its southernmost point, as far as the British were concerned, 50km (30 miles) to the south beyond Peronne, the depth of the withdrawal at this southern end being around 20km (12 miles) eastwards towards St Quentin. Opposite the northern end of this movement was General Gough's Fifth Army, faced with only a short distance to follow up, but under pressure to close up with the Germans in time to support an attack at Arras at the beginning of April. To the south was Fourth Army under General Rawlinson. His force was under less pressure of time but was both more thinly spread along its frontage, and had further to go to reach the new German position.³⁹

Within a few years of the war's end criticism was developing of the failure of the Fourth and Fifth Armies to make more of the German retreat to the Hindenburg Position in March 1917. The adverse comment of J.F.C Fuller for example, has been alluded to earlier in this chapter. This was refuted by Cyril Falls in the Official History, where he was at pains to explain that the organized nature of the German withdrawal, the devastation left in their wake, and the strength of the defensive position to which they were known to be falling back "...acted as a brake" upon the advance of the British forces. Further "...it was plainly useless to attack that position until the bulk of the artillery was within range and well supplied with ammunition."⁴⁰ Nonetheless some writers have continued to propose the somewhat circular argument that on the one hand

the British High Command launched an all-out 'pursuit' of the Germans, but that at the same time such an operation was doomed to failure. Terraine argued: "'Pursuit' by the allied armies, no matter how vehemently ordered by their higher commanders, was hardly more than a pious hope." He went on to add "The Cavalry, the only weapon of exploitation that they possessed, was seen to be almost completely ineffective in these circumstances." and that "...the arm was not well handled."⁴¹

A closer examination of events shows that on the contrary, rather than a reckless, but ineffective pursuit, Fourth and Fifth Armies conducted a methodical but largely successful follow up of the German withdrawal. This managed to balance the twin requirements of closing up to the Hindenburg position in time for the planned Easter offensives, by the British at Arras, and by the French to the south, and of minimising unnecessary loss. These twin objectives in the light of the German withdrawal were laid out by Haig on 16 March in a G.H.Q. letter to Army Commanders and to Kavanagh at the Cavalry Corps:

2. The general intention of the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief is:-
 - (a) To maintain pressure on the enemy and harass his rearguards with the minimum number of troops required for that purpose.
 - (b) To strike the enemy on the Arras-Vimy front in the greatest possible strength with a view to penetrating his defences, outflanking the Hindenburg Line from the north and operating in the direction of Cambrai.

Advantage should be taken of local opportunities to cause the enemy loss in his retirement, especially by means of artillery fire; but attacks in force which will be met by rearguards fully prepared, are unlikely under the conditions to give an adequate return for the losses likely to be incurred."⁴²

(Incidentally this letter was an early example of Haig's tendency to include Kavanagh, a corps commander, in meetings and correspondence otherwise only addressed to the commanders of Armies.) Taken in the light of these criteria, the cavalry operations of March 1917 were far from 'ineffective'. The Germans were indeed 'harassed' and 'caused loss', at the cost of a minimum of casualties to the cavalry. The operations also provided a valuable opportunity for the cavalry to put into effect some of the training undertaken over the winter, and for the tactical evolution of the arm to continue. Indeed

minor operations such as the Villers Faucon attack of 27 March (discussed below) might be considered textbook examples of the successful application of mounted units to attacks on limited objectives.

When the German withdrawal began (on 14 March opposite Fourth Army, and on 17 March opposite Fifth Army) only the corps cavalry regiments attached to the infantry corps were available to follow this up. It rapidly became apparent that these limited cavalry forces would not be sufficient and on 19 March a division from the Cavalry Corps was ordered up to support each army. The two Indian divisions, now re-named the 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions were selected, 4th division going to Fifth Army in the north, and 5th Division going to Fourth Army in the south.⁴³

However, although these additional troops represented nearly 40% of the cavalry available to G.H.Q., they were sufficient only to replace the existing corps regiments and slightly increase the numbers of cavalry on each corps front. 4th Cavalry Division, attached to Fifth Army (I (Anzac), II, and V Corps) deployed forward only the Lucknow Cavalry Brigade; three regiments for the three corps on the army front. Meanwhile to the south, the Canadian Cavalry Brigade (from 5th Cav. Div.) took over the front of the two northerly corps of Fourth Army (XIV and XV), while the Ambala Brigade covered the two southerly Corps (III, and IV). As the latter two brigades adopted the standard pattern of putting two regiments in the line and keeping one in reserve, this also represented a front line reinforcement of each infantry corps equivalent to only a single regiment of cavalry. As this was intended to replace rather than augment the already exhausted corps cavalry regiments it reflects little more than maintenance of the *status-quo* in numbers of mounted troops rather than a significant increase. This simple lack of manpower should be taken into account when the impact of the cavalry on these operations is judged. This was clearly not a force large enough to deliver a decisive blow upon the retreating Germans, 'well handled' or not.

Nor was that the intention of the cavalry commanders. The modest ambitions of the Cavalry divisions can be read in the orders issued by 5th Cavalry Division H.Q. on its attachment to Fourth army:

2. The tasks of the Division are:-
 - (a) To ascertain the dispositions of the advanced hostile detachments.
 - (b) To ascertain the enemy's defences and strength.

- (c) To picket the enemy so as to prevent his advancing and so as to give instant information of his withdrawal.
- (d) To be ready to follow up the enemy if he withdraws.⁴⁴

These orders clearly reflect the tone of Haig's G.H.Q. letter of the 16 March; contact was to be maintained, but no rash and costly moves made. As the following narrative will show, however, far from being overly timid in the execution of these instructions, the lead brigades of 5th Division fought extremely aggressively, not only following up, but forcing the pace of the German withdrawal. In short, within the bounds set by their orders, the operations of the cavalry during this period were a complete success.

Operations 23-28 March 1917

(Figure 3.1 overleaf)

As has been outlined above, the task of the Fifth Army in the north required a more urgent push against the retreating Germans. Their way was blocked, however by a more well-developed system of German intermediate defences, including the 'R1', 'R2', and 'R3' reserve lines. Although only the third of these was defended with any vigour, Gough was forced to advance by a series of methodical set piece attacks, which left little rôle for cavalry beyond reconnaissance patrols and flank guards.⁴⁵ Thus little significant mounted action took place on this front. On the Fourth Army front, however, covered by 5th Cavalry Division, the greater distance to be covered, and the lack of formal intermediate defensive positions left more scope for cavalry operations.

When 5th Cavalry Division took over from the regiments of corps cavalry on 24 March, the Fourth Army front lay approximately 8km (5 miles) east of the Bapaume to Peronne road, running north-west to south-east, parallel to, but some 10km (6 miles) short of the Hindenburg position. Divisional Headquarters was established in Peronne. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade took over the northern half of the line from Bus to Longavesnes, the Royal Canadian Dragoons covering XIV Corps on the left (north) and the Fort Garry Horse covering the XV Corps on the right, with Lord Strathcona's Horse in reserve. To the south the Ambala Brigade took over the front of III and IV Corps with the 8th Hussars and 18th Lancers initially in the line.⁴⁶

The regiments were in action immediately. Having made contact with the Australians to the north and the French to the south, both brigades started to patrol forwards. The Canadians attacked the village of Ytres at the northern end of the line and "... after a sharp fight"⁴⁷ established posts there. Meanwhile 9th Hodsons Horse, the third regiment of the Ambala Brigade, occupied Etreillers in the south, although their posts were raided overnight 24/25 march and several men were lost.⁴⁸

25 March was spent in a similar fashion in what the divisional *War Diary* described as "Outpost, reconnaissance and patrol fighting along whole front of Fourth Army."⁴⁹ On 26 March the Canadians pushed forward, capturing the villages of Equancourt and Longavesnes, driving out small parties of the enemy and handing the villages over to the infantry.⁵⁰ Meanwhile to the south the Ambala Brigade combined with elements of III Corps in an attack on Roisel. Earlier, on 21 March, Maj. Gen. Fanshawe, commander of 48th Division, but in temporary command of III Corps, had formed an advanced guard consisting of his 'Corps Mounted Troops' (Cavalry and Cyclists), 1/4th Oxford Light Infantry, two batteries of field artillery, and two sections of engineers. This became 'Ward's Force', named after the Corps C.R.A. Brig. Gen. Ward, who was given temporary command of it.⁵¹

On 26 March, this force, with its mounted component now formed by 2 squadrons of 18th Lancers, and supported by 3 armoured cars from 9th L.A.C. Battery, attacked Roisel. The cars and the infantry attacked the village frontally from the east while the lancer squadrons outflanked it north and south. The armoured car attack was very successful, driving-in a post of about 40 Germans on the western side of the village,⁵² but the outflanking effort proved more difficult: "B Squadron [18th Lancers] were unable to co-operate effectively as the ground south of Roisel was too marshy and intersected." 'D' Squadron "...co-operated on the northern flank" but machine gun fire from the village prevented a significant advance.⁵³ As a result the remaining German garrison was able to make its escape and only one prisoner was captured.⁵⁴ This battle was not particularly significant in the overall campaign, but it is noteworthy because 'Ward's Force' represented a combined-arms concept which is more often associated only with the 'Hundred Days' in 1918. In fact, however, it is one strand of a thread which can be traced from the combined bicycle, machine-gun, and cavalry formations proposed at Loos in 1915, through the cavalry and armoured car operations of 1916, and

eventually into the cavalry and tank operations of 1917 and 1918 described in later chapters. As will be demonstrated, far from being a revolution in 1918, the developments of that year should be seen as the culmination of a long development process.

Returning to the events of March 1917, overnight 26/27 the Canadians pushed a small enemy detachment out of Lieramont, once again handing the village over to the infantry.⁵⁵ With this village taken the front line lay along a line from Lieramont, through Longavesnes and Roisel. From there the next bound would include the village of Villers Faucon 3km (2 miles) to the east, and to the north the twin settlements of Guyencourt and Saulcourt. For this operation the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was reinforced by the addition of the 8th Hussars from the Ambala Brigade, and the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (XV Corps Cavalry), as well as the armoured cars of 9th L.A.C. Battery, and 3 batteries of artillery from 48th Division (in addition to the RHA batteries of all three brigades of 5th Cav. Div.)

The attack was to be one of envelopment from north and south, (Figure 3.2 overleaf) the Canadians moving into Guyencourt from the north and the 8th Hussars attacking Villers Faucon from the south. As a preliminary, at about 1:00pm one squadron of the Royal Canadian Dragoons advanced east from Longavesnes for about 1km (1000 yards) and charged a German outpost, nine prisoners were captured and a further three killed with the sword.⁵⁶ This would later allow machine guns to be pushed forward in this area to cover the attack on the villages.

A preliminary bombardment of 40 minutes duration was begun at 4:30pm and at 5:10 the attack began. After a short delay caused by a snowstorm the Canadian Brigade advanced from the north-west in bounds, carried out in open order at the gallop. The Wiltshire Yeomanry were pushed out to the north and north-east to cover the flank and rear of the attack while Lord Strathcona's Horse swung around to approach Guyencourt from the north. Meanwhile the Fort Garry Horse advanced on their right approaching Saulcourt from the north-west. Artillery and machine gun support from the west continued "...to the last minute",⁵⁷ halting as the Canadians dismounted to fight on foot through the ruins of the villages. The villages were secure in Canadian hands by 6:00pm. The defenders fled in the direction of Epehy, and although machine guns in that village rendered a close mounted pursuit impossible, the Hotchkiss teams of the

Fort Garry Horse rapidly deployed east of Saulcourt and were able to inflict casualties on the retreating Germans.⁵⁸

During the course of the Guyencourt attack, Lt. Harvey of Lord Strathcona's Horse came upon an enemy trench protected by several strands of barbed wire. Knowing that this was an obstacle insurmountable to his horse, he dismounted, jumped the wire on foot and entered the position with his revolver, capturing a machine gun. For this he was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross.⁵⁹

Meanwhile a similar assault was made on Villers Faucon from the south. B and D Squadrons 8th Hussars moved off at 5:00pm while the bombardment was still in progress. B Squadron advanced rapidly to the cover of several copses to the west of the village, and dismounted to provide fire support, while D squadron swung wide to the right and approached the village from the south. Again, after a short dismounted fight, the village was in British hands by 6:00pm. Hussar casualties were very light, two killed and fifteen wounded, with fifteen horse casualties.⁶⁰

Unfortunately the armoured cars fared less well. After the success of the cars at Roisel in drawing enemy fire, two were sent along the Marquaix to Villers Faucon road with the specific intention of distracting the enemy from the cavalry. Sadly, the Germans had responded to the previous battle by rushing up armour piercing ammunition for their machine guns and both cars were quickly knocked out, their entire crews, with the exception of one officer, killed or wounded.⁶¹ The impact on the 9th L.A.C. Battery of this loss is poignantly summarised in the laconic entry in the battery *War Diary*: "27/3/17, 2 armoured cars in action. O.C. seriously wounded."⁶²

In general, however, all parties were well pleased with the operation. Brig. Home visited the Headquarters of 5th Cavalry Division on 29 March and recorded in his diary that "They were very cheerful and pleased as their men had had quite a pretty little fight and were all the better for it."⁶³ MacAndrew, the divisional commander also sent a wire to his troops offering "Heartiest congratulations... for the dashing attack..."⁶⁴ On the same day the division was withdrawn from the front line, and was to take no further part in the advance.

Lessons of the Spring Fighting

It may seem odd in the light of the successes of the end of March that the 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions were withdrawn from the battle area after only five or six operational days. However, those who have castigated the cavalry for not 'doing more' neglect the high intensity of these operations. The cavalry were in action almost every day on reconnaissance or in attack, and the intervals would have been spent digging in, awaiting infantry relief, and then moving onto the next objective. Rest and shelter were almost non-existent, and the weather continued to be very cold. The Wiltshire Yeomanry (XV Corps Cavalry) recorded that "During the operations between March 19th and 30th the Regiment was in action 9 days besides sending out troops on reconnaissance on two other days... The horses were in the open from March 18th onwards and owing to very severe weather, hard work, and long hours saddled-up, suffered very severely in condition."⁶⁵ Nor as has already been discussed did the Divisions come into the line as fresh as they would have liked due to the weather and the ration situation over the winter.

It is a long-standing military truth that mobile operations are highly fatiguing and difficult to sustain for more than a short period. The highly mechanised forces involved in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were only able to sustain their momentum for a few days before an 'Operational pause' was forced upon them by their own logistical situation. On the Western Front even the duties involved in garrisoning a static front line trench were considered sufficiently fatiguing that troops relatively rarely spent more than seven or eight days in the line before relief, and four days was considered the reasonable norm.⁶⁶ The infantry system of supports at all levels from Company to Division allowed for a rotation of troops with only a minority in the line at any one time. For the cavalry, however, when the German withdrawal began each infantry corps had just a single cavalry regiment available to follow up. After five or six days (19-24 March) these troops were worn out. As has been explained, over the front of Fourth and Fifth Armies, a reinforcement of two divisions of cavalry provided only slightly better than one or two further regiments per corps. Five days later on 29 March these too were exhausted, and with 1st, 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions being held back for the Arras offensive there was

simply no more cavalry available to provide a third 'rotation'. Far from having 'lost the habit and art of movement' the cavalry wore itself out by its very mobility. The remainder of the advance to the Hindenburg Line thus took place with only very limited cavalry support.

Reference has already been made to the 'textbook' character of cavalry operations during this period. Both brigades of 5th Cavalry Division showed themselves capable of attacks using a well-coordinated combination of artillery and machine gun support, dismounted fire-power, and the astute use of mounted shock. Nearly all attacks were characterised by the use of outflanking manoeuvres and the rapid consolidation of ground gained by the advance of both integral Hotchkiss teams and supporting machine-gun squadrons.

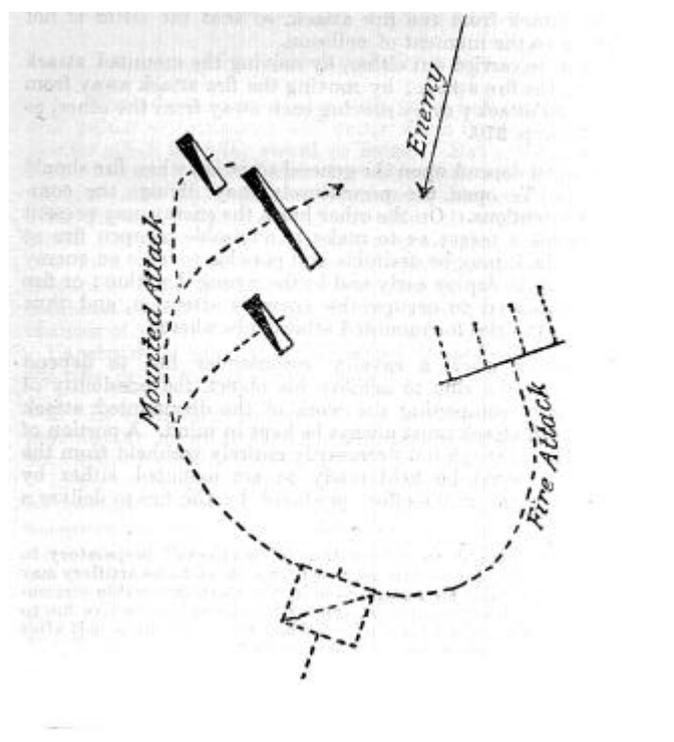


Fig. 3.3 Diagram of cavalry tactics from *Cavalry Training*, Fig. 20

The Canadian capture of Equancourt on 26 March is a good example. The village was first engaged by machine gun and artillery fire from the north-west from the Canadian M.G. Squadron and R.C.H.A. battery. Subsequently under the cover of this fire, the Fort Garry Horse established dismounted fire positions to the west and north, A Squadron on the north side 'menacing' the village particularly vigorously.⁶⁷ With the enemy suitably distracted, two squadrons of Lord Strathcona's Horse were able to gallop the village

from the south virtually unmolested. Casualties for the whole operation were five men wounded.⁶⁸ A sketch of this operation, with attack by fire on one flank masking a mounted advance on the other would bear a striking resemblance to the model for such an attack laid out in Fig. 20 of *Cavalry Training*.⁶⁹ (Reproduced on previous page.) In spite of Home and Kavanagh's reservations, examined earlier, the cavalry had not forgotten the key elements of mobile warfare. These were also pre-war tactics, classical 'fire and movement' concepts which were applicable in 1900 and remain so in 2007. Much has been made of how the citizen infantry of the B.E.F. re-learned these techniques in 1917, assisted by such documents as SS143 *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917*, published in February of that year.⁷⁰ It is arguable that the cavalry, still leavened by a significant number of pre-war regular officers and men, had never forgotten them.

The attack on Guyencourt-Saulcourt-Villers Faucon on 28 March took essentially the same form but on a larger scale. It is also remarkable for its co-ordination between the several brigades and their supporting arms. Simultaneous, widely separated attacks from north and south were successfully launched, with troops advancing at high speed, but moving tactically in bounds using the available cover. Crucially, the artillery and machine guns were able to suppress the defenders with fire until the cavalry were virtually amongst them. A German officer captured on the day considered the speed and co-ordination of the attack to have been key: "The speed with which the squadrons effected their entrance from the south and north completely upset his plans, which he had no time to alter."⁷¹ In the light of these actions the accusation of tactical staleness among the cavalry after months of static warfare is hard to sustain.

On 10 April 1917, while 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions huddled in snow-filled shell-holes east of Arras, G.H.Q. issued one of the few doctrinal pamphlets of the war addressed specifically at cavalry fighting. This pamphlet *A Note on the Recent Cavalry Fighting up to 7th April 1917* is highly significant in that it gives an insight into the contemporary view of what had taken place in the advance to the Hindenburg Line in March, and of any lessons from it. The pamphlet is reproduced in full as Appendix 3.1, as the points it raises offer a valuable tool for re-assessment of the spring fighting and will have relevance to a subsequent analysis of the Arras battles.

Several of the observations in the pamphlet are relatively mundane, 'time spent on reconnaissance' (Paragraph (a.)) is something of a military cliché, however others are more significant. Paragraph (b.) highlights the problem encountered at Gueudecourt in September 1916, (which was later to be the keynote of the fighting at Monchy); that cavalry halted and dismounted on a captured objective particularly a village, are hopelessly vulnerable to horse casualties if the enemy can bring observed artillery to bear. This was to become even more of a problem as the Germans became more adept from 1917 onwards in the creation of observed artillery 'killing zones' within their new flexible defensive systems.⁷² The advice is therefore to push on beyond such 'localities', and to tell off pursuing detachments. However, it is hard to find examples of this working in practice, even the most successful of the cavalry's spring operations, the Guyencourt-Saulcourt-Villers Faucon attack was unable to advance beyond its immediate objectives due to enemy machine-gun fire.

The main body of the pamphlet, paragraphs (c.) to (g.) outlines the ingredients of a classical mobile attack, combining speed and flanking assaults, masked by a frontal attack, using carefully timed suppressive artillery, armoured cars, and machine-gun fire on the target. Again the Guyencourt attack serves as an exemplar, but in this case of the successful application of all these principles. It can be argued that this is not a particularly radical set of tactical principles, and indeed it has been noted earlier that a similar battle plan was presented in pre-war cavalry manuals. The contemporary value of the pamphlet, however, lies in its implicit assertion that these methods have now been tested 'for real' on the battlefield and have been shown to retain their validity. Moreover, that although much of the character of the war may seem new and different, commanders neglect these 'old-fashioned' principles at their peril. This consistency, and the continued application of pre-war doctrine on a battlefield that evolved to make it ever more appropriate, is one of the themes of this study.

Overall the contribution of the cavalry to the advance to the Hindenburg Line was probably not decisive. However it was not a phase of the campaign which offered any promise of decisive results, and this fact was quickly recognised by Haig and the commanders of Fourth and Fifth Armies. An infantry advance unsupported by mounted troops would probably have been slower, and potentially more costly, but would ultimately have achieved the same results. What then of the decision to commit two

divisions of cavalry to the battle? This should not be seen, as some have interpreted it, as a misguided vision of a great rout of the retreating Germans, which the cavalry failed to achieve. Rather it may be viewed as a routine reinforcement of a part of the Fourth and Fifth Armies; the corps cavalry, that was feeling the strain.

It is arguable, and it was a recurrent theme of Haig's thinking, that the Cavalry Corps needed to be carefully husbanded until the 'big day'. As Home put it: "If you think you may want Cavalry, it must be kept in a glass cage until the day arrives, no half measures are of any use."⁷³ In the light of this it may seem profligate to commit a large part of the cavalry to an operation that it was already known would not be strategically decisive. However, it must be remembered that Haig was under pressure from a timetable not of his own making. The Easter deadline for the B.E.F. to be ready for a combined offensive with the French in the south must have been a factor in his thinking. If cavalry could speed up the advance of the two southern armies into position to support this attack then the commitment of these sparse resources would be justified. The removal over the winter of the Cavalry Corps' artillery and machine guns for service in the front line, and the formation of pioneer battalions also showed that G.H.Q. was not afraid to dip into the resources of the Corps when it was convenient to do so. Equally while the cavalry could ill afford the additional horse losses incurred during the campaign, there is no doubt that the opportunity for mounted action provided a boost to the morale not only of the divisions involved but to the whole arm. A similar although limited effect may have been produced in the ranks of the rest of the army, the appearance of horsemen still being viewed as a sign of forward progress.

As was alluded to in the introduction to this chapter, the March fighting is also significant in that it was one of the few occasions when Haig (whatever his motivations) provided the cavalry with a realistic and achievable set of operational objectives. These, the cavalry were able entirely to fulfill. Thus judged against their operational goals as laid out by their commander they were entirely successful. Arguably this was not to happen again until Amiens in August 1918, and even there Haig widened his horizons at the last minute before the attack and inserted unrealistic additional objectives into the plan. While admittedly quite modest, this success has been almost entirely ignored by subsequent historians. There is one honourable exception, Cyril Falls, the Official

Historian. His remarks on contribution of mounted troops to the Hindenburg advance may be left as a final comment on the cavalry during this period:

Practically all the work fell upon the infantry divisions because the corps cavalry regiments were not strong enough for much more than reconnaissance. It was perhaps unfortunate that the cavalry divisions were so carefully husbanded for the coming offensive during this phase; for the work done by the 5th Cavalry Division during the few days it was at the disposal of Fourth Army was brilliant.⁷⁴

Planning the Arras Offensive

(Figure 3.4 overleaf)

In the spring of 1917, as with the Somme offensive the year before, Haig as Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F. did not have a free hand to attack where he chose on the Western Front. He remained convinced that the decisive sector of the front was in the north, in Flanders, where an attack could clear the Germans from the Channel coast,⁷⁵ but this plan was not to be realised until the autumn. Meanwhile he was obliged to fight on in the south in co-operation with the French. The replacement of General Joffre at the head of the French armies, the appointment of General Nivelle, and the politics which followed have been thoroughly examined elsewhere,⁷⁶ however, the outcome of these discussions and the strategy for the coming months were laid out by G.H.Q. in January 1917.⁷⁷ Essentially the B.E.F. was to play a supporting rôle to French attacks in the south, attacks would be launched in the Ancre Valley by Fifth Army, at Arras by Third Army (under General Allenby), and at Vimy Ridge by First Army. These would be limited affairs intended only “To pin the enemy to his ground, draw in his reserves, and thereby facilitate the task of the main French attack.”⁷⁸ General Nivelle had also successfully argued for the British to take over a substantial additional sector of the line south of the Somme battlefield in order to free French Divisions for the upcoming offensive. This extension of the line was to be the responsibility of Fourth Army (as was examined earlier in this chapter).

The task laid before Third Army at Arras was “Firstly to seize the high ground about Monchy le Preux. Secondly, to turn the German defences south of Arras by a rapid

advance in a south-easterly direction towards Croisilles and Bullecourt.”⁷⁹ This was to be the main thrust of the attack, and would be supported to the north by the capture of Vimy ridge by First Army, and by the operations of Fifth Army in the south. Haig, as was his habit, called for proposals from his army commanders for the details of how these attacks should be undertaken.

Edmund Allenby, commander of Third Army, was an almost exact contemporary of Haig, both were 56 years old in 1917. His career had also followed a path similar to Haig’s; Allenby following him into the post of Inspector General of Cavalry in 1910. He had gained significant combat experience in South Africa, both as a regimental officer and as a column commander, and in 1914 was appointed to lead all of the British cavalry in France, as commander of the Cavalry Division of the original B.E.F. As the number of cavalry in France increased he rose to command of the Cavalry Corps (then of 3 divisions, with a separate Indian Cavalry Corps) in October 1914.⁸⁰ Perhaps unusually for the expanding B.E.F. all of these rôles were accommodated within his substantive pre-war rank of Major General, which he had held since 1909. He led the corps through the costly defensive fighting of First Ypres over the winter of 1914-15, before moving on to command V Corps in May 1915, again leading that formation through the defensive fighting of Second Ypres.⁸¹ Allenby took over command of Third Army in October 1915 when its former commander, Monro, was sent to the Dardanelles.⁸² T A Heathcote described Allenby as “the British Army’s last and greatest captain of horse”⁸³ and it is probably true that he was the most experienced cavalry leader in the B.E.F. He was also to go on to famous success with mounted forces in Palestine. However in the spring of 1917 Third Army, with the exception of its unsuccessful diversionary attack on 1 July 1916 had not done much fighting. Apart from his limited rôle on the Somme, Arras would be Allenby’s first army-level set-piece battle, and his first major all-arms offensive action.

Opinions vary concerning the relationship between Haig and Allenby; Wavell claimed that “He [Allenby] and Haig had never been congenial to each other.”⁸⁴ Lawrence James more recently described their relations as “outwardly tranquil”.⁸⁵ Possibly, the similarity between the two men in their relative inarticulateness led to a degree of awkwardness in their meetings.⁸⁶ General Charteris was a witness to this, observing “Allenby shares one peculiarity with Douglas Haig, he cannot explain verbally, with

any lucidity at all, what his plans are. In a conference between the two of them it is rather amusing.”⁸⁷ Although he went on to point out that “...they understand one-another perfectly.”⁸⁸ In spite of their communication difficulties James asserts that Haig found in Allenby “...a trustworthy general, in tune with his own thinking and second to none in his adherence to the principles of the aggressive spirit and wearing down the enemy.”⁸⁹ Indeed Allenby had gained a reputation for perhaps being unnecessarily aggressive, or profligate with the lives of his men. Haldane, commander of 3rd Division under Allenby at Ypres in 1915 remarked “Everyone hates being in Vth Corps”⁹⁰ and he was widely unpopular. Wavell, naturally sought to excuse this, arguing that Allenby “...merely carried out the orders of superior authority” but tellingly went on:

But Allenby’s gospel of absolute loyalty to the orders of those above him made him wholehearted in his persistence to push in [sic] while any possible chance of success remained.⁹¹

This ‘aggressive spirit’ is apparent in the *Appreciation* produced by Third Army in February, outlining the Arras attack.⁹² Allenby believed a degree of tactical surprise was possible, even in an operation on a large scale, and measures were included to hide preparations for the assault. A short but intense artillery bombardment of only 48 hours was also proposed. This combination of shock and surprise, Allenby believed, would soon carry the attacking troops through the German defences and into open country, and he advocated a change in thinking among his subordinates:

At this period, the beginning of open warfare, it must be realised that the maintenance of the forward movement depends on the determination and power of direction of the commanders of sections, platoons, companies and battalions. The habit of digging a trench and getting into it, or of waiting for scientifically arranged artillery barrage before advancing, must be discarded.

A slow advance will give time for German reinforcements to arrive. If the advance is continued with reasonable rapidity it is probable that the resistance will quickly lessen and that we shall reach places in which there are no German troops other than those running away in front of us.

... Artillery as well as infantry must shake off the habits of trench warfare. Battery commanders must be prepared to use their initiative and be able to make

rapid reconnaissance followed by rapid movement... direct fire will become common.⁹³

Allenby's thinking about the fluid nature of the likely fighting is also in evidence in his remark that "Staffs will move with the troops, and staff and other officers will require horses."⁹⁴ The contrast between this optimistic *all-out* attack and the measured 'Bite and Hold' approach of Rawlinson a year before is obvious. It is an easy cliché to suggest that this reflected Allenby's cavalry background as opposed to Rawlinson the infantryman, but this is probably less relevant than the contrast between Rawlinson's bitter experience of the Somme battles, and Allenby's thrusting personality, combined with his inexperience of this type of fighting. This was the first offensive of this magnitude of which he had charge, and no doubt he wanted to make an impression.

In some respects this optimism had good grounds, in particular Third and First Armies were well supplied with artillery, over their 20km (12 mile) attack front they had twice the number of guns used on the 30km (18-mile) front of 1 July 1916.⁹⁵ Expertise, particularly in the use of creeping barrages had also increased. Haig, however, was characteristically sceptical of the more innovative parts of the plan (as had been the case when he considered the proposed night attack on 14 July 1916). The 48-hour bombardment in particular was vetoed in favour of a more conventional four-day artillery preparation.⁹⁶

As this planning progressed, the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line (discussed in the previous section) began to unfold. In some respects this ought to have rendered Haig and Nivelle's offensive plan obsolete, as the 'Bapaume salient' in the German line, which formed the original objective, no longer existed. Nivelle, however, remained adamant that the attacks at Arras by the British, and on the Aisne by the French should be carried out as planned, with minor amendments, and with the (somewhat coincidental) objective of taking the Hindenburg Line position in flank at both ends. Curiously, Haig's principal concern became that further withdrawals by the Germans might take place before the offensive could be launched, preventing a sufficiently massive blow from being delivered against their forces.⁹⁷

The Third Army infantry attack, supported by artillery, was divided into four main phases, corresponding with four objective lines;

- The 'Black line', to be captured in the first few minutes, consisted of the German front line trenches, and represented an advance of around 500-1000 yards (450-900m);
- The 'Blue line', attacked two hours after 'Zero Hour', included the German second line, a further 1000 yards (900m) forward. At this point the advance would pause to allow artillery to move forward.
- The 'Brown line' was to be attacked at 'Z plus 6 hours 40 minutes' and included the so-called 'Wancourt-Feuchy line', an additional German defensive line some 2200 yards (2km) beyond the 'Blue line'.
- Finally, an advance would be made at 'Z plus 8 hours', before dusk, to a position on the 'Green line'. This line did not reflect a specific German defensive position but was an arbitrary line drawn along the high ground beyond the village of Monchy-le-Preux, 7000 yards (6.4km) beyond the infantry start line.

The ambitious nature of these infantry objectives is clear. They represent a significant penetration of the German position.

The rôle of the cavalry in the offensive was laid out in *Instructions issued to the Cavalry Corps for offensive operations to be carried out by the Third Army* issued on 5 April 1917.⁹⁸ The Corps was placed under Third Army command. Kavanagh, as corps commander however, did not have unified control of all five divisions. 1st Cavalry Division was allocated to support the Vimy Ridge attack under First Army command (later amended to G.H.Q. Reserve). Also the two Indian Divisions were separated from the corps; 4th Cavalry Division was attached to Gough's Fifth Army in support of the Bullecourt attack to the south (which was to follow the Arras and Vimy Ridge offensives), and 5th Cavalry Division was held in G.H.Q. Reserve. Third Army was therefore immediately supported by the remaining two divisions of the Cavalry Corps; 2nd and 3rd, along with an attached infantry division (the 17th). The Cavalry Corps objectives lay beyond those of the infantry, and were defined as a line astride the Arras – Cambrai road stretching from Riencourt in the south to Etaing in the north, a front some 8km (5 miles) wide, 16km (10 miles) beyond the initial British front line. This advance was to be attempted in the last hours of Z-Day, after the infantry had reached the Green line and formed defensive flanks on either side to the north and south.

When compared with the cavalry objectives for 1 July 1916 the plans for the cavalry at Arras are superficially similar. Both required an advance by two divisions astride the main axial road through the battle front, to a depth of around 16km (10 miles). However as has been noted earlier there was less discussion at Arras of onward exploitation deep into the enemy's rear areas. The contrast with the later operations of 1916 is also discernible in the movement timetable for the cavalry. 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were expected to be in their 'final positions of readiness' astride the Cambrai road at Tilloy les Moufflaines "...by the time the infantry attacks are expected to reach the Brown line", i.e. around Z plus 6 hours. Indeed the whole movement was intended to be more or less simultaneous. Instructions to the Cavalry Corps stated:

It is the intention to issue this order ['Cavalry advance'] in such time as will enable the leading brigades of the cavalry divisions to pass through the Green line as soon as, or very shortly after, the infantry reach that line.⁹⁹

Further, unlike the previous year when the cavalry had waited even in its most advanced positions of readiness behind the infantry start-line, the final position of readiness was defined actually beyond the German front line (Black line) position. This was certainly an innovative step, but the wisdom of pushing so many cavalry so far forward before the outcome of the infantry attack was certain is not beyond criticism, as subsequent events were to prove. Allenby and Kavanagh were forced strike a balance between placing mounted troops close enough to the battle to be of use, and potentially stranding them, out of supply in the chaotic forward area of an ongoing attack. A recognition of this potential supply problem can be seen in the orders to all arms to carry iron rations for three days, and the subsequently rather notorious order for the infantry to save weight by leaving greatcoats behind.¹⁰⁰ The cavalry were issued three days oats for the horses (around 8kg (20lb)), as well as 190 rounds of rifle ammunition.¹⁰¹ (In the event, the impact of this extra weight on already undernourished horses was severe).

The plan also suffered from the same command and control problems as had occurred the previous year. The final position of readiness of the two cavalry divisions was of less importance to their ability to advance, than their authority to do so. Once again instead of this being automatically timetabled, the order 'Cavalry advance' would come from Third Army via Cavalry Corps Headquarters. The likelihood of this order being

issued in a timely fashion, and quickly communicated to the troops concerned was very low.

Two final features of the Cavalry orders for the offensive are worthy of note. The first of these is a page of 'Variations' appended to the *Instructions issued to the Cavalry Corps*, these envisioned possible outcomes of the attack other than that initially outlined and offered compensating changes to the plan. Of particular interest was the 'Second variation'. This gave instructions for routes to be reconnoitred so that in the event of the failure of VI Corps' attack south of the river Scarpe, and a corresponding success by XVII corps to the north, the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions could be re-routed to exploit north of the river. The practicality of this manoeuvre in the middle of an attack is questionable, but the appearance of such flexible, contingency based planning is significant. Such a change of plan would also be hamstrung by the length of the chain of command between the troops concerned, and those at Third Army deciding to make the change. This factor was to become apparent during the course of the battle.

Secondly, in operation orders of 8 April,¹⁰² details are given of Army-level heavy artillery co-operation with the Cavalry Corps, both from Third and Fifth Armies, using long-range guns to 'shoot' the cavalry onto its distant objectives, the villages of Boiry, Vis, and Fontaine les Croiselles. This was a good idea in principle, but was to prove unsuccessful, the lack of controllable artillery support for the cavalry divisions becoming a significant factor in their subsequent performance.

Arras: 9 April

The Cavalry Corps began April 1917 in its winter billets near the Channel coast. Two days before the start of the attack, the three cavalry divisions committed to the Arras battle began their movements (1st Cavalry Division supporting First Army, and 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions supporting Third Army). These moves were originally scheduled for 6 April, but were delayed until the 7th in the light of a 24-hour postponement of the whole operation requested by the French.¹⁰³ Initially the divisions closed up and moved to positions to the west of Arras. From north to south these were:

- 1st Cavalry Division: the valley of the Ternoise, north-west of St Pol, (HQ at Croix);
- 3rd Cavalry Division: the valley of the Canche, from Frevent west as far as Conchy, (HQ at Monchel); and
- 2nd Cavalry Division: the Authie valley from Doulens west to Auxi-le-Château, (HQ at Wavans).¹⁰⁴

In the case of 2nd and 3rd Divisions these moves simply followed the river valleys which had formed the units billeting areas, the Canche and the Authie. Each river valley offered water, and lay on a direct road towards Arras, the heads of the divisions lying an average of 30km (18 miles) from the city.

On 'Z-1'; 8 April, the three divisions closed up further and advanced to holding positions closer to Arras. 1st Division moving to Frevin-Capelle 10km (6 miles) to the north-west of Arras, 3rd Division to Gouy-en-Artois, 14km (9 miles) to the west, and 2nd Division to Pas-en-Artois, 25km (16 miles) to the south-west.¹⁰⁵

The infantry attack began at 5:30am on 9 April. Significant gains were made by all three attacking corps on the Third Army front; XVII Corps to the north of the Scarpe, and VI and VII Corps to the south of the river. Indeed Falls observed in the *Official History* that '... the first day's operations of the battles of Arras were among the heaviest blows struck by British arms in the Western theatre of war.'¹⁰⁶ The greatest advance, some 5km (3½ miles) took place on the XVII Corps front immediately north of the Scarpe where 9th and 4th Divisions advanced to within a few hundred yards of the final Green Line objective beyond Fampoux, (the furthest advance yet in a single day in the trench war).¹⁰⁷ In the centre VI Corps completely overwhelmed the German first line defences and were able to capture a number of guns in 'Battery Valley' to the rear of this position. Unfortunately delays in the attack meant that the artillery barrage outran the infantry advance and the attack mostly halted short of the last major German defensive position, the Wancourt-Feuchy or Brown line. Only 15th Division on the left (north) of the VI Corps attack was able to penetrate the Wancourt-Feuchy defences and occupy a long north-south ridge, which became known as Orange Hill, but this was only achieved late in the day and little could be done to exploit this success.¹⁰⁸

In accordance with the plan,¹⁰⁹ the two cavalry divisions under Third Army command moved off on the morning of the 9th to positions of readiness. 2nd Cavalry Division

advanced to the suburb of Ronville, immediately behind the British line to the south-east of Arras, arriving by 9:30am, and 3rd Cavalry Division halted on the racecourse to the north-west of Arras by 10:00am.¹¹⁰ In the light of the infantry successes, the order 'Cavalry advance' was issued by Third Army. This was received at Cavalry Corps HQ by telephone at 2:40pm and wired to the divisions shortly after.¹¹¹ In response to this 3rd Cavalry Division moved around the north of Arras and onto Cavalry track 'A', the northernmost of the cavalry tracks prepared through the British front line. 2nd Cavalry Division advanced from Ronville via tracks 'C' and 'D' further to the south. Each division crossed the original front-line trenches via extensions to the tracks completed by dismounted parties earlier in the afternoon.¹¹² Both were in position in their 'Final positions of readiness' at Tilloy, astride the Arras-Cambrai road and beyond the German first line positions by 4:00pm, ready to advance towards their objectives beyond the Green line.¹¹³ Unfortunately with the Brown line defences still largely unbreached such an advance was impossible and at 8:20pm the divisions were ordered to fall back to the west and south of Arras. 2nd Cavalry Division moved back to the Crinchon valley to the south-west of the town while 3rd Cavalry Division circled back around to the north to billets between the St. Pol road and the river Scarpe¹¹⁴ and on the racecourse.¹¹⁵

No cavalry support had been assigned to the XVII Corps north of the Scarpe in the original plan, except as one of the 'variations' included as an appendix. At a meeting during the afternoon Allenby (ignoring the planned 'variation') asked Haig, in view of the successful advance on this front, for the use of a brigade from 1st Cavalry Division, to support XVII Corps.¹¹⁶ Up to this time this division was held in G.H.Q. Reserve at Frevin-Capelle, 10km (6 miles) north-west of Arras. (9th Brigade of this division had already been detached to support the Canadian Corps of First Army to the north but was not brought into action).¹¹⁷ Haig agreed, but at this point the rather tortuous nature of the command structure became apparent. Although 1st Cavalry Division was in G.H.Q. reserve, it was still nominally under the command of Cavalry Corps (The remainder of which was under Third Army command). Thus orders from G.H.Q. to 1st Cavalry Division to detach a brigade to Third Army went through Cavalry Corps Headquarters. Cavalry Corps H.Q. were telephoned by G.H.Q. at 4.15pm, and in turn rang 1st Division with a warning order. Corps received a confirmatory G.H.Q. wire at

4.55pm,¹¹⁸ but this was not passed on, instead 1st Division sought direct confirmation from G.H.Q., which was not received by the division until 6.15pm.¹¹⁹ By this time it was too late for anything significant to be done. The 1st Brigade was moved up as far as Athies, but got no further.¹²⁰ The loss of this opportunity for exploitation was felt keenly by the infantry commanders of 4th and 9th Divisions.¹²¹ Br. Gen. Carton de Wiart, himself a cavalry officer, although at the time in command of 12th Infantry Brigade (part of 4th Division) recalled:

We could have taken many more prisoners and much valuable ground if only cavalry had been available, but as it was we could see the guns being driven away into the distance, to be used against us, another day.¹²²

Once again the length of the chain of command had prevented local commanders from exploiting situations where a rapid deployment of mounted troops might have made a significant difference.

Only one small-scale, but significant cavalry success is recorded from 9 April. The Northamptonshire Yeomanry were serving as the corps cavalry regiment of VI Corps, and accompanied by the corps' 6th Cyclist Battalion formed the 'Corps Mounted Troops'. Their orders were to advance behind the 15th Division attack, and then pass through the infantry and seize the river crossings over the Scarpe at Fampoux. These crossings would be vital in retaining contact between VI Corps south of the river and XVII Corps to the north, as the two corps advanced on their respective Green Line objectives.

When Feuchy village (the northern end of the Brown line on the VI Corps front) was captured by 15th Division, around 5:00pm, the Yeomanry under Lt Col. Seymour, accompanied by 'A' Company of the Cyclists advanced through the infantry. Continuing along the river bank for a further 1km (1/2 mile) the Yeomanry reached the cross-roads south of Fampoux village. 'B' Squadron under Maj. Benyon turned left towards Fampoux, and despite coming under sniper fire from the houses north of the river, drove off the snipers, captured two field guns, and "made good the road bridge". Patrols were also sent across the river to link up with the forward elements of 4th Division north of the river. Meanwhile 'C' Squadron under Maj. Nickalls advanced further east to secure the railway bridge over the river, capturing four further guns and a number of prisoners. The two squadrons then bivouacked overnight, the horses

remaining saddled, in the marshes beside the river.¹²³ The Cyclist company had been held up somewhat by the bad going along the river bank but arrived in time to throw out outposts to the south-east on the Monchy road, and to help secure the position overnight.¹²⁴

Arras: 10 April

Although by nightfall on 9 April no units of Third Army had reached the Green Line, their final first day objectives, Allenby was content that the battle was going well, and was keen to push on and exploit the success of the first day. Orders were given for a renewed attack at 8.00am on the 10th in which all three corps were to secure the remainder of the Brown Line positions.¹²⁵ Orders were received from Third Army at the Cavalry Corps H.Q. at 11.30pm to be ready to move to support this attack at 7.00am.¹²⁶ However VII Corps on the right (South) of the line was held up by continuing fighting in the Hindenburg Line trenches opposite its attack, and asked for a delay. A new start time was therefore agreed of 12:00 noon, this was telephoned to Cavalry Corps H.Q. at 4.10am on the 10th and duly passed on to the cavalry divisions.¹²⁷ While allowing the infantry more time to re-organise and for artillery to be brought up, the late start reduced the opportunities for cavalry exploitation. As Falls put it “The prospects for the cavalry going through before dark were thus diminished.”¹²⁸ The attack on 10 April was successful in as much as the remainder of the Brown Line position, and Orange and Chapel hills beyond were captured.¹²⁹ Further advance, however proved difficult. The ground before Monchy-le-Preux was swept by fire not only from the village itself but also from positions to the north of the Scarpe around Mount Pleasant and Roeux. As a result the infantry attack was halted by nightfall on the forward slopes of Orange Hill and as far east as Les Fosses Farm.¹³⁰

To the north of the Scarpe, Gen. Fergusson, commanding XVII Corps (belatedly) considered that there might be a ‘favourable’ opportunity for cavalry along the north bank of the river from Fampoux towards Greenland Hill, supported by 4th Infantry Division attacking on their right towards Mount Pleasant and Roeux.¹³¹ Accordingly at 11.15am command of the whole of 1st Cavalry Division was restored to the Cavalry

Corps and Third Army from G.H.Q. (Excepting of course 9th Brigade still supporting the Canadians to the north.) Formal orders for the operation were issued as part of Cavalry Corps Operation Order No. 4 at 11.45am.¹³² Maj. Gen. Mullens' 1st Cavalry Division set off from its overnight position at Fermont-Capelle 10km (6miles) north-west of Arras at around 1.45pm,¹³³ closing up to 1st Brigade which had moved forward the previous day, and with 5th Dragoon Guards (of 1st Brigade) as advanced guard. Progress was slow, 1st Cavalry Brigade recorded that "the road along the north bank of the Scarpe was not only very bad, but the congestion of traffic going both ways caused numerous blocks."¹³⁴ When Brig. Gen. Makins, in command of 1st Brigade reached Fampoux at 4:30pm it was clear after consultation with the infantry commanders of 4th Division that their supporting attack had made no headway against fire from Roeux chemical works and the railway embankment. Thus the cavalry attack stood no chance of success.

There was no doubt that the cavalry could not advance – dismounted action would have had no more possible result than the infantry attack, and the mounted action was evidently not feasible. There was no scope, the troops were in a regular neck of a bottle, with no chance of outflanking movement.¹³⁵

The attack was called off and the division bivouacked where it stood, strung out between St. Nicholas, (north of Arras) and Fampoux. This attack was to be renewed at noon on the following day, 11 April, but the continuing opposition from Roeux made significant advances impossible and the operation was cancelled again at 6.00pm.¹³⁶

For the two cavalry divisions supporting the Third Army advance south of the Scarpe, the delay in the infantry attack from 8.00am until noon gave a welcome respite. Retirement on the night of the 9th had been very slow, against the flow of traffic moving up in support of the attack, and most units had not reached their bivouac positions until the early hours of the morning of the 10th. 5th Cavalry Brigade recorded that their last unit in, 'E' Battery R.H.A., did not arrive until 5.30am.¹³⁷ The weather had also deteriorated, Monday had been cold but fine, overnight the wind rose bringing heavy showers of sleet and snow.¹³⁸ 4th Cavalry Brigade, moving in support of 3^d and 5th Brigades of 2nd Cavalry Division recorded on 9 April that "Owing to the darkness and the state of the Cavalry track" some units did not reach bivouac positions until 3.00am,

“...weather conditions miserable.”¹³⁹ Again on 10 April “Weather conditions were abominable and could not have been worse.”¹⁴⁰

As daylight came on 10 April the cavalry divisions turned laboriously around and they now set out again on the tracks north and south of Arras. 3rd Cavalry Division was to advance north of the Cambrai road with Monchy as its immediate objective. 2nd Cavalry Division was to advance south of the road towards Hill 90, behind the southern end of the Wancourt-Feuchy position. (Orders were issued by telephone from Cavalry Corps H.Q. in the early hours of the morning, and formalised in Cavalry Corps Operation Order No.4, issued at 11.45am on the 10th.)¹⁴¹

North of the Cambrai road 3rd Cavalry Division was telephoned by the Cavalry Corps H.Q. at around 11.00am. It was reported that infantry of 37th Division had been seen in Monchy-le-Preux, and that consequently the leading brigades of 3rd Cavalry Division should advance.¹⁴² Accordingly, Maj. Gen. Vaughan, commanding 3rd Cavalry Division ordered an advance by 8th Brigade north of Monchy towards Boiry-Notre-Dame, and by 6th Brigade south of Monchy towards Vis-en-Artois (7th Brigade would remain in support). These movements began around 2:30pm.¹⁴³ Throughout the afternoon 3rd Cavalry Division received reports of the faltering progress of 37th Division towards Monchy, coupled with optimistic urgings from Kavanagh at Cavalry Corps to push on and become involved in the battle at the earliest opportunity. At 3.40pm the Divisional Diary records “Patrols in touch with Infantry reported that 37th Division held up at western exits to Monchy le Preux, ... [village] believed to be held by only two battalions which 37th Division hoped soon to dislodge.” Meanwhile at 3.50pm “Corps commander gave verbal orders on telephone that troops on south were pushing on well and that he wished division to push on rapidly and take risks.”¹⁴⁴ These telephone interventions were to become a common feature of Kavanagh’s command style, not only at Arras but also in later battles. Unfortunately, as will be explored more fully in later chapters, he was rarely in command of the full facts at Corps H.Q. and these interventions were often unhelpful.

By five o’clock it was apparent to those at the front line that the infantry attack had stalled short of Monchy. 3rd Cavalry Division reported to Cavalry Corps at 5.20pm “Our infantry have not got Monchy”.¹⁴⁵ To get the attack moving again 37th Division suggested that the cavalry gallop the ridge to the north of the village around Pelves Mill,

as machine-gun fire from this area had the infantry pinned down.¹⁴⁶ By this time the lead elements of 8th Cavalry Brigade had advanced as far as the forward slopes of Orange Hill and were coming under fire from Monchy and from across the river to the north-east. At around 6.00pm an attempt to advance was made by a squadron each of the 10th Hussars (under Capt. Gordon-Canning) and Essex Yeomanry (under Maj. Buxton). The two squadrons galloped as far as Pelves Mill,¹⁴⁷ but were driven back by artillery and machine-gun fire. Fortunately, their retreat was covered by a brief snowstorm. Casualties were also reduced by the Germans' use of high explosive shells, which largely buried themselves in the ground, instead of airburst shrapnel.¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile to the south of 8th Brigade, 6th Cavalry Brigade was supporting the infantry attack immediately to the west of Monchy, but this too was held up due to fire from the village and the Brigade could make no progress.¹⁴⁹

The armoured cars of 7th L.A.C. Battery (attached to 3rd Cavalry Division), also made an attempt to advance, pushing down the Cambrai road. This proved extremely difficult as the road surface was shell damaged and blocked by fallen trees. The weather also left the going very muddy and falling snow blocked the drivers' vision slits. The Battery diary records "with the exception of the drivers the personnel of the cars was constantly outside guiding and making up the road surface." Some Germans were engaged around La Bergère crossroads, but with nightfall the attempt was abandoned, one car having to be left at Les Fosses Farm, stuck in a shell-hole.¹⁵⁰

Meanwhile, south of the Cambrai Road Maj. Gen. Greenly's 2nd Cavalry Division was at its position of readiness at Tilloy by 12.30pm. The division advanced with 5th Brigade on the left towards the south end of the Wancourt-Feuchy line, and with 3rd Brigade on the right towards Hill 90, at around 3:00pm (4th Brigade remained in support). However, as Hill 90 remained in German hands little progress was made.¹⁵¹

At 6.00pm 37th Division reported "...that situation west of Monchy was not rosy",¹⁵² however this fact, although clear to those at the front, seems not to have been appreciated by the higher commanders. At 6:35pm a meeting took place between Allenby and Kavanagh where it was agreed that the cavalry should try to take Monchy that night, in co-operation with the 37th Division. Kavanagh once again telephoned Vaughan at 3rd Cavalry Division:

Corps Commander stated on telephone 6.35pm that both he and the Army Commander agreed that the Cavalry should make a determined effort to get Monchy tonight, as great importance was attached to the capture of Monchy. He considered that it was an opportunity for Cavalry to achieve important results by working wide round the flank in co-operation with infantry.¹⁵³

This was clearly an overly optimistic appreciation of the situation, however it should be noted that reports were very slow reaching Cavalry Corps H.Q. Formal word of the failure of 8th Cavalry Brigade's push on Pelves Mill, attempted at 6.00pm, did not reach Corps until 8.45pm.¹⁵⁴ In the event there was no opportunity for an infantry advance due to continuing shelling and machine-gun fire, and indeed some battalions of 37th Division did not receive the attack orders until after the preparatory artillery barrage had already lifted.¹⁵⁵ Thus no attack materialised.

The 3rd Cavalry Division retired at nightfall and bivouacked north of the Cambrai road and west of the Wancourt-Feuchy Line trenches and Orange Hill. No hot food was available and the ground was too soft to picket so the men sheltered in shell holes holding the horses. It snowed through most of the night. 8th Cavalry Brigade was subject to overnight shelling, 10th Hussars in particular suffered 9 men and 51 horses killed.¹⁵⁶ South of the Cambrai road Gen. Greenly commanding 2nd Cavalry Division gave his brigadiers the choice of staying put overnight, or retiring, on the proviso that they returned ready to resume the attack at 5:00am on the 11th. The three brigades chose to stay put, and bedded down in shell-holes where they were, spread out between Tilloy and Neuville Vitasse.¹⁵⁷ They were re-supplied overnight by packhorse with 6lb (3kg) of oats per horse.¹⁵⁸ 5th Brigade in particular came under significant shell-fire during the night, and unable to re-deploy due to the darkness and the amount of wire lying around their position, suffered over 100 human casualties as well as losing a number of horses.¹⁵⁹ Overall it was a cold and miserable end to a second frustrating day for the cavalry.

Monchy le Preux: 11 April

(Figure 3.5 overleaf)

Even on 11 April, the third day of the offensive, Allenby believed that the possibility remained of a decisive blow. Indeed his orders for the day suggest that he thought a collapse of the enemy resistance was imminent. A telegram to corps commanders ran: “The A.C. wishes all troops to understand that the Third Army is now pursuing a defeated enemy and that risks must be freely taken.”¹⁶⁰ How closely this represented the real situation is a moot point. The offensive was to be resumed by all three attacking Corps at 5:00am. Orders for the Cavalry Corps were issued at 11.45pm on the 10th.¹⁶¹ One cavalry division was to support each corps attack; 1st Division supporting XVII Corps north of the Scarpe, 3rd Division Supporting VI Corps between the river and the Cambrai road, and 2nd Division supporting VII Corps south of the road. Cavalry was to advance at 6:00am; “Each [infantry] division will have one [cavalry] brigade close up behind, and in close touch with, the attacking infantry.”¹⁶² Ambitious objectives were set, not only of capturing the Green Line of 9 April, but of pushing on as far as the final German position, the so-called ‘Drocourt-Queant Line’ (nearly 10km (6 miles) east of Monchy), and linking up with Fifth Army, attacking that morning from the south at Bullecourt.¹⁶³

The inability of the 1st Cavalry Division to advance north of the Scarpe has already been described. The activities of the 2nd Cavalry Division on the south side of the Cambrai road are equally quickly dealt-with. VII Corps to the south was tasked with the capture of Hill 90, and when this attack failed no opportunities remained for the division to advance. 2nd Cavalry Division remained in its overnight positions and came under renewed shell fire on the 11th, suffering significant casualties among the horses, before the whole division was withdrawn to its forming up positions in the Crinchon Valley at 4.50pm.¹⁶⁴

Between the Cambrai road and the Scarpe, the attack was resumed by VI Corps at 5:00am, supported by 3rd Cavalry Division. 15th Division attacked between Monchy and the Scarpe, while 37th Division attacked Monchy village itself. During the fighting of the previous day, 10 April, the German line to the north of Monchy had been held by the *Reserve Battalion* of the *162nd Regiment* of the *17th Reserve Division* holding a line

along the Monchy-Roeux road. This was a relatively fresh battalion. The line to the south through Monchy itself and along the Wancourt road was held by remnants of the other battalions of *162nd* and *163rd* Regiments, both of which had suffered heavily in the defence of Neuville Vitasse on 9 April, and subsequently holding the southern part of the Wancourt-Feuchy line. They had thus already been driven out of two previous defensive positions and their divisional artillery had been almost entirely captured or destroyed.

However, by the morning of 11 April the German position in Monchy had been reinforced (on the evening of the 10th) by the *3rd Bavarian Division*. In particular *I Battalion 17th Bavarian Regiment* took over positions in the village. Unfortunately as these positions were taken over at night the Bavarians had little chance to arrange a proper defence. As a result the Bavarian battalion was virtually destroyed in the 37th Division attack at dawn. By 7:30am elements of both 15th and 37th Divisions were holding positions in, and to the north of Monchy village; 13/KRRC and 13/Rifle Brg. of 111th Brigade (37th Div.) occupied the village, while 10 and 11/HLI of 15th Div held positions to the north.¹⁶⁵ Significantly, however, unlike the guns of the garrison of the village the previous day, the artillery of *3rd Bavarian Division* survived intact, and was deployed in a great arc behind Monchy ready to pour fire onto the village.¹⁶⁶

Vaughan's *3rd Cavalry Division* took up a position behind the infantry attack ready to exploit around the flanks of Monchy. Their objectives were Pelves Mill on the left, and Bois Du Vert and 'Hill 100' in the centre approximately 1000m (1100yds) beyond the village. At 7:10am 8th Cavalry Brigade learnt that 112th Brigade had a foothold in the western part of Monchy and reported this to *3rd Cavalry Division*.¹⁶⁷ Later at 7:55am 6th Cavalry Brigade to the south passed on a similar report: "112 Brigade report Monchy has fallen, also considers it safe to say that La Bergère has also fallen." Further patrol reports from the *3rd Dragoon Guards (6th Brigade)* suggested that the village was not wholly in British hands but that it was at least partly captured.¹⁶⁸ In response to this news, Brig. Gen. Bulkeley-Johnson, commanding 8th Cavalry Brigade ordered his brigade to advance on their objectives to the north of, and beyond the village. He issued verbal orders to the brigade:

Seize the ridge Bois des Aubepines to Pelves Mill; Essex Yeomanry on the right, Tenth Hussars on the left. When this is achieved, proceed to first objective,

namely Bois du Sart - east end of Pelves, including Hatchet and Jigsaw woods... to each leading regiment two subsections machine guns. Rest of Brigade to follow in this order, G battery R.H.A., Blues, remainder of Machine Gun Squadron.¹⁶⁹

He also reported the advance to 3rd Cavalry Division:

In consequence of information that Monchy is now taken I am sending off Tenth and Essex to try to get their objectives. They are both going south of Orange Hill as M.G. fire from the river is as bad as ever and holding up the infantry.¹⁷⁰

In the light of this advance, Brig. Gen. Harman of 6th Cavalry Brigade to the south ordered his own lead regiment, 3rd Dragoon Guards forward to conform with the 8th Cavalry Brigade move and cover their southern flank.

These three regiments moved forward over prepared trench crossings in the Wancourt Feuchy line at around 8:30am. 10th Hussars and Essex Yeomanry of 8th Brigade on the left (north), intending to circle around between Monchy and the Scarpe, while 3rd Dragoon guards of 6th Brigade headed south of the village. Emerging south of Orange Hill they advanced at the gallop, in line of troop columns, with one troop advanced as scouts.¹⁷¹ An advance in brigade strength like this was a rare enough sight to make a significant impression on the watching infantry. Capt. Cuddeford of the Highland Light Infantry (15th Div.) was witness to this advance:

During a lull in the snowstorm an excited shout was raised that our cavalry were coming up! Sure enough, away behind us, moving quickly in extended order down the slope of Orange Hill was line upon line of mounted men covering the whole extent of the hillside as far as we could see. It was a thrilling moment for us infantrymen, who had never dreamt that we should see a real cavalry charge, which was evidently what was intended.¹⁷²

It was at this moment that a decisive point was reached in the battle. The objectives of the cavalry advance lay beyond Monchy, and the squadrons had intended to skirt around the village, but after their experience the day before, Bulkeley-Johnson had ordered that if fire was encountered from north of the river the 8th Brigade should swing right and head directly for Monchy. The subsequent death of the Brigadier later that morning has denied history his own account of this decision, but it was recalled by Capt. Gordon-

Canning of the 10th Hussars, who had led the unsuccessful reconnaissance north of Monchy the day before:

On the morning of 11th I definitely said that it would be impossible to advance via the low ground on Pelves Mill; the advance must be made via Monchy and then directed N.E, along high ground in order to outflank Pelves and Pelves Mill. This was agreed to by B.J.¹⁷³

The advancing regiments were indeed brought under a heavy fire coming from Mount Pleasant Wood across the river and both regiments veered right into the village.¹⁷⁴ After a brief conference in the village square between Lt. Col. Whitmore of the Essex Yeomanry and Lt. Col. Hardwick of the 10th Hussars, one squadron of Essex Yeomanry advanced north-east along the Pelves road, while the lead 10th Hussars squadron moved north along the road to Pelves mill. The remaining Germans in the village fled, but it was found to be impossible to advance beyond the village due to fire from German positions to the east and north. Lt Col. Hardwick (C.O. 10th Hussars) took a squadron around the north side of the village but he was driven back into the cover of the village via the château park on the northern side. Hardwick was severely wounded in the course of this manoeuvre and Lt Col. Whitmore of the Essex Yeomanry took command of forces in the village.¹⁷⁵ These forces were quite substantial as in spite of the heavy fire received by the leading squadrons, and their inability to advance beyond the village, the remaining squadrons of both regiments had followed on closely, and rather than rallying back to Orange Hill had followed on into the village. Thus probably near to 1000 men and horses were packed into the village.

The infantry of 37th Division in Monchy were found to have suffered heavily, virtually all officers had been killed, and a party of only about seventy exhausted men was found in the western part of the village, many were sheltering in cellars rather than active in defence.¹⁷⁶ The infantry was set to collecting wounded, digging, and salvaging tools and ammunition while the cavalry took over defence of the village. The Vickers guns of the MG Squadron and the regimental Hotchkiss were deployed on the north-eastern, eastern, and south-eastern exits to the village, two strong-points being constructed; at the north-eastern apex of the château park, and on the eastern side of the Pelves road.¹⁷⁷ Unfortunately as a number of the tool-pack horses had been lost in the advance, fortifying the position proved difficult, in addition both the MG Squadron and the

regiments had lost a number of machine-gun ammunition packs, so rounds were in short supply.¹⁷⁸ The Essex Yeomanry made up for this loss by salvaging two infantry Lewis guns and bringing them into action.¹⁷⁹

By around 9.30am the village had been placed in a reasonable state of defence, but around this time German shelling of the village also started to intensify. While out in the open the effect of German shelling had been greatly nullified by the softness of the ground, this was not the case among the streets and buildings and the cavalry started to suffer heavily as a result. Large numbers of led horses filled the streets of Monchy, and sought cover on the western side of the village. These streets were soon blocked with dead and injured horses.¹⁸⁰

Meanwhile on the right of the 8th Cavalry Brigade, 6th Cavalry Brigade advanced as far as the Monchy-Wancourt road south of Monchy, with 3rd Dragoon Guards leading. The regiment advanced with B Squadron in front (Capt. Holroyd-Smith), with one troop of the squadron in line and the remaining three troops in line of troop columns behind, followed by C Squadron (Maj. Cliff). On reaching the road, the Dragoons came upon a party of Germans attempting to dig in, in front of four guns. These troops fled leaving the guns.¹⁸¹ Very few friendly infantry were to be seen and the Brigade came under fire from Guemappe 1000m (1100 yards) to the south-east, so they took up dismounted positions along the road, deploying their Hotchkiss guns, and supported by the Vickers of the attached MG section.¹⁸²

Towards 9:00am, in an attempt to assess the situation Brigadier Bulkeley-Johnson commanding 8th Cavalry Brigade, advanced with his staff as far as the Monchy-Fampoux road, but here he was killed. As a result command of the brigade fell to Lord Tweedmouth, C.O. of the Blues, although in fact with 10th Hussars and the Yeomanry in Monchy, Tweedmouth's command was limited for practical purposes to his own regiment, the brigade RHA battery, and the remainder of the Brigade MG Squadron.¹⁸³

At around 10:30am the 63rd Brigade (Reserve brigade of 37th Division) was ordered up to reinforce the village. These troops were able to advance only as far as an area of German practice trenches north-west of Monchy, where the bulk of the brigade took cover, feeding small parties into Monchy as opportunities arose during breaks in the firing.¹⁸⁴ Also at around this time the three batteries of horse artillery belonging to 3rd Cavalry Division; C, G, and K, Batteries of IV Brigade RHA came into action in

support of 6th and 8th Brigades. Deploying in the valley between the south end of Orange Hill and Monchy itself, they fired protective barrages beyond the village,¹⁸⁵ 450 rounds per battery were fired in the course of the day.¹⁸⁶

As the morning wore on, the situation in the village became grim, especially for the exposed horses. Indeed Lt. Swire of the Essex Yeomanry had to be specially detailed for the task of shooting wounded horses in the crowded streets.¹⁸⁷ Col. Whitmore reported at 11:10am:

Have sent several messages conveying all information of E.Y. and X.R.H. What remains of those regiments are holding on to the north-east, east and southern exits of the village. Require both M.G.s and ammunition. Am afraid we have had many casualties. Counter-attack expected. Col. Hardwick and several officers wounded. Reinforcements required as reserve. Majority horses casualties.¹⁸⁸

An attempt was made at around 11.20am by the Royal Horse Guards (Blues), with the remaining four guns of 8th Machine Gun Squadron to try and reinforce the village but this was forced back by the weight of fire falling around the village. Two gun pack horses were hit and the guns lost in the snow.¹⁸⁹ At this point Vaughan, in command of 3rd Cavalry Division realised that no further progress was likely and a decision was made for the division to “strengthen any position they now hold” using machine guns and to try to withdraw the remaining horses.¹⁹⁰ Those of 6th Cavalry Brigade (3rd Dragoon Guards) to the south of the village escaped without great loss, but the horses of 8th Cavalry Brigade were heavily shelled, and many more were killed during attempts to withdraw them.

A further despatch from Whitmore in Monchy at 11:45am read ‘We are badly in need of reinforcements and machine-guns.’¹⁹¹ In response to this a second attempt was made at around 2:00pm by A Squadron of the Royal Horse Guards and the remaining subsection of machine guns to reinforce the village. No. 1 MG Section did make it into the village, although the accompanying squadron of the Blues was forced back, perhaps fortuitously as their additional presence in the village would probably have served only to provide further targets for the German guns.

Similar concerns were being felt by the 3rd Dragoon Guards on the right (6th Cavalry Brigade) front. Fearing being outflanked to the south, where the line was held only by a

party of about thirty infantrymen, survivors of the morning attack, a message was sent at around 2.30pm asking for reinforcements. One squadron of the North Somerset Yeomanry (6th Cavalry Brigade), was despatched accompanied by four machine-guns, and by regimental tool-pack horses.¹⁹² An initial attempt to advance mounted was met with heavy machine-gun fire, but a second attempt on foot leading pack animals only was successful, reinforcing the 3rd Dragoon Guards on the Wancourt road.¹⁹³

By mid afternoon it was appreciated at all levels of command that the attack around Monchy had stalled. At 5.00pm, Kavanagh at Cavalry Corps H.Q. ordered the withdrawal of the un-engaged parts of the corps; (2nd Cavalry Division, and the 7th Brigade of 3^d Cavalry Division) to their former positions to the west of Arras. The remaining brigades in Monchy were to withdraw "...when the situation permits".¹⁹⁴ Indeed despite the fact that the Hussars, and Yeomanry in Monchy and the Dragoon Guards to the south fought on into the evening, Advanced Cavalry Corps Headquarters in Arras ignored them, closing at 6.00pm and withdrawing to Duisans, west of the city.

In the late afternoon infantry of 12th Division were sent into the village under cover of snow to relieve the cavalry. These were later reinforced by the 17th Division, formerly the division attached to the Cavalry Corps as part of the Third Army reserve.¹⁹⁵ As night fell a line was consolidated from Fampoux, through Monchy and along the Monchy-Wancourt road. The majority of the cavalry were withdrawn, handing over the defence of the village to 37th Infantry Brigade at midnight. Due to a lack of machine guns the cavalry Hotchkiss teams as well as the Vickers guns of the 8th Brigade Machine Gun Squadron were retained in Monchy until the following day. A party of fifty men, mostly 10th Hussars, stayed on under the command of Capt. Palmes.¹⁹⁶

With the departure of this stay-behind party on 12 April the part played by the cavalry in the Arras offensive came to an end. On the night of the 11th Allenby had ordered all the cavalry back to its billets of 8 April, to the west of Arras. After resting there they were further withdrawn on 16 April. On 18 April, Haig ordered Kavanagh to keep two brigades in readiness within 36 hours of the front line, but these were never called for and cavalry took no further part in the battle.¹⁹⁷

Lessons of Monchy

An analysis of the overall ‘success’ or otherwise of the cavalry in the operations during the advance to the Hindenburg Line has already been offered. It has been argued that while strategically of limited significance, these operations were tactically well conducted and reflect credit on the mounted troops involved. The production of the G.H.Q. pamphlet also reflects an acknowledgement of this at the time, even if this was to be forgotten by post-war commentators.

The part played by the Cavalry Corps in the Arras battles, however, is less easily defined. A simple verdict on the Arras offensive is offered by the fate of its commander. Allenby was removed from command of Third Army and sent off to Egypt.¹⁹⁸ Despite his later successes this move can only be viewed at the time as a demotion, and the inference from that is that the offensive was a failure. Rawlinson had learned in 1916 that such set piece offensives have a natural internal momentum, and to push on after that has run out is to court great human loss for little territorial gain, hence ‘Bite and Hold’. The latter stages of the Arras campaign follow this pattern, the battle was pushed on into the second half of April, when the Third army was exhausted and the Germans had reorganised their defences, and became increasingly bogged-down and bloody. The early stages of the attack, however, are rightly viewed as a notable success. The Third Army advanced further, faster, and with fewer losses than had been achieved hitherto in trench fighting. Unfortunately the cavalry attack at Monchy-le-Preux fell at the ‘high-water mark’ of the offensive. No further significant advances were made after 11 April, and the failure of 8th Cavalry Brigade has developed into a metaphor for the failure of the offensive as a whole, and for Allenby’s lack of understanding of the battle.

At first glance the cavalry fighting of 9-11 April supports this conclusion. Clearly the advance of 3rd Cavalry Division on 11 April was, from the point of view of its operational objectives, a failure. No units reached even their first objectives of Pelves Mill and Hill 100, and exploitation beyond towards the wider operational goal of the Drocourt-Quèant line 10km (6 miles) to the east, was never a possibility. Also, as Kavanagh wrote to Allenby in a letter of 13 April “Altogether I am afraid it has been rather an expensive business.”¹⁹⁹ Just how expensive is detailed in Appendix 3.2. 3rd

Cavalry Division as a whole took 598 casualties over the three days, and the regiments that held the line around Monchy suffered the greater part of these losses; over 400. Col. Whitmore estimated that by 11.00 am on 11 April the garrison of the village, (formed of the 10th Hussars, Essex Yeomanry, 8th MG Squadron and some infantry) had been reduced to "...considerably less than half its strength".²⁰⁰

This human loss, however, was overshadowed in the eyes of contemporary observers relatively accustomed such losses, (Preston described the casualties as ... "Regrettable [but] proportionately no higher than in many infantry attacks."²⁰¹) by the more unusual sight of the equally massive loss of horses. Lieutenant Alan Thomas, an infantry officer who visited Monchy on the evening of 12 April as part of the 37th Division described the scene:

Heaped on top of one another and blocking up the roadway for as far as one could see lay the mutilated bodies of our men and their horses. These bodies torn and gaping had stiffened into fantastic attitudes. All the hollows of the road were filled with blood. This was the cavalry.²⁰²

This passage has been picked up by nearly every subsequent published account of the battle,²⁰³ and serves as a graphic image of the scale of equine loss. Exact figures for horse casualties are hard to determine (this question will be examined in more detail later in this chapter), but may be estimated at somewhere between 500 and 1000. A 10th Hussar survivor of the battle offered the higher figure, claiming that his regiment left the village after dark with only 30 horses still in hand.²⁰⁴ Whatever the exact figure, the loss was enormous, and the gains very limited.

It is tempting to look no further at the involvement of the cavalry at Monchy than this, and to take Thomas' final words "This was the cavalry" as an overall verdict on their usefulness in the offensive.²⁰⁵ However while it is easy to characterise the offensive as a whole, and Monchy in particular as expensive failures, when these events are viewed in more detail, from the point of view of mounted troops, some facts emerge to the credit of the cavalry and their commanders.

The precise events of the early morning of 11 April remain somewhat controversial, The 'capture' of Monchy is claimed by the 37th Division, and a fine memorial to this achievement stands in the village. However units of 15th Division to the north, the cavalry, and even C Battalion of the Tank Corps all claimed a share of these laurels.²⁰⁶

What is less in doubt is that credit for the retention of the village in British hands for the remainder of the day falls to Col. Whitmore and the 6th and 8th Cavalry Brigades. Again as at Gueudecourt the previous autumn, a point had been reached where an important tactical objective fell briefly between the two armies. The German defences of the village had been more or less destroyed, but in making the effort 111th and 112th Brigades had so exhausted themselves that they were in no position to defend the ground gained against a counter-attack. The albeit somewhat accidental arrival of the cavalry secured the village for the British. Kavanagh claimed that "... if they had not gone in and occupied Monchy the Germans could have reoccupied it when they pleased."²⁰⁷ There is no evidence that the Germans made any serious attempt to recapture the village once the cavalry had arrived, concentrations of enemy infantry were noted on several occasions, but these were dispersed by artillery and machine-guns.²⁰⁸ However, this should not be viewed as evidence that they would not have taken it back if they thought it practicable, rather that the presence of the cavalry rendered such a counter-attack foolhardy.

The accidental nature of the cavalry presence in the village should also be stressed (and has been examined earlier). Monchy did not form the objective of their attack; a commander who deliberately placed nearly an entire brigade of cavalry in such a position, and left it there at the mercy of enemy artillery for the remainder of the day would be open to serious censure. However, in the confused situation of the morning of 11 April, the ability of the cavalry to consolidate (albeit at great cost) the work of the infantry earlier in the day, until proper infantry relief could be co-ordinated, probably turned the attack of 37th Division from a costly failure into a success.

It is possible to speculate why the Germans made no serious attempt to recapture Monchy. One answer, and possibly one of the key tactical lessons of the battle, is the effectiveness of cavalry machine-guns. Ivor Maxse is famous for observing later in the war that "A platoon without a Lewis Gun is not a platoon at all!"²⁰⁹ and the same may be said for the Hotchkiss guns in the cavalry. Since 1916 these had been issued at the level of 16 per regiment, or at least one per troop. This overcame the earlier problem created by the numerical weakness of cavalry units, namely that their dismounted rifle strength, and thus unit firepower was very low. The presence of pack-mounted Hotchkiss guns within the troops themselves, as well as the addition of the 12 Vickers

guns in each brigade machine-gun squadron, provided cavalry units with substantial mobile firepower. This was recognised before the Arras offensive began. The Third Army appreciation of 7th February stated that:

With the cavalry, as with the infantry, the essence of success lies in moving forward rapidly before German reinforcements arrive on the scene. Once the ground is gained it will not be difficult to hold it against counter attacks, having in view the great increase in firepower now made available by machine guns.²¹⁰

Col. Whitmore put this into practice at Monchy basing his defence of the village around machine gun strong points. Unfortunately many of the guns and as importantly ammunition pack-horses had been lost in the advance and he never had as many machine-guns as he would have liked. This is reflected in the stress he placed on “M.G.s and ammunition” in his messages to Brigade HQ., and the necessity of salvaging two infantry Lewis Guns found in the village. The remainder of the day resolved itself into a duel between the dwindling number of cavalry machine-guns firing from the village, many of which were put out of action,²¹¹ and German machine-guns and artillery seeking to silence them. In the event the cavalry were able to hang on, and the tenacity with which their guns were manned is reflected in the Victoria Cross awarded to Lance Corporal Mugford, formerly of the Essex Yeomanry, then serving in the 8th M.G. Squadron, who continued to man his Vickers with two broken legs, refusing to be taken to the aid post.²¹²

A similar situation developed to the south of the village where the 3rd Dragoon Guards based their defence of the Warcourt road around their machine-guns, receiving reinforcement of further guns from the 6th Brigade M.G. Squadron and from the North Somerset Yeomanry in the course of the afternoon. The *Brigade War Diary* drew attention to this stating:

O.C. 3rd D. Gds reported very favourably on Hotchkiss rifles stating that the line held by 3rd D. Gds was defended entirely with Hotchkiss rifles which were able to break up assembly of Germans prior to counter-attack.²¹³

The ability of relatively small numbers of machine-gun armed cavalry to defend tactically important positions leads to another important question concerning their use not only in the Monchy battle but in the offensive as a whole; were there simply too many cavalry? There is little doubt that Monchy could have been defended by a

significantly smaller force. To pack the whole of two regiments into the village simply resulted in the heavy casualties suffered by these units in the crowded streets, without greatly enhancing the potential defence. Kavanagh himself raised this point “Each Commanding Officer brought the other two squadrons of his regiment rather too close on the leading squadrons and in turn were forced to close into the village.”²¹⁴ Further reinforcements from the Royal Horse Guards and 8th MG Squadron also made several attempts to reach the village in the course of the day. But while the machine guns were desperately needed, and had been requested by Whitmore, it is hard to see what help the Blues would have been, other than to provide additional targets for the German artillery.

At a higher level, the same problem arose with the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions as a whole. Allenby deserves credit for his keenness to deploy these troops forward, and Final Positions of Readiness beyond the Black Line (German Front Line) reflect a useful tactical change from 1916 when such formations were typically held hopelessly far behind the line. However it is clear that Allenby miss-read the battle in one critical respect. After the infantry made the dramatic progress of 9 April, he seems to have concluded that the battle was very nearly won, and that the successes of the first day would continue on subsequent days. As he put it in his telegram to corps commanders on 10 April; “The A.C. wishes all troops to understand that Third Army is now pursuing a defeated enemy and that risks must be freely taken.”²¹⁵ He expressed slightly more reservation in a letter to his wife the same day, but the tone is similar: “The battle is not over, as we are still on the tail of the enemy, pressing and capturing their rearguards.”²¹⁶ If this is viewed alongside the deep objectives set out for the cavalry advance on 11 April, it is clear that he did not anticipate much organised resistance.

In drawing this conclusion Allenby was simply wrong. It has been pointed out by both Falls²¹⁷ and Wynne²¹⁸ that at Arras the new German techniques of defence in depth were not fully developed. Counter-attack divisions were held too far in reserve (to protect them from Allied artillery), and were thus not available to support the front line divisions, which were in many cases virtually wiped out. Nonetheless, the German position was, if incomplete, still significantly deeper than those of the previous year. A typical German regimental defensive position (of three battalions) now extended to a depth of up to 10km (6 miles)²¹⁹ as opposed to the deployment over as little as 1000m (1100 yards) used previously on the Somme. It was therefore unrealistic to expect that

after an infantry advance of only around 5km (3 miles), that had not completely overcome the enemy's existing fixed defences (much of the Brown line was still in German hands on the night of 9 April) that cavalry would be able to advance in strength unimpeded. Instead the 2nd and 3rd Divisions were trapped, out of reach of water and supply, in the muddy space between Arras at their backs and the remaining German defences in front of them to the east.

It is arguable that the greater progress achieved by XVII Corps north of the Scarpe offered the possibility of cavalry exploitation. Unfortunately on this side of the river the available cavalry of 1st Division had been held so far back in reserve (in a manner reminiscent of the Somme battles the year before) that it was not able to reach the battlefield in time. E. L. Spears summed up the frustration felt by those who were witness to these events:

As a cavalry officer I cannot but feel the deepest regret that my old arm was so mishandled. There seems to be absolutely no doubt from the evidence of infantry officers, both of the 9th and 4th Divisions, that cavalry could have got through on their fronts on the afternoon of the 9th. It is deplorable that instead of this being attempted the division north of the river was held so far back as to be useless, while south of it great masses of horsemen clogged the advance of both infantry and guns.²²⁰

Elsewhere Spears went on to add "in one respect the unfortunate cavalry... was lucky in that the Germans had neither guns to fire nor planes to see with; for this great assembly of horses only four thousand yards from the front presented an unheard-of target."²²¹ In the light of what happened at Monchy this is an important point. Fortunately apart from those engaged at Monchy, only one brigade was exposed to significant shelling. 5th Cavalry Brigade came under fire between 5.00pm on 10 April and 7.00am on the 11th as it occupied a position at the southern end of the cavalry line opposite Wancourt and Hill 100. Here losses were substantial, amounting to over 100 human and nearly 350 equine casualties suffered in one night.²²²

Losses from enemy artillery were not the only casualties suffered by the Cavalry Corps over the three days spent in and out of the forward area. The extreme weather also played a significant part. The generally poor condition of the horses as a result of a long cold winter on short rations has already been discussed. Added to this was the

heavy weight carried (including extra ammunition and horse feed), and the dreadful going on roads and cavalry tracks which rapidly deteriorated into deep mud and slush. Maj. Parks, Assistant Director Veterinary Services (A.D.V.S.) of 2nd Cavalry Division summed up the conditions; “The cavalry track was deep with mud almost impassable to riding horses, quite impassable to wheels; horses suffering from exposure got down and were unable to rise.”²²³ Even in the billeting areas to the west of Arras the weather made conditions terrible. Trooper Bailey of 1st Life Guards (7th Cavalry Brigade) gave a vivid and widely quoted description of the morning of 10 April on Arras racecourse:

The horses had pulled up their heel pegs and were huddled together. Some were dead through exposure, others had chewed their saddle blankets to pieces. It was impossible to release the head chains as they were completely frozen, and so were our fingers. ... After a while came the order to saddle up and mount. What with the freezing night which had weakened the horses and our combined weight, many of them just collapsed and died.²²⁴

Maj. Jolliffe, A.D.V.S. of 3rd Cavalry Division complained after the battle that “There appears to be a great deal of difficulty in obtaining accurate figures for horse casualties - ...in a large proportion of cases it was quite impossible to find out what had become of the horses that were missing.”²²⁵ This remains the case. Accurate overall figures for horse losses are difficult to determine, not least because there was little standardisation in listing. Horses were recorded as ‘killed in action’, ‘died’, ‘destroyed’, ‘evacuated’, ‘wounded’ and a host of other sub-categories. A table of fatal horse casualties for the Cavalry Corps was produced by the Deputy Director Veterinary Services (D.D.V.S.) and this is reproduced as Appendix 3.3, however it is clear from other sources that the total of 1208 fatalities for the Corps suggested by the D.D.V.S. is an underestimate of the losses. For 2nd Division the figure of 464 excludes a further 308 horses wounded or evacuated²²⁶ giving a divisional total of 772. Similarly, a further 382 horses evacuated²²⁷ should be added to the figure of 603 for 3rd Division giving a total of 985. On this basis the figure for 1st Division of 141, should perhaps be increased by around 50% to 200. This gives an overall corps loss of approximately 2000 equine casualties from all causes.

Clearly the majority of losses in 3rd Cavalry Division were from enemy fire (in 6th and 8th Cavalry Brigades in particular). However for units less heavily engaged the losses

from cold and exhaustion were proportionally higher. 5th Cavalry Brigade lost 347 killed wounded and missing from shellfire, but a further 130 died of exhaustion.²²⁸ 4th Cavalry Brigade, who as divisional reserve suffered very little at the hands of the Germans lost 15 horses killed and wounded, but a further 65 either died of exhaustion or had to be destroyed. In addition 29 were evacuated sick.²²⁹ In the light of these figures the ‘mishandling’ of the Cavalry Corps complained of by Spears becomes all the more evident as their advance not only exposed them to enemy attack to no purpose but also the very act of advancing in such atrocious conditions inflicted significant casualties on already weakened horses.

In view of all these difficulties and losses, and of Allenby’s over-optimism, the question arises whether *any* useful rôle existed for cavalry in the offensive. The deepening of the German defensive system had made a ‘breakthrough’, in the sense of a complete strategic penetration of their organised defences as Haig had envisioned the year before, ever less likely. It is not axiomatic, however, that this diminished the possible usefulness of mounted troops in the offensive. It has been shown earlier in the remarks of Maj. Darling that during the winter cavalry had been training for a re-defined offensive rôle, involving relatively close ‘definite objectives’ and interacting with supporting infantry. It is arguable that the deepening of the German defensive zone, rather than offering fewer opportunities for mounted troops, in fact had an opposite effect. As the battle area deepened, fighting inevitably became more fluid, with a lower density of troops and artillery within it. In this more open fighting the potential for small mounted units to exploit ‘gaps’ at a tactical rather than operational and strategic level, and to take advantage of fleeting opportunities was ever greater. Cavalry could also potentially extend of the gains of the infantry (typically limited, as at Arras, to around 5km (3 miles)) and push on to the full depth of the enemy defences.

As this study will go on to show, the full significance of this change was not appreciated, and reflected in cavalry fighting until the following year. The seeds of it were evident at Arras, and again at Cambrai in November 1917 but were not fully developed until Amiens in 1918. However on both those later occasions this cavalry effort followed closely on the heels of the infantry attack on the first day, or even first few hours of the battle. A significant dislocation of the German defences could be expected from the shock of the opening of an offensive, and therein lay the opportunity

for the cavalry. To expect that this effect would persist until the following day, or as Allenby did, to the third day of the battle was simply unrealistic. German reinforcements could be expected if not within hours then at least within a day, and after that any forward momentum would be lost.

The operations around Monchy reflect a move towards this new style of fighting, initial objectives were quite modest and infantry support was expected to take over the positions gained. Unfortunately the command structure and communications available to 37th Division and to the cavalry were not flexible enough to cope with this new style of fighting. Artillery co-ordination in particular failed completely. In the attempt to deploy guns forward to support the renewed attacks confusion reigned. The commander of 111th Brigade reported of his attack on Monchy on the morning of 11 April: “At 5.00am when the attack started my brigade had no artillery support, and I did not know what batteries had been allotted to me, or who was commanding them.”²³⁰ Indeed it has been suggested that the bombardment which did arrive in support of this attack actually fell on the attackers, hitting two of the four available tanks.²³¹ If this was the situation in a prepared infantry attack, how much more difficult it would be to support more spontaneous mobile cavalry operations can only be imagined. Allenby’s remarks about the need for troops to discard the habit of waiting for a “...scientifically arranged barrage” have been quoted earlier, but while the flexibility he was urging was admirable, proper artillery support remained fundamental to the success of any attack. As was mentioned above, this general deterioration in the organisation of the attackers was also exacerbated by a corresponding, inverse level of *re*-organisation by the Germans. By the third day of the battle the defences around Monchy had hardened out of all proportion to their condition on 9 April.

The fate of the 8th Cavalry Brigade at Monchy has been blamed on a neglect of these tactical basics. Capt. R. Gordon-Canning, who commanded ‘B’ squadron of the 10th Hussars in the battle wrote to the Cavalry Journal in the 1930s making this point:

I consider that arrangements should have been made for a machine gun and artillery barrage on to Pelves Mill and Mt. Pleasant Wood. The German garrisons were left untouched to do what they liked with us...The invariable error of a localised attack was again brought out. No sooner were the two advanced regiments in Monchy than all further movement stopped. This

permitted every German gun to concentrate on Monchy within two minutes of our arrival. If a holding attack had been carried out by the infantry on Pelves Mill and Roeux at the identical moment of our advance, I believe the cavalry could have obtained Keeling Copse and Bois des Aubepines within half-an-hour of leaving Orange Hill.²³²

In short, in the absence of diversionary attacks, and suitable artillery and machine-gun support, the cavalry inevitably became trapped in the village, a target for enemy artillery. Of the Army level artillery support proposed for the cavalry in orders of 8 April, (referred to earlier) no sign can be found on 11 April. Even the 3^d Cavalry Division's own integral R.H.A. batteries only came into action in support of the attack at around 10.30am, by which point the lead regiments were already bogged-down in Monchy, and the initiative had been lost. Had proper artillery support been available to the cavalry from the outset of their attack, (As had been the case in the Hindenburg Line battles in March) the result may have been very different.

A second aspect of this new fighting which has been alluded to earlier is scale. Two divisions of cavalry advanced on the VI Corps front, yet it has been suggested that Monchy was somewhat over-garrisoned by two regiments, and during the offensive as a whole only three or four regiments were seriously engaged (out of eighteen). It is arguable that very similar results could have been obtained with a far smaller force of cavalry, and indeed that a smaller force would have been more manoeuvrable, and would have led to a less cumbersome command structure and more flexibility. Falls recognised this, observing "In place of the ambitious scheme of using cavalry in masses, by divisions, as was projected south of the Scarpe, the best opportunity seems to have been for squadrons acting independently."²³³ For this to work, however, a change in command structure and philosophy would also be necessary, with far more delegation to front line leaders. Falls again, "... responsibility and freedom of action should be delegated to subordinate commanders who are well forward. The German system which made the battalion commander the real controller of the battle proved its value again and again."²³⁴ Sadly there was little evidence of this on the British side at Arras. The situation north of the Scarpe on 9 April serves as an example, where local commanders saw the potential for mounted exploitation but had no cavalry to hand, and no authority to obtain them.

Much of this may seem somewhat theoretical, and based upon hindsight, but the Arras fighting does offer one practical demonstration of these principles. The capture of the bridges at Fampoux by the VI Corps Mounted Troops (the Northamptonshire Yeomanry and Corps Cyclists) on 9 April is a brilliant example of the potential for small units to exploit the more fluid situation, advance past the leading infantry, and seize points of tactical importance. Not only did this small force successfully reach the bridges which formed their objective, they captured a number of German guns in the process, and were still holding on 36 hours later in a position to support the attack on Monchy on the morning of 11 April. Stephen Badsey's comparison of cavalry with paratroops has been referred to earlier in this study, but in this case it is perhaps particularly apt. The seizure of bridges ahead of the main force by lightly equipped mobile forces immediately conjures images of later airborne operations, the difference being that at Arras it was entirely successful.

Unfortunately the very success of the Northampton's advance (the regiment took only four casualties),²³⁵ and the small scale of the operation has led to it being widely overlooked when the rôle of the cavalry in the offensive is considered. Monchy is not only a larger action, but possesses the components of mass casualties and 'pointless sacrifice' that fulfil popular expectations of a Great War cavalry battle. It was at Fampoux rather than Monchy, however, that the real potential of mounted troops on the evolving trench battlefield of 1917 was demonstrated.

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CHAPTER 4

CAMBRAI, NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1917

Then a most ludicrous thing happened, there was a great deal of clattering, galloping and shouting and a lot of our medieval horse soldiers came charging down the street; I yelled to them that the bridge was gone but they took no notice of me and went right up to it, one MG would have wiped out the lot, and then they turned about and with a very piano air trotted back the way they had come.

Maj. Philip Hammond,
'F' Battalion Tank Corps¹

Introduction

It has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters that at a tactical level the cavalry was capable of being an effective fighting force, both offensively, as on the Somme, and in March 1917, and in the defence of static positions using firepower at Monchy-le-Preux. However, both in 1916 and the first half of 1917 this potential was largely negated in set piece attacks by failures of command, control and communications, and of operational planning which excluded the cavalry from much of the fighting, or by failures of the initial infantry and artillery attack to create the opportunities for mounted advance.

This chapter examines the part played by the cavalry in the Cambrai offensive of November 1917, and the German counter-attack that followed in December. Although it does not form a major case study, brief consideration is also given to the Third Ypres battles of August to November that year. Despite a lack of major cavalry action at Ypres the planning for the offensive sheds light on the thinking of senior commanders, in particular Gen. Gough, whose involvement with the cavalry is examined in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

The offensive near Cambrai in November 1917 was initially an enormous success, a substantial 'break in', at least, was achieved in the German defences. Thus in theory an ideal opportunity for the cavalry to show its mettle was created. Unfortunately, the cavalry entirely failed to take advantage of this, and the arm has been vilified as a result

ever since. Once again the roots of this failure lay in the complexity of the chain of command and the inadequacies of communications. This theme will be explored in some detail in the following pages. It will be shown that these structural problems were also compounded by failures of command by individual leaders at the higher levels. By contrast, once again on the few occasions where individual units were able to enter the fight they did so with their accustomed skill and vigour.

The offensive was also the first occasion where tanks and cavalry were both used in large numbers. How well these two arms were able to co-operate, or indeed were expected to co-operate will be examined. In particular the contrast between the structure and function of the two Corps; Tank and Cavalry, will be investigated. It will be shown that far from being the polar opposites some have suggested, the two arms had potentially much to learn from each other.

Cambrai, A Tank Battle?

Unlike Arras earlier in the year, which ranks as one of the 'forgotten' offensives of the Great War, the attack at Cambrai in November 1917 has received a significant amount of scholarly attention. Unfortunately, from a cavalry perspective, the focus of most of these studies is evident in the titles, such as *The First Tank Battle, Cambrai 1917*,² produced by Robert Woollcombe, grandson of Lt. Gen. Sir Charles Woollcombe, commander of IV Corps, and Brian Cooper's *The Ironclads of Cambrai*,³ both published in 1967. These were followed by A J Smithers' *Cambrai the First Great Tank battle 1917*,⁴ produced in 1992. Only William Moore's *A Wood called Bournon, The cover-up after Cambrai, 1917*⁵ takes a slightly less techno-centric viewpoint, but follows the same line as its predecessors with regard to mounted troops. Tim Travers devoted a chapter to Cambrai in his *How the War was Won* (1992) but as will be discussed his viewpoint is perhaps the most technophile of all.⁶

The primary interest of all these writers is the tank, and Cambrai as the first manifestation of large scale armoured warfare. This is an entirely legitimate theme, but as has been observed in earlier chapters, it is all too easy when seeking to emphasise the importance of the (actually rather faltering) first steps of the tank, to offer as a

counterpoint the manifest uselessness of the cavalry arm. All of these works are guilty of this to a greater or lesser extent, characterised by the fact that the opinion on the 'medieval' cavalry expressed by Maj. Hammond at the head of this chapter occurs repeatedly in them.

The use of the cavalry as a convenient scapegoat for the failures of the Cambrai offensive as a whole began almost as soon as the battle was over. When the battle was debated in the House of Commons in December 1917 the use of cavalry was described as "...obviously absurd."⁷ This criticism continued after the war and led to the complaint by T. T. Pitman in the *Cavalry Journal* that,

Of all the cavalry operations on the Western Front, none met with more criticism than their 'action' or as some say, 'inaction' at the Battle of Cambrai. Their failure to achieve success gave anti-cavalry critics the opportunity they had been seeking since 1915, and the result was censure by many, who neither knew their subject, nor the orders that were issued to the cavalry whom they condemned.⁸

The Cambrai volume of the *Official History*⁹ was one of the last of the series to appear, published as late as 1948. While the compiler Wilfrid Miles gave a reasonably balanced account of the Cavalry's performance, this was not so with the Preface, written by Sir James Edmonds, who took the opportunity to repeat once again the words of his anonymous American concerning '...the last machine-gun' (discussed earlier in this study) and to observe "It is by no means certain... that there was any place for bodies of horse on the battlefields of 1917."¹⁰

The tone having been set by Edmonds, the degree of vilification heaped on the cavalry seems if anything to have grown with the passing of the years. Robert Woollcombe, writing in 1967 devoted a chapter to 'The failure of the cavalry'.¹¹ This largely took the form of an analysis of the communications difficulties of 1st Cavalry Division and IV Corps on 20th November, and does contain a useful commentary on the events of the day. By contrast Smithers in 1992 did not devote space to such an analysis, restricting himself to sweeping judgements. He quotes Col. Baker-Carr of the Tank Corps "Nothing much has been said about the cavalry, for there is nothing to say... The cavalry, after blocking all the roads for miles, sat down behind a hill, and remained there all day and then returned homewards, again blocking up the roads which were desperately needed to bring up every sort of supplies for tanks and infantry." He went

on once again to invoke the views of Maj. Hammond of the Tank Corps "... those poor horse soldiers were a pitiful sight in a modern war."¹²

The balance has been somewhat redressed in recent years with the 1997 publication of Anglesey's volume on the Western Front¹³ which covers Cambrai from the cavalry perspective in some detail. The exploits of the Indian cavalry on 30 November and 1 December were also covered by Gordon Corrigan (an authority on the Indian army in the Great War) in the cavalry chapter of his recent *Mud, Blood and Poppycock*.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it remains the case that, as Anglesey observed, Cambrai was a battle "in which the cavalry took a controversial part which has never been adequately studied."¹⁵

The Background to Cambrai: Third Ypres

Almost from the moment of his appointment to the command of the B.E.F., Field Marshal Haig took the view that a decisive blow was best delivered against the Germans at the northern end of the Western Front, in Flanders.¹⁶ This ambition was thwarted by the need for inter-allied co-operation over both the Somme and Arras operations, as has been alluded to earlier in this study. With the collapse of Nivelle's offensive in the south, the disturbances in the French army that followed, and the replacement of that general by Petain as Commander-in-Chief of the French army in May 1917,¹⁷ Haig finally got an opportunity to put his plan into effect. The product of this was the series of battles from August to October 1917 officially known as 'Third Ypres', but more commonly and iconically referred to as 'Passchendaele'. A formal case-study has not been made of Third Ypres here as there was very little involvement of mounted troops in the battle. However it forms the background to the Cambrai offensive, and even though large scale cavalry operations did not take place, the rôle of mounted troops in the operational plan, and the small part played by the Corps Cavalry Regiments, merits examination as it shows the continuing evolution of mounted fighting.

In brief, the plan for the opening phase of the offensive starting on 31 July, which came to be known as the Battle of Pilkem Ridge, was for an advance out of the Ypres salient over a fifteen mile (24km) wide front. The Second Army on the right of the attacking front under Gen. Plumer would make limited advances to secure the southern

flank, while the Fifth Army on the left under Gen. Gough would launch the main attack east and north, pivoting on its left flank, towards Pilkem Ridge and then north-east towards Passchendaele itself. Passchendaele village and the spine of the ridge were to be captured by Day 4, and by Day 9 (8 August) Gough was to have reached, and linked up with operations launched by British and French forces along the coast. How realistic in its objectives this plan was, and its chances of success, have been regularly criticised. Sir James Edmonds observed in his preface to the *Official History*: “Almost every point in connection with it became in after years a matter of controversy, or rather a reason for attacking the reputation of Field Marshal Earl Haig.”¹⁸ In particular the appointment of Gough to command the greater part of the battle in preference to Plumer (the architect of the triumphant Messines operations) has given ammunition to those of a ‘Cavalry Generals’ persuasion. Leon Wolff commented:

And of all British generals with a zest for the assault the name of Sir Hubert Gough headed the list. In his hands Haig placed the spearhead of the campaign, though he and his army had never set foot in the salient before. Because he was only forty-seven, impetuous, and an ex-cavalryman like his chief, Haig considered him more likely to crash through than Plumer and Rawlinson, both of whom were older and (in the past) more sympathetic toward limited attacks for partial gains – precisely what Haig did not have in mind at the moment.¹⁹

This interpretation is at best a gross oversimplification of the situation. It would appear that Haig did still retain hopes for a decisive blow, but no longer considered this to be the only, or even the most likely outcome. He looked for a plan of attack which was methodical and limited in initial objectives, but which retained the flexibility to exploit any greater opportunities that might occur; as Vandiver recently put it “Haig’s idea of objectives ran wider and deeper than ‘Bite and Hold’ tactics, but it has to be said that he turned to these methods in practice.”²⁰ This may have been in part a response to the Messines battle where there was a growing feeling that more could have been made of the spectacular success of that attack and that the offensive was overly conservative in its aims and was consolidated too quickly.²¹

The command arrangements have been characterised as Gough, a ‘Thruster’ planning deep, ambitious objectives, with Haig, rather than endorsing this, frequently calling for caution and delay on the part of his subordinate, eventually handing the greater part of

control of the battle back to Plumer and Second Army.²² As will be outlined below, in fact Gough's plan for the battle was more sophisticated and measured than is widely acknowledged, and shows his growing understanding of the rôle of cavalry on the battle field of 1917 (This theme is examined in more detail in Chapter 6). Within the operations of Third Ypres the seeds of a tactical change can once again be seen in the application of mounted troops, and in combined-arms fighting. Similar traces were apparent at Arras, and although not fully exploited at Cambrai, were to become mature features of the battles of 1918.

Little had changed in the operations of the large bodies of cavalry within the Cavalry Corps itself. There is nothing in the orders for, and movements of these Cavalry Corps units which is noticeably different from the Somme or Arras. In preparation for the Ypres offensive, all five divisions of cavalry were concentrated around St Pol, around 40 miles (64km) south-west of Ypres, under G.H.Q. control.²³ Two divisions were moved up to the shoulders of Fifth Army's attack, positioned at Elverdinge, 4 miles (7km) to the north-west, and Dickebusch 2½ miles (4km) south-west of Ypres. Two further divisions were to be advanced as required to an advanced concentration area at Merville about half-way between St Pol and Ypres.²⁴ In the event none of these troops were to become involved in the battle.

It is, however, in examination of the activities of the Corps Cavalry Regiments attached to infantry units that a new development is revealed. Gough characterised the plan for the Ypres offensive in a memorandum of 28 June as "a succession of organised attacks at short intervals"²⁵. The attack was not to over-reach itself by trying to push on continuously, as at Arras, nor to be satisfied with a single 'Bite and Hold' as at Messines. Rather a series of manageable 'bites' would be carried out in quick succession, (repeated every 3-10 days) allowing the attacking forces to bring up guns, and stay in supply and communication, but at the same time not allow the enemy to re-organise. (This is a manifestation of the concept of 'Tempo'; the ability to assemble repeated attacks within a short time-frame, which was one of the keys to success in 1918.)²⁶ Orders continued to describe a succession of coloured objective lines corresponding to successive German defensive positions, but a complete breakthrough of all of these at the first push was not necessarily expected.

Orders for the 8th Division (part of II Corps attacking Château Wood) stated that while the first three objective lines were to be captured on timetable, the advance to the Fourth Objective (German Third Line) would be developed much more flexibly, and “will consist of pushing out strong cavalry and infantry patrols with tanks, supported by larger bodies to secure localities.”²⁷ The advance to the Fourth Objective would only take place on ‘Z Day’ if it were found to be weakly held, otherwise the division would consolidate on the third objective. In the case of the 8th Division the ‘strong cavalry patrols’ were to be formed from a squadron of the Yorkshire Dragoons attached to the division from II Corps. Thus mounted troops would be used within the deeper battlefield, to secure local objectives as opportunities arose, and the attack as a whole would not over-reach itself.

In the event the attack of II Corps on 31 July stalled on its early objectives and so the Yorkshire Dragoons remained in reserve. However, similar orders were issued to the Corps Cavalry Regiment of XIV Corps; King Edward’s Horse, and, as their *War Diary* records they did come into action.²⁸ The XIV Corps formed the northernmost of the attacking corps of Fifth Army, and the two attacking divisions of the corps were each allocated a squadron of K.E.H.; ‘B’ Squadron supporting the 39th Division and ‘C’ Squadron the 51st. ‘A’ Squadron was on traffic duties in the rear, but its Hotchkiss teams were divided among the other two squadrons, bringing the number of guns in each squadron up to six. By midday on 31 July the 51st Division had captured its second objective line, west of the Steenbeck stream. At 12:30pm, ‘C’ Squadron K.E.H. received a message from the 1/6 Seaforths saying that they had crossed the stream with a small party (30 men) but that while they could see no enemy they required support. ‘C’ Squadron advanced mounted as far as Ferdinand Farm, on the west bank of the stream, before coming under fire, which forced them to dismount and deploy behind the infantry around the farm. The Hotchkiss teams in particular were able to give valuable support to the infantry by firing overhead from their position slightly to the rear. This continued for the remainder of the day, until all but the Hotchkiss teams were withdrawn at 11:30pm, the machine gunners being relieved by infantry the following morning. The squadron suffered 11 men killed and 13 wounded (out of a strength of probably around 120 or approximately 20%). But also as the diary records “The horses during all this time were in a bad way as they were continually falling into shell holes

full of mud, and were also exposed to artillery and machine-gun fire.”²⁹ 51 Horses were listed as killed or missing.

The exploits of ‘C’ Squadron K.E.H. can only be considered a very minor part in the vast canvas of Third Ypres, but they are significant in that they represent an unusual degree of tactical flexibility and combined-arms thinking. Cavalry, albeit in small quantities was attached directly to the front line attacking divisions, and came under their immediate command. Also its integrated use not only after battle objectives had been reached by the infantry, but as part of the fight for those objectives was built into the plan for the attack. The capability of mounted troops not only for patrolling ahead of the infantry, but also for providing valuable mobile supporting firepower, was demonstrated. If troops were to have been attached from the Cavalry Corps itself this would have been further augmented by the Vickers guns of the MGC(C) Squadrons. This potential had already been demonstrated at Monchy le Preux in April, but as has been discussed in Chapter 3, that was largely by accident and did not represent a deliberate tactic. At Ypres this integrated use of cavalry can be seen built into the plan of attack, albeit tentatively and in small numbers, from the outset.

In using cavalry forces in this way Gen. Gough can arguably be seen applying the spirit of Haig’s ideas on the application of cavalry, both in small packets within the battle but also in a large ‘mass of decision’ held to the rear. In this aspect the plan for Ypres is reminiscent of that for Loos two years before, as discussed in Chapter 2. Gough did not get the opportunity to plan another set piece offensive after 1917, but as will be examined at more length in Chapter 6, his ideas concerning cavalry continued to evolve in a way that those of his colleagues in other Army commands possibly did not.

Cambrai: The Plan

(Figure 4.1 overleaf)

The long struggle that was Third Ypres was brought to an end after the capture of Passchendaele village by Canadian forces in mid-November 1917.³⁰ In the light of the effort and cost of the fighting in Flanders it is difficult to see why Haig launched another offensive towards Cambrai less than a fortnight later. A variety of factors influenced the decision to make another attack so late in the year. Individually none of

them was a compelling reason for an offensive, but their conjunction was sufficient to generate the impetus for another battle. Unfortunately, as will be seen, this conjunction did not lead to a coherent plan, nor were the various participants clear how their various individual motivations interacted with one-another. The result of this was an under-resourced offensive which lacked clear operational objectives, and which turned short-term success into longer-term failure.

As early as the end of April 1917 Haig had discussed with Nivelle an attack in the Cambrai area, to draw off German reinforcements from the already faltering French attack in the south. Fourth and Fifth Army staffs were tasked to examine the question, and on 19 June III Corps, then part of Fourth Army, produced a plan for a small scale operation. By then, however, the justification for such an operation had passed. Also in June, Gen. Byng took over Third Army from Allenby, who departed for Egypt, and on 5 July Third Army took over the Fourth Army area including III Corps. Thus the III Corps plan arrived on Byng's desk at Third Army.³¹

Simultaneously, in July 1917 the Tank Corps, (formerly Heavy Branch Machine-Gun Corps) came into existence.³² The commander of the new corps, Brig. Gen. Elles, and his Chief of General Staff, Lt. Col. Fuller, were keen to develop an operation which would show off the potential of their tanks, newly upgraded in the form of the Mark IV. These had been available since June, and were now in service in substantial numbers. On 4 August Elles and Fuller submitted a plan to G.H.Q. for a tank-based raid in the Cambrai area. This received a cold reception as staff were busy with Ypres. The same plan, however was passed the following day to Byng at Third Army. Byng was only too happy to include the tanks as part of an offensive plan already under consideration.³³

Thirdly, on the staff of IV Corps in the line opposite Cambrai was Brig. Gen. Tudor, commanding the artillery of 9th Division. He too came up with a plan, advocating a surprise attack based upon unregistered artillery bombardment. This too was passed via Lt. Gen. Woollcombe, commanding IV Corps, to Third Army on 23 August.³⁴ Byng took a plan combining all these elements to Haig at the end of August. The situation in Flanders meant that Haig was not in a position to approve the attack or make any firm promises of resources, but Byng was encouraged to continue planning on paper against a day when the plan might be put into effect. That day came on 13 October when Haig formally approved the start of preparations for the attack. Following that decision a

formal conference of subordinate commanders was held at Third Army on October 26th.³⁵

Several reasons have been offered for Haig's approval of the Third Army plan. Both his supporters and detractors argue that he was desperate for a spectacular success to counter the long drawn out failures of Ypres. The difference between them is whether this is viewed as shrewd out-manoeuving of his opponents in Westminster, or desperate vanity. Either way, as Moore put it:

Haig's position was not unlike that of a stage impresario whose backers begin to mutter about seeing a return on their investment. The long running Ypres show was drawing to a close without showing much profit and it was no good blaming everything on the weather. ...It wasn't excuses Haig needed but a new star turn.³⁶

The result of this was an offensive which was supported by the C.-in-C. for political reasons, had been born in Third Army for reasons which were now obsolete, and was planned by tank-men and gunners whose objectives were technical demonstration rather than strategic success. The result of the latter in particular was that, as Terraine observed "Third Army had allowed itself to be so preoccupied with the first stage of the fight that it never properly considered what would come next."³⁷

The operation was also compromised by a lack of troops. After the Italian disaster at Caporetto in October, Haig was forced to provide divisions from France to reinforce the Italian front.³⁸ This left barely enough to cover the Cambrai operation with virtually nothing in reserve. Charteris, Haig's intelligence chief expressed this concern: "We should get surprise, but we are really taking on a big job with 5 divisions less than we expected to have." He went on: "Our own big attack is heavily prejudiced by the withdrawal of the divisions to Italy. We shall have no reserves. We shall be alright at first, afterwards is in the lap of the God of battle."³⁹ This lack of reserves was reflected in the fact that for the first time since 1915, the cavalry divisions were dismounted in the latter stages of the Cambrai attack, and committed to battle as infantry. A rôle in which they performed with great credit, but a profligate use of specialist troops. These events were all too reminiscent of Loos in 1915, where a similar lack of manpower for reserves led to the use of cavalry in this rôle.

Fundamental to the planning for the battle of Cambrai was the ground over which it was to be fought. The British line, running broadly north-west to south-east, passed approximately 7½ miles (12km) to the south-west of Cambrai itself. Facing it were the German ‘Hindenburg’, and ‘Hindenburg support’ trench systems. However crossing the front lines from north to south were the roughly parallel Canal du Nord (to the west) and Canal de l’Escaut, also known as the Canal de St. Quentin (to the east). Between these two canals was an area roughly 7 miles (11km) wide and 12 miles (19km) deep, defined to the north by the Sensée River, running east-west. This ‘quadrilateral’ as it was termed was key to the plan.⁴⁰ As first devised, the plan called for the use of surprise artillery bombardment and tanks to smash through the Hindenburg defences, then an advance northwards along the corridor between the canals. This advance would be continued over Bournonville ridge and the Sensée crossings, and further along the German position to the north-east, rolling it up from the flank. However, a series of meetings between Haig and Byng followed where the plan was refined.⁴¹ As a result the focus was shifted from a rolling attack north-east up the German line to a more ambitious encircling operation passing to the east of Cambrai and as far as the Sensée. Third Army expressed the objectives thus:

1. The object of the operation is to break the enemy’s defensive system by a coup de main; with the assistance of tanks to pass the Cavalry Corps through the break thus made: to seize Cambrai, Bournonville Wood, and the passages over the Sensée river and to cut off the troops holding the German front line between Havrincourt and that river.⁴²

Critically, the plan called for the capture by the infantry of the crossings over the Canal de l’Escaut on the eastern side of the attack at an early stage to allow the Cavalry Corps to cross and swing around the rear of Cambrai. Wilfrid Miles observed rather ruefully in the *Official History*:

It will be noticed how important it was to pass the cavalry divisions, without delay, across the St. Quentin canal, [Canal de l’Escaut] which constituted a truly formidable obstacle for mounted troops. Once the way was cleared by the other arms, all would depend on the boldness and enterprise with which the cavalry was handled.⁴³

Third army had at its disposal 19 infantry divisions. The main attack was to be made by seven of these; four divisions of Lt. Gen. Woollcombe's IV Corps on the left, astride the partially built and still dry Canal du Nord, and three divisions of Lt. Gen. Pulteney's III Corps on the right with its right resting on the Canal de l'Escaut. A fourth division of III Corps and three divisions of V Corps were in reserve. In addition a total of 476 tanks were to spearhead this attack.⁴⁴ The use of unregistered artillery and the lack of a preliminary bombardment would not only provide surprise, but also avoid churning up the ground, allowing these tanks to advance more easily.

The detailed rôle of the cavalry was laid out in 'Instructions for Operations GY' issued on 10 November.⁴⁵ All five divisions of the corps were to be involved, but only three were to be committed on the first day ('Z Day'). Cavalry Corps Advanced Headquarters was to be established at Fins, approximately 5 miles (8km) behind the British front line. This was also to serve as the advanced concentration area for two divisions (1st Cavalry Div. and 5th Cavalry Div.), while a third (2nd Cavalry Div.) was to concentrate at Villers Faucon, a few miles to the south-east of Fins. All divisions were to be ready to advance from these positions at 2½ hours after the start of the infantry and tank attack (referred to as 'Zero'+2½). Three routes of advance were specified. 1st Cavalry Division would advance from Fins via Metz, Trescault, and Ribecourt to the canal de l'Escaut at Marcoing. From there it would swing north and advance up both banks of the Canal with the dual objective of isolating Cambrai from the west, and co-operating in what Haig had urged should be an 'all arms attack' on Bourlon Wood and Bourlon village to the north.

To the east of 1st Division, 5th Cavalry Division was to advance astride two routes; from Fins via Gouzeaucourt, beside the line of the railway through Villers Plouch to Marcoing; and from Gouzeaucourt via La Vacquerie to Masnières. This division would then cross the canal at Marcoing and Masnières, pass through the last line of German defences on the far bank, the so-called 'Masnières Beaurevoir Line' to the north-east of the canal, and embark on a great sweep around the east side of Cambrai to the Sensée crossings in the north. 2nd Cavalry Division would follow the routes taken by 5th Cavalry Division and swing eastwards on the far side of the canal to guard the flank. To further disrupt the German rear areas, one brigade of 4th Cavalry Division, the Lucknow Brigade, was to advance with 2nd Division and raid south-east towards Walincourt. 3rd

Cavalry Division, and the remainder of 4th Division would move up to the concentration areas vacated by the first three divisions, and would be committed to follow up the advancing divisions at a time to be determined by Cavalry Corps Headquarters.

This plan was, to say the least, ambitious. The divisions were concentrated on the night of 19 November (Z day -1) in villages an average of 12 miles (20km) to the west of Fins.⁴⁶ On the night prior to the attack they would have to march from there to the forward concentration areas, and in turn on to the canal and their objectives. For 5th Cavalry Division in particular this added up to a total of some 30-35 miles (50km). Routes across the Hindenburg defences would have to be constructed, and crucially, the canal bridges would have to be secured intact by the advancing infantry. The cavalry was to be criticised, as will be examined later, for its lack of 'attack', but as can be seen both distance and the physical obstacles faced by the cavalry divisions, the German defences and critically the Canal de l'Escault weighed heavily against their success.

Communications were also likely to be vital. Although a proposed time of departure (Zero +2½) was stated, this would not be executed automatically, instead the time of advance of the cavalry divisions was to be determined by Cavalry Corps, on the basis of reports from cavalry patrols and from the advancing infantry. However, in the spirit of combined-arms operations, 1st Cavalry Division was removed from the Cavalry Corps and placed under the command of Woollcombe's IV Corps. (Similarly but less significantly, the Lucknow Brigade was placed under the command of III Corps.) This would have been a useful step had it not been that all communication between IV Corps and the cavalry still had to pass through Cavalry Corps Advanced H.Q. at Fins. The lack of a direct link between the infantry corps (and divisions) and the cavalry, and the potential for delay and interference by Kavanagh at Cavalry Corps were to be a significant problem. The serious consequences of this will be discussed later, but the reluctance or inability of corps and army commanders to relinquish direct control of the cavalry is once again evident. As during the Somme and Arras battles this insistence by higher commanders on choosing for themselves the moment of advance was to be fatal to the chances of the cavalry of seizing fleeting opportunities, and once again was largely to write them out of the battle.

A variety of efforts to improve communications were attempted, but in the event were not enormously helpful. A cable connection was to be laid from Cavalry Corps to an

Advanced Report Centre at Marcoing, and a contact aircraft of 35 Squadron RFC was allocated to each advancing cavalry division for liaison with Cavalry Corps. Pack-mounted wireless sets were also to accompany the divisions, and set up on the line of the canal. Instructions also stated that tank mounted radios would be available to take messages as they would also be in operation on the canal line. Somewhat bizarrely, however, it was determined that cavalry radios should not broadcast within 1 mile (1.6km) radius of a tank radio as this would cause interference.⁴⁷ How cavalry radios were to function given this restriction is not clear. Arguably the necessity for all of these complex technical solutions, none of which worked effectively anyway, could have been avoided simply by devolution of command of the cavalry to the divisional commanders themselves, and the establishment of a fixed timetable for advance.

The Advance of 1st Cavalry Division: 20 November 1917

'Zero Hour' arrived at 6:20am on 20 November 1917. In the absence of a preliminary bombardment the Germans were caught by surprise and the successes of the tanks and infantry in capturing their initial objectives were rapid and substantial. These have been thoroughly examined elsewhere,⁴⁸ thus only the movements of the cavalry will be considered in detail here.

It was calculated that the initial march of the cavalry divisions from their positions of concentration to the advanced positions at Fins would take five hours. Thus in order to allow the horses and men some rest on arrival the divisions set off shortly after midnight with a view to arriving at Zero Hour. 1st Cavalry Division completed this march without mishap and arrived north of Fins at 6.15am.⁴⁹ On arrival, command of the division formally passed from Cavalry Corps to IV Corps,⁵⁰ but as no direct link existed between IV Corps and the division, messages continued to be relayed by Cavalry Corps Advanced H.Q. Within the 1st Cavalry Division, the 2nd Cavalry Brigade was detailed as advanced guard, with the objective of moving up the west bank of the St Quentin Canal on Cantaing and Fontaine. The 5th Dragoon Guards of 1st Cavalry Brigade were also attached to 2nd Cavalry Brigade, with orders to cross the canal at Marcoing and support up the eastern side.⁵¹

At 8:20am, (equivalent to 'Zero +2', thus actually half an hour ahead of schedule) the division was ordered by IV Corps to advance from the forward position of concentration at Fins as far as Metz. The division duly moved forward, the lead elements reaching Metz by 9:55am.⁵² Encouraging reports continued from IV Corps. At 10:08am Cavalry Corps was informed "Havrincourt being mopped up. Ribecourt taken. 1st Cav. Div. to feel forward as soon as road is clear."⁵³ This message was passed on to 1st Cavalry Division and they continued their advance through Trescault. It was at this point that one of the most controversial episodes of the battle of Cambrai occurred. The village of Flesquières lay on a reverse slope roughly in the centre of the British attacking front. It lay behind the German defences, and formed part of the 'Rearward Battle Zone' known to the British as the 'Hindenburg Support Line'. Not only was the position very heavily garrisoned and expertly defended, but for reasons which have occupied many pages of scholarship and debate since,⁵⁴ the infantry of Maj. Gen. Harper's 51st Highland Division became separated from their tanks, and when the latter were mostly destroyed by German artillery fire, the infantry attack stalled short of the village.

This reverse should not have influenced 1st Cavalry Division as their line of advance took them south of Flesquières via Ribecourt, Marcoing and east of the Bois des Neuf (described in some sources as 'Nine Wood'). However at about 11:00am, apparently unaware that the village was still in German hands, Gen. Harper commanding 51st Division rang Gen. Woollcombe at IV Corps to report that 'Flesquières was in our possession and that the road from Trescault to that place was fit for cavalry.'⁵⁵ How he reached this conclusion has never been established, but he did. As a result IV Corps passed on a message to 1st Cavalry Division timed at 11.15am:

HP14 Road from TRESCAULT through K29 Central to FLESQUIERES reported fit for cavalry AAA FLESQUIERES now taken AAA Push forward through BROWN LINE AAA No report so far about RIBECOURT road AAA⁵⁶
(The exact text of this and following orders is given as their content was to become highly controversial.)

This message was to become a major bone of contention in the aftermath of the battle between Lt. Gen. Woollcombe of IV Corps and Maj. Gen. Mullens, commanding 1st Cavalry Division. Woollcombe would later assert that no part of HP14 changed the specific orders or route of advance of the cavalry, and that it contained only

‘information’.⁵⁷ In this he is strictly correct, but the clear inference to be drawn from the message is that an advance via Flesquières might be more successful than one via Ribecourt. Mullens had also visited the reserve brigade headquarters of 51st Division in person at 11:15am and been advised that the capture of Flesquières was imminent. As a result of this he concluded that an advance via Flesquières “...might not only be better, but might be the only available or quicker line of advance on Cantaing, to pass to the west of the Bois des Neufs (sic).”⁵⁸

In spite of Mullens’ ability to talk in person to 51st Division, his chain of command still passed from IV Corps via Cavalry Corps H.Q. to his own division, and it was from Cavalry Corps that the final crucial interference came. At 11:50am he received a message from Cavalry Corps also timed 11:15am:

G.210 IV Corps report 11.10am the road from TRESCAULT through K29 and through FLESQUIERES is open AAA It is not yet known if RIBECOURT road is open yet (sic) AAA The 1st Cav. Div. will advance through FLESQUIERES AAA⁵⁹

The final sentence of this message may be considered a direct change to Mullens’ orders, albeit from a corps under whose direct command his division no longer fell. The interfering hand of Kavanagh at Cavalry Corps can be sensed in this order (G.210), ‘interpreting’ the orders from IV Corps. It may be that this order truly reflected the wishes of Woollcombe at IV Corps at the time (although he was to deny this later), but it certainly removed any remaining discretion from Mullens as to the line of advance of his division. In the light of this at 11:20am Mullens ordered his advanced brigade (2nd Cavalry Brigade) to advance on Flesquières. Unfortunately as has been mentioned, despite Harper’s claims to the contrary, Flesquières was still resisting 51st Division. With no progress possible in this direction the advance of 1st Cavalry Division was effectively halted.

It was not until 1:00pm that 2nd Cavalry Brigade was able to make further forward progress. It should be noted at this point that, in circumstances reminiscent of High Wood 16 months before, while 1st Cavalry Division was under the command of IV Corps, its original route of advance from Ribecourt via Marcoing and Noyelles lay entirely in III Corps area. On returning from a visit to the forward elements of his brigade in front of Flesquières, Brig. Gen. Beale-Brown commanding 2^d Cavalry

Brigade met his liaison officer with 86th Brigade of 29th Division, the division tasked with the capture of Bois des Neuf for III Corps. This officer was able to tell him that the attack on Bois des Neuf was going well and that although he had been heavily sniped at, a passage through Ribecourt was possible.⁶⁰

As a result of this new information, starting at about 1:00pm a move was made to revert to the original line of advance. At about 2:00pm, more than 1½ hours after the brigade had been unsuccessfully diverted towards Flesquières, Ribecourt was assaulted by two dismounted squadrons from 2nd Cavalry Brigade⁶¹ while the remainder of the brigade ‘turned’ the village from the south, and resumed the advance towards Bois des Neuf. Unfortunately this route lay along the forward slope south of Ribecourt and exposed the advancing troops to heavy machine-gun fire from German positions around Flesquières, thus the advanced elements of 2nd Cavalry brigade, 4th Dragoon Guards, did not reach the Bois until around 3:00pm. On arrival it was discovered that reports of the situation there were also incorrect, and that the Bois des Neuf was still not captured, so 2nd Cavalry Brigade halted in the valley immediately east of Marcoing.⁶²

At this point a further change of plan was ordered by IV Corps. 51st Division was to make a further attempt to carry Flesquières and several messages were sent from 2:45pm onwards that 1st Cavalry Division, and in particular 2nd Cavalry Brigade, should support this by doubling back in a move north-westwards over Premy Chapel Ridge towards Orival Wood to outflank Flesquières from the east. This move was attempted but on crossing the ridge patrols of 2nd Cavalry Brigade came under such heavy fire from the north-west that the move was not considered practical.⁶³ Meanwhile, more orders continued to arrive from IV Corps including at 3:40pm:

HP.19 51Div. are attacking FLESQUIERES from west and south AAA 1st Cav.
Div. will try to work round the north east of FLESQUIERES from PREMY
CHAPEL RIDGE

Mullens was later to criticise this change of orders as he had HP.14, issued earlier in the day, pointing out that it served only to further delay the advance of the division and distract from its overall objective.⁶⁴ Woollcombe argued, with some sophistry, that as Flesquières was holding up the whole advance, to “...hasten its fall” might be considered within 1st Cavalry Division’s overall objectives, and in any case the move was only to be made by two regiments, “... This left him [Mullens] 2 cavalry brigades

to carry out his original orders.’⁶⁵ The weakness of this argument is self evident, the capture of Flesquières was never an objective of 1st Cavalry Division, and indeed was not even on their original line of advance. In an effort to press home his case, Woollcombe spoke directly to Byng at Third Army by telephone.⁶⁶ The nature of the conversation is not recorded but Woollcombe cannot have been persuasive as at 4:00pm IV Corps was obliged to pass on to 1st Cavalry Division:

HP.20 Third Army orders that you are to push on with full strength through MARCOING and carry out original plan⁶⁷

Woollcombe had lost the argument, and once again Mullens was to revert to the plan to advance up the canal bank, this time on direct orders from Byng at Third Army. In the event, however, so much time had been lost that he was only in a position to order the advance of 2nd Cavalry Brigade (supported by 5th Dragoon Guards of 1st Brigade) from their position south of Bois des Neuf, the remainder of the division being hopelessly far back in the rear. 1st Cavalry Brigade was still in the vicinity of Trescault, the wrong side of the Flesquières -Ribecourt bottleneck, and 9th Cavalry Brigade remained at Metz. The confusion of contradictory orders passed to 1st Cavalry Division is recorded in the *War Diary* of the Cavalry Corps, acting as relay for the messages;

5:30pm 1st Cavalry Division report by telephone that after orders had been given to 2nd Cavalry Brigade to go to Orival Wood, [ie. Back to Flesquières] orders were received from IV Corps to say that one regiment was to move on Cantaing in accordance with original scheme. G.O.C. 2nd Cavalry Brigade had already ordered 4th D.G’s on Cantaing. G.O.C. 1st Cavalry Division then ordered whole brigade to move on Cantaing with one Regt. 1st Cav. Bde. [5th Dragoon Guards] to move to Marcoing in support.⁶⁸

As the daylight rapidly faded and misty rain started to fall it was left to Brig. Gen. Beale-Browne’s 2nd Cavalry Brigade, and in particular to his lead regiment, the 4th Dragoon Guards, to make up this lost time and press on towards the division’s objectives. Elements of the 4th Dragoon Guards were soon able to ascertain that not only was the Bois des Neuf finally free of enemy, but the village of Noyelles beyond it next to the canal had also been captured (in a mounted attack at 3:00pm by elements of 5th Cavalry Division, discussed below). Cantaing was “...faintly visible in the mist”⁶⁹ from the north-east corner of the Bois des Neuf, but apparently still occupied by the enemy.

Accordingly, Lt. Col. Sewell of 4th Dragoon Guards sent his lead squadron (A Squadron under Capt. Warter) towards Les Vallée Wood, on the canal bank to the north of Cantaing, meanwhile B squadron (Capt. Darley) was sent to form a defensive flank towards Cantaing to protect A Squadron's advance. Unfortunately B Squadron were "... checked by wire and heavy machine-gun fire from Cantaing and were unable to do more than draw the enemy's fire from that village."⁷⁰ This was, however, sufficient to allow A Squadron to advance. Two troops were dropped off on the left to extend the flank of B Squadron northwards while Warter and the remaining two troops galloped on. In the centre of Les Vallée wood was La Folie Château, approaching this four German ammunition wagons were encountered, the horses and crews were shot as the cavalry rode on, charging with swords a further party of twenty enemy on foot, killing or capturing all. The château itself was approached and further prisoners taken.

Simultaneously with the advance of 4th Dragoon Guards, 5th Dragoon Guards had been sent to continue towards their objective of moving up the eastern bank of the canal. Unfortunately this was impossible as although the infantry had got across the canal in Marcoing, no advance could be made beyond the bridge due to fire from Flot Farm 1200 yards (1000m) north of the crossing. As a result the 4th Dragoon Guards were now dangerously deep within the German positions, and receiving fire not only from Cantaing to the west but also from across the canal to the east. Thus they were forced to retire to the Bois des Neuf, B squadron covering the withdrawal of A Squadron to a position east of the Bois.⁷¹

4th Dragoon Guards were happy with their efforts, a large number of casualties had been inflicted, with Hotchkiss, rifle, and sword, between 50 and 60 prisoners had been taken, (the exact number was not recorded as they were handed over immediately to the infantry of 86th Brigade) and two machine guns had been captured. Total loss in the regiment was three killed (one of whom was Capt. Warter, killed during the retirement), four wounded and eight missing, with 30 horses lost. While only a small part of the overall canvas of Cambrai, the 4th Dragoon Guards had shown that they could both survive and manoeuvre in this part of the battlefield without suffering excessive casualties. As has been shown in previous chapters, the tactical effectiveness of the cavalry was once again not in doubt. One wonders what could have been done if the rest of the brigade or indeed the division had been available. The brigade then withdrew for

the night to a position west of Cantaing. Lt. Col. Sewell was disappointed not to have taken Cantaing: “In my opinion had it not been for the enemy on the east of the Escault canal it would have been possible to push our advance and turn the village from the east.”⁷² However, the enemy remained east of the canal and no more could be done.

2nd and 5th Cavalry Divisions: 20 November

While 1st Cavalry Division spent the short daylight hours of 20 November struggling to get forward to their objectives, the two other cavalry divisions on their right in the III Corps area underwent a similar experience. 5th Cavalry Division, supported by 2nd Cavalry Division, was tasked with the grand sweep around to the east of Cambrai, crossing the Canal de l’Escault at Marcoing and Masnières. This advance was to be made along two cleared cavalry tracks, the western route passing from Gouzeaucourt through Villers Plouch to Marcoing, and the eastern or ‘Kavanagh’ track from Gouzeaucourt via La Vacquerie to Les Rues Vertes and thence across the canal at Masnières. However unlike 1st Cavalry Division which made its advance strung out in one long column along a single route of advance, both 5th Cavalry Division in the lead and 2nd Cavalry Division in support were split across both tracks. Their order of march may be shown schematically as follows:⁷³

Marcoing Route	Masnieres (‘Kavanagh’) Route
<p>5th Cav. Div.: Secunderabad Bde. 5th Cav. Div. H.Q. (MacAndrew) Ambala Bde.</p>	<p>Canadian Cav. Bde.</p>
<p>2nd Cav. Div.: 4th Cav. Bde.</p>	<p>5th Cav. Bde. 2nd Cav. Div. H.Q. (Greenly) 3rd Cav. Bde.</p>
<p>4th Cav. Div.:</p>	<p>Lucknow Bde. (Under III Corps)</p>

The idea behind this split was presumably that it delivered a complete division (the 5th) across the canal as rapidly as possible, allowing the division to advance rapidly as a coherent whole towards its objectives beyond Cambrai. However, the difficulty presented by such an arrangement was that while communications along each line of march were reasonably good, laterally they were virtually non-existent. As each division was split across the two lines of advance, the Canadian Cavalry Brigade under Brig. Gen. Seely would be almost entirely out of touch with 5th Division H.Q, while 4th Brigade would be similarly separated from 2nd Division. To counter this Maj. Gen. MacAndrew commanding 5th Cavalry Division and Maj. Gen. Greenly of 2nd Cavalry Division had agreed that should the left column be able to push on while the right was held up, command of the Canadians would pass to Greenly.⁷⁴ In any case the advance of both divisions was to be controlled from Cavalry Corps H.Q. in the rear. The consequences of all these arrangements will be examined later.

Unlike the situation on IV Corps front, the early stages of the III Corps advance were extremely successful. The 'Outpost' and 'Battle' zones of the Hindenburg defences, forming the first and second objectives were secured by 11:30am. The attacking divisions on the right of the III Corps front (12th and 20th Divisions) then swung further to the right to form a defensive flank along Bonavis Ridge, overlooking the canal, in order to allow the supporting 29th Division to push on towards the canal crossings at Marcoing and Masnières.⁷⁵

Aside from the activities of the cavalry divisions, another feature of this advance is noteworthy. As at Ypres in August, troops of the corps cavalry regiments were attached to the attacking infantry divisions to patrol forward and to exploit any opportunities during the latter stages of the advance. Two troops of the Northumberland Hussars, III Corps cavalry, were attached to 59th Brigade in 20th Division. Their orders were, once the 'Brown Line' (Second Objective, Hindenburg Support system) had been captured to push on quickly to the crest of the Bonavis Ridge to prevent German observation from the ridge onto the lines of advance of 29th Division and the cavalry.

The two troops set off at just before 9:00am and advanced successfully to the 'Brown Line' where they halted dismounted, "the wire being safely crossed and the trenches remaining unfilled, jumped."⁷⁶ From there they were able to see that the advance of 12th Division (along the spine of the ridge to the east of their position) was being held up by

rifle and Machine-gun fire from a position north of le Quennet farm. Taking a rather liberal interpretation of their orders, the two troops attacked this position. Lt. Sanders' troop dismounted and advanced frontally by short rushes, supported by the Hotchkiss guns of both troops (2 guns). Meanwhile Lt. Ramsay's troop circled around the rear of the position, deliberately exposing themselves periodically in order to draw fire away from the frontal attack. Two tanks were also flagged down and persuaded to join the attack. These were able to contribute fire support, knocking out a machine-gun position before being themselves hit by field gun fire. Ramsay then galloped the position from the rear, resulting in its surrender and the capture of two field guns. Leaving Sanders to remount and re-organise, Ramsay then pushed on at a gallop towards Bonavis Ridge securing positions on the crest which both troops then occupied until relieved the following morning.⁷⁷

Once again the skill and enterprise of junior cavalry leaders was displayed, as was to be seen later in the day with the 4th Dragoon Guards at la Folie, (described earlier). The two lieutenants showed that they not only grasped the wider tactical situation, but were able to use their initiative to mount successful local attacks, using a mixture of dismounted firepower and mounted shock just as their training manuals proposed. As at Ypres, these troops were in a forward position able to assist the infantry, and even to successfully co-operate *ad-hoc* with nearby tanks. Unfortunately there was to be little opportunity for such action by the members of the cavalry divisions within the Cavalry Corps.

2nd Cavalry Division had arrived at its forward point of concentration, at Villers Faucon 10km (6 miles) behind the British front line, at 'Zero Hour'; 6:20am, having marched through the night. 5th Cavalry Division was delayed by an hour by railway crossings, and did not arrive at Fins until 7:30am, however this delay was not significant as they were not time-tabled to move until 'Z+2½' or 8:50am.⁷⁸ In the event they were kept waiting somewhat longer. A report timed at 9:15am (received at 10:25am) was sent by the Secunderabad Brigade, lead brigade on the western, Marcoing, route that their contact patrols with the infantry were onto the second objective, however no orders for an advance by the 5th Cavalry Division were issued. Progress to the east was slower still. As has been described above, the 12th Division was held up on Bonavis Ridge and the right flank of the advance was not considered secure. At 10:05am III Corps advised

Cavalry Corps H.Q. that 29th Division was being released to advance “with caution” towards Marcoing and Masnières.⁷⁹ That division began its advance at 10:15am.⁸⁰ It was not until 10:52am, 2 hours after their scheduled start time that Kavanagh ordered an advance by the lead brigade of 2nd Cavalry Division (5th Cav. Bde.). Even this was only as far as the road south-west of Gouzeaucourt.⁸¹ Here they were to wait. It should be noted, however, that 5th Brigade was not the lead unit time-tabled to use this route, the order of march had them following the Canadians of 5th Cavalry Division. The 5th Division had still not been ordered forward, and in acknowledgement of this 2nd Division were ordered to keep south of the road and leave it clear. It is difficult to see what Kavanagh was hoping to achieve by this move, reversing the order of march of the two divisions.

Cavalry working parties had meanwhile been sent forward to consolidate the gaps in the wire and complete construction of the two tracks. Cavalry Corps H.Q. was advised that this work would be complete by about noon.⁸² At 11:40am 5th Cavalry Division finally received the order to advance by telephone from Cavalry Corps H.Q. This was confirmed in writing at noon (3 hours after their planned start time); the division was to “...move forward as ordered pushing patrols in touch with advancing infantry so as to advance across the canal should the situation be favourable.” 2nd Cavalry Division was to close up on its lead brigade to the south of the Gouzeaucourt road, so as to be “...ready to follow 5th Cav. Div. should the situation develop favourably.”⁸³

On the left-hand (western) track, leading elements of the Secunderabad Brigade of 5th Cavalry Division reached the southern outskirts of Marcoing by around 1:45pm, having covered the 16km (10 miles) from Fins in around 1½ hours.⁸⁴ The majority of the village had by that time been in the hands of the 87th Infantry Brigade for over an hour, but although they had been able to make good the river and canal crossings they could make no progress beyond the railway station, which remained stubbornly defended. The Advanced Guard of Secunderabad Brigade, a squadron of 7th Dragoon Guards, crossed the canal bridge at about 2:00pm, but immediately came under machine-gun fire and opted to dismount and extend the line of the 87th Brigade infantry attacking the railway.⁸⁵ Maj. Gen. Macandrew, commanding 5th Cavalry Division, is reported to have been somewhat displeased at his men reinforcing the infantry, as he was still hoping to make a substantial mounted advance.⁸⁶ However, the move might just as easily be seen

as another example of the tactical flexibility on display by the cavalry at local level on 20 November, where attacking on foot where appropriate was as common as staying mounted.

Still keen to get across the canal the second squadron of 7th Dragoon Guards was ordered north to try to secure the bridge at Noyelles. A report on this action was made by the squadron commander Capt. Lane :

At about 2:15pm on the 20th November I was ordered to take my squadron and make good the village of Noyelles Sur l'Escault. Lt. Dawkins and one troop was detailed as advanced guard. They advanced rapidly to point L.11.d [immediately south of Noyelles] where they came under rifle and M.G. fire. I decided to gallop the village with troops at 40 yards distance. The M.G. fire was high and did no damage. The advance was successful and the village was captured at 3:00pm. Total captures 35 prisoners, of whom 10 were found hiding in the village.⁸⁷

Capt. Lane had reason to be pleased, as the squadron suffered no casualties in this attack, but although infantry was able to move up and consolidate the hold on the village it was not possible to cross the canal bridge due to hostile fire from the far bank. Several of the river bridges leading to the canal had also been destroyed.

Shortly afterwards the lead brigade of 1st Cavalry Division arrived at Marcoing, and 4th Dragoon Guards were able to continue probing northwards along the east bank of the canal beyond Noyelles as far as La Folie, (described earlier) however they were equally unable to cross the canal, and 5th Dragoon Guards' advance on Flot Farm had no more success than that of the 7th Dragoon Guards at 2:00pm. Thus both the 1st Cavalry Division, and the western portion of the 5th Cavalry Division were halted east of the canal, and made no more progress that day. This left only the Canadian Cavalry Brigade of 5th Cavalry Division, and the 3rd and 5th Cavalry Brigades of 2nd Cavalry Division on the easternmost 'Kavanagh' track with any possibility of crossing the canal, via the bridges at Masnières.

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade, as advance guard of the column using the 'Kavanagh' track set off from fins at around 11:40am, simultaneously with the advance of the Secunderabad Brigade on their left. They made similar time, arriving on the southern outskirts of Les Rues Vertes, (as the village on the south side of the canal was known,

Masnières being on the north side) at around 1:40pm. Here they met elements of 88th Brigade and were subject to "...a certain amount of hostile artillery and M.G. fire."⁸⁸ Les Rues Vertes had been in the hands of the 88th Infantry Brigade since some time after noon, but an event had occurred which was to be critical in the failure of the Cavalry Corps' advance, and as a result has become rather controversial.

'F' Battalion of the Tank Corps was tasked with the capture of Les Rues Vertes and Masnières ahead of 88th Brigade. Maj. Philip Hammond, the commander of 'F' Battalion left a memoir of the capture of the villages which has been widely quoted in subsequent accounts.⁸⁹ According to his account he was able to enter Les Rues Vertes on foot accompanied only by one other soldier and ran for the canal bridge only to see it disappear in "...a cloud of dirty white dust" as the German defenders blew their demolition charges. The extent of the damage to the bridge is unclear, but it was still passable. When the tanks of 'F' Battalion arrived they were accompanied by Capt. Martel of the Tank Corps staff, and he, believing that the bridge might still take the weight of cavalry, prevented the tanks from attempting to cross.⁹⁰ Unfortunately as no cavalry had arrived and as the Germans were consolidating their defence of the far bank of the canal it was decided at 12:40pm to send a tank across. The sequel has become one of the legends of the Cambrai battle; 'F' Battalion tank 'Flying Fox II' drove onto the bridge, carrying what Moore has termed "...the world's first 'panzer grenadiers'";⁹¹ bombers from 11 Rifle Brigade. This was too much for the bridge, which collapsed, dumping the tank in the canal. The bombers and tank crew fled unharmed, covered by the steam created by the flooding of the hot exhausts, but the bridge was gone.

It was not until around an hour later (at 1:40pm) that Seely, commanding the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, arrived at the south end of Les Rues Vertes. Here he conferred with Brig. Gen. Nelson commanding 88th Brigade, who was under the erroneous impression that the tanks had crossed the canal bridge and that it remained intact.⁹² Accordingly Seeley ordered forward his advanced guard regiment, the Fort Garry Horse. They reached the bridge at about 2:15pm, to be greeted by a broken and impassable bridge.⁹³ It was this appearance by the cavalry which prompted Maj. Hammond's often repeated remarks about "...medieval horse soldiers" and "...a ludicrous thing" quoted at the head of this chapter, however more should be inferred from it about the prejudices of a tank officer than about the performance of the cavalry.

Indeed he places the arrival of the Fort Garry Horse in his narrative ahead of the collapse of the bridge by Flying Fox, implying that it was already impassable, and thus avoiding any odium on the Tank Corps for its destruction.⁹⁴ Others have gone further, A. J. Smithers sought to argue that the destruction of the bridge somehow saved the cavalry from a worse fate on the far bank, as their advance was self-evidently doomed: “But for the mishap of Lieutenant Edmundson’s tank on Masnières bridge they [the German machine-gunners] would have collected vastly more scalps. Fortunately for themselves the British cavalry did nothing.”⁹⁵ Little further comment on such remarks is necessary here.

Far from doing nothing, the Fort Garry Horse looked for an alternative crossing point over the canal. Subsequent events were described in a report by their commander Lt. Col. Paterson.⁹⁶ Arriving at the downed canal bridge at around 2:15pm Paterson was advised that the canal was passable by the lock gates and footbridge 1000 yards (900m) to the east of the village. This was “...stated by civilians to be suitable for horses in single file, and over which I could see the infantry crossing.” Maj. Sharpe was sent to examine the crossing, he did not return, but around 3:00pm Maj. Walker of the MG Squadron reported that his squadron had prepared a crossing over the lock. B Squadron of the Fort Garry Horse (under Capt. Campbell) was ordered across, and the remainder of the regiment prepared to follow.

Meanwhile, as 5th Cavalry Division had been exploring the canal crossings at Marcoing and Masnières, 2nd Cavalry Division had been waiting south of the Gouzeaucourt road with no orders. Tiring of this delay, at 1:20pm Maj. Gen. Greenly sent a motorcycle to Cavalry Corps to find out what was going on. A staff officer returned from Cavalry Corps H.Q. at 2:08pm with orders for the division to follow closely on the advance of 5th Cavalry Division.⁹⁷ 2nd Cavalry Division advanced, Greenly himself arrived in Les Rues Vertes some time after 3:00pm and found the Canadians were out of contact with the rest of their division. He rode on to the 5th Cavalry Division report centre to consult with MacAndrew, the divisional commander, but he was nowhere to be found. In accordance with the command contingency arrangements described earlier, he took command of the Canadian Brigade and called a conference with Seely, the commander of the Canadians, and Brig. Gen. Nelson, commander of 88th Infantry Brigade.⁹⁸

The outcome of this meeting was crucial as Greenly was persuaded that the single lock crossing was too precarious to push a whole brigade, let alone most of 2nd Cavalry Division over. The approaches were marshy, the crossing was under increasing enemy fire, the weather was deteriorating, and there were perhaps only 1½ hours of daylight remaining. Orders were duly sent to the Fort Garry Horse that no more troops should cross the canal and any on the far bank should be withdrawn. The Canadian Brigade were to assist 88th Brigade in consolidating a line along the canal, and the remainder of the 2nd Cavalry Division column, approaching in the rear of the Canadians, was to halt with its head 2 miles (3.2km) south of Les Rues Vertes.⁹⁹ As these orders were sent out, the possibility of getting significant numbers of cavalry anywhere across the canal on 20 November disappeared.

On receiving the recall orders Lt. Col. Paterson commanding the Fort Garry Horse set off himself in pursuit of Capt. Campbell's 'B' Squadron. Unfortunately he was not able to catch them up and they disappeared into the gloom beyond the canal.¹⁰⁰ The subsequent activities of 'B' Squadron Fort Garry Horse have become another of the legends of Cambrai. Capt. Campbell was killed early in the advance, and the squadron was led by Lt. Strachan, who was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross for his leadership. Strachan left a detailed narrative of their adventures in an article for the *Cavalry Journal* in 1927.¹⁰¹ According to his account, the squadron was tasked with a special mission separate from the rest of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, that of capturing an enemy Corps Headquarters in the village of Escadœuvres north-east of Cambrai, and they set off with this in mind. The squadron passed through the wire of the German Masnières-Beaurevoir line north of the canal, and cutting their way through a camouflage screen on the Crevecoeur - Masnières road, charged a battery of German guns. Many gunners were killed and the squadron rode on, past a group of around 100 Germans with four machine-guns who tried to surrender, but who, in the light of 'B' Squadron's special mission, were left for supporting troops to round up. After an advance of about 3 miles (5km) the squadron rallied in a sunken road and took stock of their position. It was apparent that they had taken over 50% casualties, and that no support was forthcoming, in addition the Germans had identified their position and increasing fire was directed upon them. At this point Strachan decided that the mission

was now impossible and, abandoning the remaining horses the survivors of the squadron withdrew under cover of darkness to the canal.

A somewhat more sanguine account of the expedition was provided in a letter printed in the *Cavalry Journal* of 1928 in response to Strachan's article. This was produced by Lt. (later Capt.) Cowen, who had been sent with the squadron as a German-speaking interpreter. In particular he was highly critical of Strachan's choice to ignore the German machine-gunners:

The Germans had their hands upraised in token of surrender. I told Lieutenant Strachan that I was going to take a section and send it back with those prisoners. Instead of this he seized my reins as I started to give the order, directing me to keep going – a serious mistake which cost many lives, for the moment we had gone by, the Germans picked up their rifles and machine-guns and started firing from our rear.¹⁰²

It is also apparent from Lt. Cowen's account that it was largely due to his ability to bluff enemy sentries in German that the foot party was able to return to the canal without further loss. As it was the squadron had lost Capt. Campbell, 86 out of 129 other ranks, and all 140 horses,¹⁰³ as well as Hotchkiss and packs. Eighteen prisoners were brought in.

On this basis B Squadron's foray across the canal can hardly be considered a great success. However, in the reports of both Strachan and Cowen the evidence of an even greater failure can be discerned. Strachan observed "... it will easily be seen that, the whole success of the cavalry action depended upon crossing the river and the canal. It is ancient history now that a tank crossing the Masnières bridge crashed through and as this prevented the cavalry from crossing the "show" was practically called off."¹⁰⁴ However he continued "Judging from what one single squadron did, what could five cavalry divisions not have done?"¹⁰⁵ His description of the advance through the Masnières - Beaufevor line, the last formal German defence line on the north side of the canal, shows that this was met with comparatively little resistance: "Up to this point [the German gun battery] no opposition had been encountered from German infantry. The trenches marked on the map were merely 'spit-locked' (dummy) and there was practically no wire, but there were a few concrete 'pill boxes' completed and machine-guns were firing from them."¹⁰⁶ He concluded "It appears that there would have been a

remarkable opportunity for a great cavalry success, had the operation in its original form been carried out.”¹⁰⁷ Cowen supported this view, recalling the spit-locked trenches and absence of wire. He bemoaned the lack of air reconnaissance “The visibility that day had been very low, due to fog, causing many of our low flying planes to crash into the hills. Had they been able to see clearly and get reports back promptly our infantry could have advanced to the Rumilly - Crevecoeur Line with little resistance.”¹⁰⁸

This perception by the front line commanders that a gap in the German defences existed can be contrasted with the view from Cavalry corps H.Q.:

At 3p.m. the situation was that Masnières and the Masnières - Bearevoir line was still held by the enemy, that the main bridges over the canal were broken, that the crossings that existed were narrow, and that it would take a very long time for any considerable body of cavalry to cross even if there was no opposition, and secondly, that the crossings were still under the enemy's fire.¹⁰⁹

The senior commanders within the Cavalry Corps have been criticised for making much of their difficulties, and seeing little of their opportunities.¹¹⁰ It would seem that this was the case here. Greenly in particular seems to have allowed himself to be persuaded that a further advance across the canal was not possible. Left alone, Seely might have pushed on, but he was both the subordinate commander, and a Yeomanry officer faced with Greenly the Regular. Moore has suggested that Maj. Gen. MacAndrew, the commander of 5th Cavalry Division, in view of his displeasure at the dismounting of the 7th Dragoon Guards in Marcoing, appears to have been in more aggressive mood, and may have continued to attack,¹¹¹ but he was away in Marcoing and command of the Canadians reverted to Greenly.

Kavanagh must also bear some responsibility. The plan of attack called for the cavalry to be ready to move by Z+2½ that is 8:50am. 1st Cavalry Division, under the command of IV Corps, began its advance by this time, indeed half an hour ahead of time. However it was not until nearly three hours later at 11:40am that Cavalry Corps saw fit to order the advance of 5th Cavalry Division. 2nd Cavalry Division was ordered forward to Gouzeaucourt, and then apparently forgotten until 1:20pm when Greenly sent for further orders. The result of this was that infantry and tanks had been in Les Rues Vertes for around two hours before any substantial force of cavalry arrived, by which time the bridge had been broken and German defence had thickened decidedly. In this

climate of hesitancy and delay it is easy to see why Greenly felt there was not enough daylight left to continue.

A final puzzling feature of the cavalry advance to Masnières is the question of Mon Plaisir bridge. This was highlighted by Wilfrid Miles in the Official History.¹¹² Approximately one mile (1.6km) east of the bridge in Masnières was a second crossing of the river and canal via a wooden bridge sheltered from fire by the river valley and screened by trees. This was intact and entirely suitable for cavalry. This bridge had been identified in a survey compiled by Third Army intelligence branch, but this was not circulated,¹¹³ however it did appear explicitly in the operation Orders of 29th Division as it formed part of the Fourth Phase objectives of the 88th Brigade.¹¹⁴ It was also depicted on both 1:20,000 and 1:10,000 map sheets. Strangely, no reference to it appears in any of the operational orders for the Cavalry Corps, nor was it brought to the attention of Greenly when he met Seely, and with Brig. Gen. Nelson of 88th Brigade and the latter's Brigade Major, both of whom ought to have been familiar with the orders for 88th Brigade. The only reference to the bridge in cavalry records is in the Canadian Cavalry Brigade *War Diary*, where at around 4:00pm four guns of the machine-gun squadron were deployed "...to support the infantry [presumably of 88th Brigade] who were being pressed back at Mon Plaisir bridge." In addition B battery R.C.H.A. came into action covering the crossing.¹¹⁵ It is difficult to see how such a large oversight should have occurred. It remains possible that the use of this crossing was rendered impossible by some circumstance known to the men present at the time but not recorded. If not, it must be added to the list of higher command failures of 20 November.

No further action was undertaken by the cavalry on 20 November. Cavalry Corps contacted 29th Division at 6:25pm to ask if any assistance from 2nd or 5th Cavalry Divisions would be required overnight. As no support was requested, orders were issued for both divisions to withdraw to their forward concentration areas. Unfortunately communications with 5th Division were very slow, and those with 2nd Division had broken down almost entirely as their wireless had broken, and the head of the cable from Cavalry Corps was lost in the dark. The cavalry tracks had also deteriorated in the continuing rain such as to be virtually impassable at night. As a result both divisions were counter-ordered at 9:15pm to stay where they were and carry on with the advance in the morning. Only 4th Cavalry Brigade (of 2nd Cav. Div.) at the rear of the column on

the Villers Plouch – Marcoing route received the orders early enough to move and they fell back to Villers Faucon.¹¹⁶ For the remainder “...at midnight we were told to off-saddle and peg down for the night. The prospect was by no means a cheerful one but we lay down behind the horses to get what little sleep we could.”¹¹⁷

Cantaing 21 November: Cavalry and Tanks

During the night of 20/21 November the embattled German defenders of Flesquières were advised that they could no longer be supported, and they withdrew. Thus by dawn on 21 November 51st Division was able to consolidate its second ‘Brown Line’ objectives.¹¹⁸ Orders were issued overnight by IV Corps for the attack to be continued on the left towards Bournonville, by 62nd Division, and on the right towards Fontaine, by 51st Division. 1st Cavalry Division was instructed to support the advance of IV Corps by detaching one regiment to support 62nd Division, and for the remainder to continue to try and advance west of the canal.¹¹⁹ Mullen’s lead brigade of 1st Cavalry Division, the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, was already committed to the defence of Noyelles and the canal crossings, and indeed heavy German counter-attacks were to be made on these positions throughout the day.¹²⁰ He therefore called up 1st Cavalry Brigade, which had spent the previous day in reserve around Trescault. One regiment, 11th Hussars, was detached to support 62nd Division while the remaining two regiments, 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen’s Bays) and 5th Dragoon Guards were to support 51st Division.¹²¹

Starting at about 6:00am the 51st Division advanced, occupying Flesquières, and moving on to overtake positions along the Graincourt – Marcoing road with relatively little opposition. Next they faced a partially constructed defensive line running from north of the Bois des Neuf, across the front of Cantaing, and up to Bournonville Wood. An attack on this position was prepared for 10:00am, with the as-yet unengaged 154th Brigade of 51st Division leading. This was to be supported by artillery and by 13 tanks of ‘B’ Battalion 2nd Tank Brigade. Unfortunately orders only reached the tanks at 9:00am, giving them little chance of reaching the start line in time. Seeing no tanks by 10:30, Br. Gen. Buchanan commanding 154th Brigade launched his Highlanders into the

attack unsupported, with pipers leading. This assault rapidly foundered, facing severe enemy machine-gun fire, and the brigade was pinned down short of Cantaing village.¹²²

1st Cavalry Brigade, meanwhile had been maintaining touch with 51st Division via contact patrols.¹²³ Moving off from a position to the east of Havrincourt at 9:40am they reached the southern side of Premy Chapel ridge, west of Marcoing at 10:25. From there elements of the advanced guard regiment, 2nd Dragoon Guards (Bays) advanced north-east over the ridge towards the Bois des Neuf. At about 10:45 the infantry attack was observed, and the Brigade R.H.A. battery ('I' Battery) was brought into action to shell Cantaing in support of the infantry. In spite of this support the infantry attack was seen to be held up. At 11:15 the tanks finally arrived, and seven (some sources suggest thirteen¹²⁴) made their way over Premy Chapel ridge towards Cantaing, drawing heavy machine-gun fire as they advanced. By about noon the tanks were making good progress into the village, but were unsupported by any infantry. Anxious about the fate of his unsupported tanks in the village, the colonel of 'B' Battalion sent a request for assistance to Brig. Gen. Makins commanding 1st Cavalry Brigade. In response, all three squadrons of the Queens Bays moved north along the canal and galloped the village from the east, and by 1:40pm the village was reported clear of enemy. Realising the importance of the position, Makins rapidly reinforced the Bays with a squadron of 5th Dragoon Guards, and as signs of a counter-attack were observed around 2:00pm the defences of the village were further enhanced with 6 guns from the brigade machine-gun squadron. These troops continued to defend the village for the remainder of the day, being relieved by infantry of 6th and 51st divisions overnight.

Clearly the arrival of the tanks had retrieved the situation and made a success out of what could very easily have been a disaster. (Unfortunately the lack of progress of 62nd Division towards Bourlon persuaded Gen. Harper, commanding 51st Division to call a halt to the advance, and any advantage gained was thus thrown away.¹²⁵) The Bays also seem to have got away with very light casualties, only one man being recorded killed, and 3 officers and 34 men wounded.¹²⁶

The action can be viewed as evidence of the success of cavalry working mounted in co-operation with tanks, a fact that few commentators on the battle seem to have acknowledged. Smithers was scathing about the rôle of the cavalry:

In addition to the Highlanders and Captain Raikes' tanks there was a cavalry brigade. What it was expected to achieve was unclear. An officer who watched attempts of Cavalry and Infantry to co-operate with the tanks in the open ground south of Bourlon Wood was much impressed with the difficulties of co-ordinating cavalry with tanks. When MG fire was met the horsemen had to go so far back to get cover that they lost touch and the Tank was left alone on the objective for a long time before the cavalry could be communicated with and got forward again. This should hardly have come as a surprise; there was no place for animals in such a battle.¹²⁷

Other writers simply ignore the presence of the cavalry, attributing the fall of the village to the 4th Gordon Highlanders, who were in the lead of the 154th Brigade attack.¹²⁸ Br. Gen. Makins perhaps anticipated such counter-claims for the village, in the 1st Cavalry Brigade report he states:

The village was soon over-run by the Bays. The 4th Gordons who had reached a trench to the S. of the village, then came into the village but retired again later. Lt Barnard [commanding the lead squadron of Bays] never saw any infantry in the village when he got there and the whole credit of taking Cantaing is entirely due to the Tanks supported by the Bays.¹²⁹

One has to be somewhat sceptical of this claim as Makins could hardly be considered un-partizan, but even if the Gordons were able to make a simultaneous advance on the west of the village, the cavalry was nonetheless able to contribute significantly to the battle, contrary to the widely perceived wisdom that cavalry could not work successfully with tanks.

The capture of Cantaing also marked the last mounted action in the offensive battle. 2nd and 5th Cavalry Divisions had been held in readiness to advance via Marcoing and Masnières after a further infantry attack on the Masnières-Beaurevoir Line to the east of the canal, but this attack failed to make any progress against a greatly reinforced German line. On the evening of the 21 November both divisions were withdrawn, and although 1st Cavalry Division was initially retained in the battle area, and 4th Cavalry Division moved forward to relieve the 5th, these two were also withdrawn on the 22nd.

Elements of 1st and 2nd Cavalry Divisions were to play a significant part in the struggle for Bourlon Wood between 25 and 27 November, but as this fighting was

carried out entirely on foot, the divisions forming dismounted battalions from each of their brigades, this lies outside the scope of this study. The use of precious cavalry soldiers in this way reflects Charteris' prediction before the offensive began that ultimately the attack had been launched with too few troops. It also reflects the increasing desperation with which the Third Army command continued to press the attack, refusing to acknowledge that the offensive had essentially halted on 22 November.

The German Counter-stroke: 30 November

While British attention continued to be focused on the increasingly stalemated battle for Bourslon, the Germans were making plans of their own. The reinforcements which had been rushed to the area meant that not only were they in a position to halt the British offensive, but also to contemplate a counter-attack of their own to reverse the British gains and restore the Hindenburg Line front. Preparations at the headquarters of Crown Prince Rupprecht's group of armies, in whose sector Cambrai lay, began on 24 November. This was followed by a conference with Ludendorff on the 27th, after which a formal order to the German *Second Army* was issued. The broad outline of the attack was as follows. A main thrust was to be launched at the internal south-eastern angle of the British salient by the *Caudry* and *Busigny* groups of German divisions, with the aim of striking across the base of the salient towards Metz en Couture. This would be accompanied by a thrust south by the *Arras Group* of divisions to the west of Bourslon Wood. At worst this would cut off the British troops in the head of the salient around Fontaine, Marcoing and Masnières, and at best offered the possibility of rolling up the British line towards Arras from the south-east.¹³⁰

The British Third Army commanders seem to have been taken largely by surprise by this attack when it fell on 30 November. Partly they were absorbed in the fighting for Bourslon, where a counter attack was expected, and indeed delivered by the *Arras Group* of German forces. Also they had been influenced by unduly optimistic intelligence assessments of the German inability to mount such an attack after the losses of the Cambrai battle thus far, and in Flanders. In any event the lack of available forces meant

that even had they been aware of the German plans there was little they could have done to oppose them. The British line around the salient continued to be held by the divisions of III and IV Corps which had participated in the original attack ten days before. To the south VII Corps, which took the brunt of the German southern thrust was spread out occupying a thinly held and poorly constructed line.¹³¹

The northern arm of the German attack made little progress, at great cost in German casualties, and as no cavalry were engaged little more need be said of it here. The southern attack, however resulted in the involvement of three of the five British cavalry divisions in the subsequent fighting and forms the basis of this section. Of particular relevance here is the attack by the German 34th and 208th Divisions of the *Busigny Group*, which attacked at the extreme southern end of the German offensive front, between Vendhuile in the south and Banteux in the north. These troops were faced initially by the British VII Corps, on a section of the line which had not formed part of the British attack front on 20 November, and which was relatively ill prepared for the storm which was to descend upon it.

The German attack of 30 November began with a bombardment of gradually increasing intensity upon the northern half of the VII Corps front, held by 55th Division. This was followed at 7.00am by infiltration by small columns of German infantry, (in a style which was to be used on a larger scale the following year) supported by low flying aircraft, gas and *minenwerfer* bombardment, and covered by smoke, and the natural mist of early morning. This initial attack was enormously successful. Within hours Villers Guislain and Gouzeaucourt had been captured and a hole approximately five miles (8 km) north to south and three miles (4.5 km) deep had been torn in the British defences. Many guns had been captured and what opposition continued was mostly provided by scratch forces of rear-echelon troops.¹³²

Largely by coincidence, part of the Cavalry Corps was in the area to the rear of VII Corps when the German blow was struck. As a result, when Lt. Gen. Snow of VII Corps appealed for reinforcements the cavalry were the natural choice for Third Army to commit to the battle to halt the German advance. Cavalry Corps Headquarters was at that time at Villers Carbonnel, south of Peronne and approximately 16 miles (25 km) from the German break-in. All but one of the Cavalry Divisions, were also some distance away from the fighting, 4th and 5th Divisions were at Athies and Monchy-

Lagache respectively, a few miles from the Corps headquarters, while 1st and 3rd Divisions were at Bray and Querrieu, further to the west. Only 2nd Cavalry Division was in the immediate Cambrai area, at Fins, still recovering its dismounted battalions from their time in Bourlon Wood.¹³³

Cavalry Corps HQ was telephoned by Third Army with news of the attack at 8.30am. At that point the cavalry divisions had already begun to prepare a move into the VII Corps line to take over dismounted from the 24th Division, holding the southern half of the corps front. These orders were rapidly rescinded and 5th Cavalry Division was ordered up to Villers Faucon, where 55th Division had its Headquarters. Shortly after this 4th Cavalry Division was ordered to follow in support of the 5th, and with admirable despatch, Kavanagh himself followed by motor car, taking the commanders of 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions, Kennedy and MacAndrew, with him and opening an Advanced Corps Headquarters at Villers Faucon by 10.45am.¹³⁴ At about this time 2nd Cavalry Division, nearest the northern end of the German break-in, was 'placed at the disposal' of III Corps command.¹³⁵ This was a sensible move as the German attack had struck the junction of the two corps, and while 55th Division and VII Corps lay to the south of the incursion, III Corps troops mostly lay to the north. In allocating this division to the defending infantry corps Kavanagh also devolved responsibility for his artillery to them, the R.H.A. batteries of 2nd Cavalry Division (operating under III Corps) and 4th Cavalry Division were both handed over to 55th Division.¹³⁶ This was an understandable move as 55th Division had had its gun lines largely overrun, and was desperately short of artillery (although several of these gun positions were to be recaptured rapidly as the day progressed). The unfortunate consequence of this was that it denuded the cavalry themselves of what little integral artillery they possessed, and this was to be a significant factor in the fighting of the next few days.

The first cavalry into action on 30 November were from 2nd Cavalry Division. As already stated, this division was at Fins awaiting the return of one of its dismounted battalions. At about 10.30am orders were received to reinforce the line at Gouzeaucourt, about 4 miles (6.5 km) to the east. 5th Cavalry Brigade, formed of the 20th Hussars, 12th Lancers and 2nd Dragoons (Scots Greys) was allocated as advanced guard, and departed at around 11.00am, with 20th Hussars, (who had been in the process of arranging regimental baths for that morning) as vanguard. Approaching Gouzeaucourt, patrols

reported the village in German hands, opposed on the ridge to the west by a thinly held line of assorted British stragglers, and 470th Field Company Royal Engineers. Fire from the village made forward progress impossible so the Hussars dismounted and reinforced the line.¹³⁷

At about the same time 1st Guards Brigade arrived on the left of the cavalry opposite Gouzeaucourt. The Guards Division had been initially allocated to VII Corps but this was changed as III Corps' need seemed greater, unfortunately this confusion of orders meant that only 1st Brigade, operating alone, moved into the line. Notwithstanding their lack of support and numbers, 1/Irish Guards, and 2/ and 3/Coldstream Guards, carrying 20th Hussars with them on their right flank, attacked into and through Gouzeaucourt at midday. Further progress was checked beyond the village but a new line was established which was held by the Guards and cavalry for the remainder of the day.¹³⁸

While Gouzeaucourt was falling to the Guards and Hussars, the lead elements of 5th Cavalry Division arrived at Villers Faucon. The Ambala Brigade, leading, reached there at 12.15pm,¹³⁹ however having travelled some eleven miles (18 km) at a brisk trot in only just over an hour, most of the officers of the brigade had only the vaguest idea of where they were.¹⁴⁰ Orders from Kavanagh at Corps Advanced HQ followed at 1.10pm:

The Cav. Corps will advance in a northerly direction with a view to attacking the enemy's flank between Villers Guislain and Gouzeaucourt and seizing the Gonnellieu ridge. The 5th Cav. Div. will move at once with objective the enemy's flank between Villers Guislain and Gouzeaucourt. It will be supported by the 4th Cav. Div. In accordance with the situation as it develops.¹⁴¹

5th Cavalry Division moved off from Villers Faucon shortly after, with 8th Hussars and Ambala Brigade leading. These lead troops were broadly heading for Gauche Wood, and Gouzeaucourt with the aim of linking with the Guards and 2nd Cavalry Division to the north, but they still had very little idea of the position of their own and the enemy's troops, or indeed where they were themselves. On arrival at Vaucelette Farm at around 2.30pm, it was possible to compare maps with the infantry holding the line along Revelon Ridge and a better picture of the situation was gained.¹⁴² 8th Hussars pushed on but soon drew fire from the direction of Gauche Wood, and became entangled in the trenches and wire of the British second line, which ran to the west of the wood. Abandoning their horses they took up position in a sunken road to the west of the wood.

The second regiment of the brigade, 9th Hodson's Horse attempted to move up on the left (north) of the Hussars in support, but it too got no further than the sunken road, about 600 yards (550m) from the wood. A German counter attack was, however, repulsed from the direction of the wood, and by 4.00pm as it grew dark, contact was made by Hodson's Horse with the 20th Hussars to the north and a stable defensive line established just west of the railway line from Gouzeaucourt in the north to Revelon Ridge in the south.¹⁴³

A feature of the Hodson's Horse advance was that it was made mounted. This was effective where the ground was clear but where bottlenecks were created crossing the abundant wire in the area German artillery was able to inflict significant casualties. Lt. Col. Rowcroft, who rode with the regiment recalled:

The passage of the defile and advance by 'C' Squadron had been so rapid that the enemy's artillery had not had time to get on to the troops. However as 'D' Squadron started to follow 'C' through the gap in the wire, there was a different tale to tell, and the leading troop was literally blown to pieces.¹⁴⁴

There is little direct evidence of Kavanagh's view of the battle on 30 November, but it is possible to infer from what few clues exist that he felt that this was a decisive moment for the cavalry, and that Third Army had placed responsibility for stopping the Germans in his hands. His rapid advance by motor to his Advanced Headquarters is a symptom of this. His insistence upon mounted attacks was apparent the following day, as will be discussed later, but it seems likely that he adopted a similar tone on the 30th. The Cavalry Corps *War Diary* records that at 3.15pm "G.O.C. [Kavanagh] rode up to G.O.C. 5th Cav. Div. H.Q. [MacAndrew]... Ambala and Secunderabad Brigades had just been directed *mounted* on Gauche Wood."¹⁴⁵ (emphasis added). If indeed he did insist on mounted attacks on 30 November it suggests he had misread the battle. Had the Germans been advancing in large bodies across open ground then a sharp mounted blow might have sent them reeling, but in fact their advance was by infiltration of small parties across ground which although behind the British front line, was still part of the 'battle zone'; heavily wired and cut by trenches. Also by midday the German advance had largely run out of steam and their forces were consolidating in entrenched positions. In short Kavanagh seems to have anticipated a return to 'open warfare' which had not actually occurred.

Fortunately the local commanders were not so deceived, and both 8th Hussars and Hodson's Horse rapidly dismounted and fought on foot. Another lesson had also been learned, Lt. Col. Maunsell observed:

As it was now clear that there was no hope of any further advance, the led horses were all sent back some three miles, well out of the way. The mistake of Monchy-le-Preux where 700 horses were shelled to death in the streets of the village owing to no orders having been received to send them away, was not repeated.¹⁴⁶

The remaining two brigades of 5th Cavalry Division followed the Ambala Brigade between 3.00 and 4.00pm. Secunderabad Brigade swung north to extend the line on the left of Hodson's Horse, however on approaching Gouzeaucourt they made contact with 5th Cavalry Brigade (2nd Cavalry Division) who were already filling that gap so Secunderabad brigade retired to a position in reserve to the west. An attack on Gonnellieu, one of the original corps objectives, was considered, and "Patrols were sent towards Gonnellieu with a view to a mounted attack, but the place was found to be defended by wire and machine guns."¹⁴⁷ Brig. Gen. Gregory, commanding the brigade decided that this stood no chance of success and it was not attempted. (It is perhaps fortunate that at the northern end of the line he was not in good communication with Kavanagh.)

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade meanwhile moved up on the right (south) of the Ambala Brigade, taking up positions around Vaucelette Farm, and it was in these positions that 5th Cavalry Division spent the night, 18th Lancers (of Ambala Brigade) relieving 8th Hussars in the front line after dark.¹⁴⁸

The 'Battle of Epehy': 1 December 1917

(Figure 4.2 overleaf)

Overnight 30 November to 1 December orders were drawn up for a renewal of the British counter-attack at dawn the following day. Unlike the previous day, when few had been available, a significant number of tanks had been found to support this attack, and a combined infantry, cavalry, and tank assault was envisaged. Orders were issued by Cavalry Corps Headquarters at 6.40pm on the 30th:

The 5th Cavalry Division, with the Lucknow Cavalry Brigade attached to it [from 4th Division] will attack Gauche Wood and Villers Guislain tomorrow 1st December, co-operating with 14 tanks, 8 of which will be directed on Gauche Wood and 6 on Villers Guislain. ...

4th Cavalry Division less Lucknow Cavalry Brigade will be assembled west of Peiziere by 6.30am with the object of taking advantage of the advance of the tanks and seizing Villers Ridge.¹⁴⁹

A conference of the leading brigade commanders and a liaison officer from the tanks was held at 5th Cavalry Division Headquarters at 1.15am where the details were worked out.¹⁵⁰ 1st Guards Brigade, supported by 20 tanks would attack Gauche Wood from the north. Simultaneously, on the right (south) of the Guards, Ambala Brigade of 5th Cavalry Division would attack the wood on foot from the west, supported by a further six tanks. Secunderabad Brigade would take up a supporting position to the west of Ambala Brigade, mounted. The Canadian Brigade would cover the southern shoulder of the attack. Meanwhile further south, Lucknow Brigade (of 4th Cavalry Division but under temporary command of the 5th) would attack towards Villers Guislain, supported by nine tanks, on the south-east side of the Peiziere to Villers road. In turn on their right, this attack would be supported by the remaining brigades of 4th Division; Mhow and Sialkhot, attacking north and east 'to take advantage of the advance of the tanks'.¹⁵¹

To mount such a coordinated attack over unfamiliar ground, in the few hours of remaining darkness was a difficult undertaking, for the tanks in particular, as Col. Maunsell observed:

Conditions for tank co-operation in the contemplated attack on 1st December were extremely unfavourable. The machines were a long way from the points of assembly. It was dark, and there had been no time to reconnoitre lines of approach and find out the state of affairs in general. The uncertainty as to the locality of our own troops made things difficult enough for infantry and cavalry. It was infinitely worse for the tanks, especially as the terrain was absolutely new, and the machines are by nature extraordinarily blind.¹⁵²

Nor was the artillery support for the attack remotely adequate. The two R.H.A. batteries of 5th Cavalry Division were to support the Gauche Wood attack, while the third R.C.H.A. battery was lent by the Canadians to support Lucknow Brigade.

“Anyone with the slightest experience of France” Maunsell remarked “would know that this was a mere fleabite.”¹⁵³

In spite of these disadvantages the northern part of the attack the following morning was a success. 1st Guards Brigade waited about ten minutes for their supporting tanks, but seeing no sign of them simply took Gauche Wood at a rush, supported only by the fire of their brigade machine gun company. 18th Lancers, the lead assaulting regiment of Ambala brigade supported this attack and helped mop up the wood, indeed as officer casualties in the Guards were so heavy, the officers of the 18th Lancers took temporary command of the forces in the wood.¹⁵⁴ The tanks allocated to support the Lancers, although they arrived on time, rapidly lost direction and instead of heading east towards the wood, swung north across the face of the wood, and in passing, shot up the trenches occupied by Hodson’s Horse, inflicting several casualties.¹⁵⁵ Some eventually entered the wood from the north but only at about 8.30am, after the battle was substantially over.¹⁵⁶

Further south events took a rather different turn. The Lucknow Brigade, with the 36th (Jacobs’) Horse leading, were to attack towards Villers Guislain from a position south-east of Vaucelette Farm at 6.20am. At 5.45am, just over half an hour before they were due to set off, a message was received that the tanks allocated to the attack would not reach the rendezvous in time and would move off from a point a mile (1.6km) to the north-west, at Genin Well Copse.¹⁵⁷ This would place the tanks some distance away and on the other side of the ridge running along the Peiziere to Villers road. Brig. Gen. Gage, commanding Lucknow Brigade, frantically sought to check his Brigade’s advance, (Jacobs’ Horse were contacted less than five minutes before they were to move off), and re-deploy the force a mile to the west. This was achieved by 6.50am, but no tanks were contacted.¹⁵⁸

Gage assumed that since the tanks were on his left their advance would converge with that of his brigade towards the objective (Villers Guislain), and anxious firstly that the tanks may have gone on ahead without support, and secondly to make good his rôle as flank protection for the attack on Gauche Wood, he ordered Jacobs Horse into the attack. Gage was unaware that not only had the tanks’ start point been altered but that their axis of advance had also been changed to send all the tanks towards Gauche Wood, thus no tanks would enter his brigade area at all. As a result, Jacobs’ Horse were left to

advance with no tank support, little or no artillery support, as the brigade R.H.A. had been detached, and in increasing daylight. In the face of heavy German artillery and machine gun fire the attack progressed no more than about 100 yards (100m) before becoming pinned down in the network of British second line trenches ahead of them. This was a great relief to the scratch force of rear echelon troops holding those trenches but did not carry the Brigade anywhere near Villers Guislain.¹⁵⁹

Worse was to follow on the right of the Lucknow Brigade, and here the involvement of Kavanagh and Cavalry Corps Headquarters in the conduct of affairs was starkly highlighted. On the right of Lucknow Brigade, who were temporarily under 5th Cavalry Division command, lay the remainder of 4th Cavalry Division; the Mhow Brigade leading with Sialkot brigade in support. Their orders had been to advance "... taking advantage of the advance of the tanks and seizing Villers Ridge."¹⁶⁰ Wilfrid Miles also claims in the *Official History* that "Mounted action was insisted upon by Lieut. General Kavanagh."¹⁶¹ The Brigade was concentrated to the north of Peiziere by 6.30am, ready to go, and under artillery fire, but seeing no tank attack developing and aware that the Lucknow Brigade had made no progress, Brig. Gen. Neil Haig, commanding Mhow Brigade made no move.

The Cavalry Corps *War Diary* is somewhat coy about what happened next. No mention of the Mhow brigade appears in the diary itself apart from a report of its advance at 8.45am. In the attached 'Report on Operations', events are described thus:

The Corps Commander, who had sent a Staff Officer to the 4th Cavalry Division, to report on their progress, telephoned at about 7.45am to G.O.C. 4th Cavalry Division, ordering him to commence the advance on the objective allotted to him in the Corps Order. He had not moved earlier in view of the fact that the advance of the tanks with Lucknow Brigade had not materialised.¹⁶²

Also contained in the Corps *War Diary* is a typescript 'The battle of Epehy', by Col. Maunsell, which formed the basis of his later account of events published in the *Cavalry Journal*.¹⁶³ Associated with this are letters from both Neil Haig, commanding Mhow Brigade itself, and Maj. Gen. Kennedy, commanding 4th Cavalry Division. The letters are somewhat more revealing. Haig states:

The attack on Villers Guislain was by direct order of the Corps Commander. ... I went up to Alfred Kennedy's H.Q. and explained the enemy's situation to him,

and asked him to come down to my H.Q. himself. ...Kennedy quite agreed with me that an attack on this position was impracticable and said he would go and talk to the Corps Commander on the telephone at once and explain the situation.¹⁶⁴

Kennedy's letter gives an account of this conversation:

Kavanagh: How is your attack getting on?

Kennedy: My attack? Why it has not started as the dismounted attack has not made any progress. The tanks failed to turn up and there is nothing doing.

Kavanagh: Rot! You have to carry out your attack as ordered.

Kennedy: But my orders were to take advantage of any success gained in the mounted(sic) attack and as I say there has not been any success.

Kavanagh: You have to carry out your attack at once.

Kennedy: If you order me to do so I will try it.

(I may say the Corps Commander was evidently very annoyed, and from the first, spoke very rudely.)¹⁶⁵

Haig Continues:

Kennedy returned later and informed me that he had explained the situation carefully, that the Corps Commander was very annoyed at the delay and ordered the attack to take place at once.

While I was issuing my orders... one of the Corps staff rode up and said to me "then can I inform the Corps Commander that you have great hopes of success?" I told him that he could go back and tell the Corps Commander that I didn't think we had a "Dog's bloody earthly." He returned and told the Corps Commander that I was not optimistic.¹⁶⁶

Kennedy and Haig were thus left with no option but to press ahead with an attack in which they had no confidence. Haig's report of subsequent events appears in the *Mhow Brigade War Diary*,¹⁶⁷ and was reprinted verbatim in the *Cavalry Journal* after his death.¹⁶⁸ Much of what follows is drawn from that account. Kennedy passed a formal order to Mhow Brigade at 8.15am. "You are to endeavour to push towards your objective supported by the artillery." The situation which presented Haig was as

follows, the brigade lay at Peiziere, and the adjoining village of Epehy. Approximately 5000 yards (4500m) to the north-east lay Villers Guislain, on the brigade objective; 'Villers Ridge'. The terrain in between was largely open and unobstructed, sloping down to the canal to the east, but with higher ground forming the shape of a capital 'E'. The ridge carrying the road between the two villages formed the spine to the west, with a ridge to the south around Epehy, a central ridge, known of British maps as 'Lark Spur', and Villers Ridge to the north. Two re-entrants ran westwards from the canal. The southerly of these was 'Catelet Valley' and the northern, 'Targelle Ravine', two southward projections of this northern valley were known as 'Quail' and 'Pigeon' Ravines, although neither is more than a gentle depression in broadly rolling country. Cutting off the eastern ends of these features was the former British line, now occupied by the Germans, principally consisting of a series of fortified posts connected by communication trenches. To the west, about two thirds of the way along the road to Villers lay a 'Raperie' or 'Beet Factory' which had been occupied and fortified by the Germans.

Haig's plan was that 2nd Lancers, supported by one Squadron of 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons should swing wide to the east, following a road along the northern face of Catelet Valley, before turning north via pigeon Ravine onto Villers Ridge. Meanwhile the remaining three squadrons of the Inniskillings would pass along the east side of the main Villers road, dropping into Quail Ravine and the southward turn at the eastern end of Targelle Ravine, in order to gain some shelter from, and bypass the beet factory. 38th (Central India) Horse would remain in support, as would Sialkot Brigade.

2nd Lancers moved off through Epehy at around 9.00am. The regiment had been on its way into the trenches when recalled on 30 November so the men were without swords or lances. These had to be handed out from wagons as the men rode off and many went into action without either.¹⁶⁹ Shelling was intense from the start. The Regiment (followed by 'C' Squadron Inniskillings, and a brigade MG section) deployed beyond the village into column of squadrons in line of troop columns, and set off at a gallop down Catelet Valley. They came under heavy machine gun fire from in front and from the higher ground on both flanks, but rode on until they reached the rear of the former British positions, a trench known as Kildare Trench, and the associated Kildare Post. The fresh German wire behind the post was jumped, or gaps found and the Lancers

captured the trench after some hand to hand fighting. Fortunately the trench ran along the line of a pre-existing sunken road, so it was possible to get some horses under cover, as the lancers were rapidly pinned down in this position. The remaining horses had to be sent back up the valley and suffered severely on the return trip. Haig summed up the resulting situation:

A German position had been captured and was occupied by about 200 men 2nd Lancers, 36 Men Inniskilling Dragoons, 4 machine guns 11th M.G. squadron and in addition there were 169 horses in the position, which greatly interfered with the movement of the garrison and the evacuation of the wounded.¹⁷⁰

2nd Lancers were to remain cut off in Kildare Trench for the rest of the day, fighting an at times desperate struggle with bombs and machine guns, and only withdrawing under cover of darkness.

The remainder of the Inniskilling Dragoons, meanwhile were unaware that this would be the fate of the Lancers, and seeing them move off to the east at about 9.35am, took this as their cue to begin their own advance. In similar formation to the Lancers, squadron column of line of troop columns, extended, they set out from north of Peiziere, but unlike the Lancers who had the slight cover of a valley, the first part of the Inniskilling's route as far as the Beet factory was completely exposed. Also due to an oversight, and the absence of 'C' Squadron, which normally led the column, the attack was led by 'D' Squadron, with the machine gun section immediately behind it, instead of at the rear of the column. Intense fire was encountered almost immediately, but the Dragoons pushed on at a gallop. Despite their best efforts, however the task was hopeless, 'D' Squadron and the machine guns got as far as the Beet Factory itself before being surrounded and forced to surrender, while Lt. Col. Paterson, leading the rear two squadrons, pulled up while 600 yards distant and withdrew to Peiziere. 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons lost 102 casualties, and over 150 horses in a little under ten minutes. The machine gun section, consisting of two officers 53 other ranks and 87 horses, was a total loss, killed or captured. The widely quoted remarks of Col. Maunsell in this attack bear repetition here "The point of attempting a mounted attack under the circumstances seems incomprehensible. In the case of the Inniskillings, not one single element that has conduced to the success in mounted attacks since, and including, the time of Napoleon was present."¹⁷¹ Sadly this fact was known to Haig and Kennedy before the operation

was attempted, only Kavanagh, at Cavalry Corps Headquarters it seems, believed there was any chance of success.

Haig's final effort to press forward the attack was at 10.10am. Two squadrons of the Mhow Brigade reserve regiment, the Central India Horse were sent to try to push down the north side of Catelet Valley and support the 2nd Lancers. These troops despite advancing on foot rapidly came under heavy machine gun fire and could make no progress. One squadron in fact became itself pinned down on Lark Spur and was forced to remain there until darkness fell.

The result of the morning's operations was that while the 2nd Lancers occupied a position at the eastern end of Catelet Valley, and the Guards and the Ambala Brigade held Gauche Wood, a large westward salient lay between the two, still occupied by the enemy. In particular German machine guns were active on the railway embankment north of Vaucelette Farm, in the area known as Chapel Crossing,¹⁷² and the Beet Factory was still strongly held. Nonetheless, it is highly questionable whether the Germans had either the will or the ability to push on south-westwards beyond the positions they had gained on 30 November. Their activities seem to have been limited to local counter-attacks against thrusts by the cavalry. Kavanagh however, felt that a further effort to dislodge them was required. At about midday he rode forward to the 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions' Headquarters just to the west of Peiziere, summoning Kennedy and MacAndrew to arrange further assaults during the afternoon.¹⁷³ Orders were issued for an attack by the Canadian Cavalry Brigade towards Chapel Crossing, linking up with the south end of Gauche Wood, while Lucknow Brigade, now returned to 4th Division command, would attack towards the Beet Factory, supported by Mhow Brigade on its right. Orders for an attack at 3.00pm were issued at 12.40. This order did not reach Haig at Mhow Brigade until 2.15pm due to the weight of shelling falling on Peiziere. His response was to point out the parlous state of his brigade after the disasters of the morning "4th Cavalry Division were informed that the total available force in the hand of the G.O.C. Mhow Cav. Bde. consisted of two weak squadrons of Inniskilling Dragoons, one squadron of C.I.H. and two machine guns."¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless an attack plan was developed requiring the remaining squadron of C.I.H. to push forward, assisted by the two squadrons of that regiment already trapped on Lark Spur. "O.C. Inniskilling

Dragoons was informed that in the case of success in this attack, the remains of his two squadrons would act mounted.”¹⁷⁵

Once again the artillery support for an attack on foot against entrenched enemy with large numbers of machine guns was limited to little more than the intrinsic R.H.A. and R.C.H.A batteries of the two divisions. This was simply not enough to make any impression on the enemy. The Canadian attack was initially successful, Lord Strathcona’s Horse, with support from a squadron of the Royal Canadian Dragoons were able to evict the Germans from Chapel Crossing and link up with the southern end of Gauche Wood, but that was as far as they were able to go.¹⁷⁶ To the south of them Lucknow Brigade were presented with the same obstacles as they had faced in the morning, and with no new resources with which to attempt them. Nor were they advised of the Canadian attack on their flank so no proper co-ordination was possible. Jacob’s Horse led the attack towards the Beet Factory, advancing in short rushes, but each attempt was met with rising casualties and the attack stalled after a few hundred yards.¹⁷⁷ At least “as no attack appeared to develop on the left flank” Mhow brigade were spared the necessity of further effort, and the squadrons of C.I.H. were not sent forward.¹⁷⁸

The attack by the Canadians on Chapel Crossing marked the end of significant offensive operations on the Cavalry Corps front. Overnight the brigades in the line were relieved by the reserve brigades of the two divisions, Secunderabad on the 5th Division front and Sialkot on the 4th. The Germans were content to hold the ground gained and while fighting continued to the north, the German flank opposite the cavalry remained quiet. The Cavalry Corps was finally relieved by III and VI Corps on 6 December, and Corps Forward Headquarters at Villers Faucon was closed on that day.¹⁷⁹ By that time the British salient, gained on 20th November, had largely been evacuated and returned to German hands.

The Failure of the Cavalry?

Clearly the offensive at Cambrai failed to achieve the objectives desired of it by its planners, and much of the ground gained was rapidly lost as a consequence of the

German counter-offensive of 30 November. A series of recriminations rapidly followed culminating in both 'questions in the House' and several official enquiries.¹⁸⁰ These tended to focus on the reasons why the Germans made such good progress on 30 November, and dwelt little on the actions of the cavalry. Unofficially however, the feeling was quick to develop that the cavalry had failed to live up to the opportunity presented to it by the tank and infantry attack. Home noted in his diary on 10 December: "There is a lot of talk about the Cavalry just now; people seem to think that we should have got through on 20 November."¹⁸¹ As was outlined at the beginning of this chapter, this view that the cavalry failed has been picked up by most subsequent literature on the battle.¹⁸²

Two major criticisms have been made of the cavalry. The first of these corresponds closely with one of the themes of this study, command and control. It has been argued that Kavanagh and Cavalry Headquarters were too far in the rear to properly control the battle, and thus missed what fleeting opportunities for advance occurred. Combined with this is criticism of Kavanagh himself as a commander. This view was first promulgated by J. F. C. Fuller, and is adopted more or less verbatim by Travers, quoting the former, "Meanwhile, J. F. C. Fuller knew that Kavanagh was miles away from the battle and was 'surely the worst Cavalry general in all history'."¹⁸³ The performance of Kavanagh will be examined in more detail later, suffice to say at this point that part of the problem was intrinsic in the command structure, not in the person of the commander. This criticism was also voiced by those involved in the battle itself. Gen. Woollcombe is reported to have remarked to his ADC at IV Corps "...that the cavalry had cost us our chance."¹⁸⁴ Smithers in his 1992 work once again quoted Col. Baker Carr of the Tank Corps "What a chance that day was missed! Never before and never again was such an opportunity offered."¹⁸⁵ Interestingly, Smithers, while keen to quote Baker-Carr's castigation of the cavalry, signally neglects the remarks in mitigation of their performance which followed in the original work:

Why, then, did the cavalry not avail itself of this golden opportunity? It is a difficult question to answer, though one fact which is known, has an important bearing on the subject, namely that cavalry leaders were strictly prohibited from taking any action without the permission of superior authority. This in itself largely explains their astonishing inactivity,¹⁸⁶

Mullens, the commander with responsibility for the advance of 1st Cavalry Division on 20 November stated his own case in *'Lessons to be drawn from the Operations of the 1st Cavalry Division in the battle which began on November 20th 1917'*¹⁸⁷ written less than a month after the event. In this he pointed out that after the experience of previous battles, close touch was maintained directly with the attacking infantry divisions, as a result "Reports, both accurate and prompt, were constantly received of the progress of the attack." In the light of this he argued:

Opportunities for the employment of cavalry are of so fleeting a nature that the G.O.C. leading Cavalry Division and the G.O.C. leading Cavalry Brigade who are the individuals on the spot, should be held responsible for taking advantage of any opportunities which occur. Time does not admit of sending the information back to the rear and for re-transmission to the front. ...

It is most urgently represented that the leading Cavalry Division should be given the plan and should be allowed to carry out the task allotted in the best way that offers.

He went on to catalogue the "counter-orders" he had received in the course of the day. It is clear that there is a good deal of merit in his argument. The interference of Cavalry Corps HQ, and possibly of Kavanagh himself, as well as that of IV Corps H.Q., was a significant factor in the slow progress of 1st Cavalry Division. Kavanagh also failed to push 2nd and 5th Divisions forward with adequate vigour, essentially abandoning 2nd Division on the side of the road for several hours and forgetting about it.

Gen. Woollcombe and IV Corps naturally took issue with almost every point made by Mullens, denying any responsibility for the command delays. Some of this controversy has been alluded to already earlier in this chapter. The IV Corps report summarising the exchange of orders between themselves and 1st Cavalry Division concludes

It is not seen how any of these orders [HP.14 et Seq.] impeded the advance of 1st Cavalry Division, or in any way interfered with the execution of the original orders. The only object of the various orders was to hasten the action of the cavalry.¹⁸⁸

However, no matter what the 'object' of the orders may have been or the good intentions of IV Corps, it is difficult not to sympathise with Mullens. Woollcombe's argument that the messages contained only 'information' is a weak one, notwithstanding

the fact that the said information was grossly inaccurate. The orders in the afternoon to move over Premy Chapel ridge were also a clear change from the original planned line of advance. That confusion and delay resulted is hardly surprising. Cavalry Corps Advanced Headquarters must also shoulder some of the responsibility. Their follow up message regarding Flesquières can only be regarded as a direct order to 1st Cavalry Division to advance by that route. Given the circuitous channels of communications and complex command structure, Mullens can hardly have been expected to ignore an order from Kavanagh on the grounds that he was since 6:15am under IV Corps rather than Cavalry Corps command. Kavanagh made no reference to this in his comments on the performance of the Division but it is tempting to suggest that this interference in the chain of command was at his behest. Either way the Cavalry Corps *War Diary* would seem to imply that they were under the impression that they were passing on the intent, if not the actual wording of IV Corps' wishes.¹⁸⁹

It should also be borne in mind that 1st Cavalry Division was extremely constrained in its freedom of movement. If the Hindenburg Support Line is taken into account the German defensive systems extended through Flesquières and some distance to the east of (beyond) Ribecourt. Thus the Division was not in a position simply to change direction and outflank defended positions in this part of the battlefield. Further on this would be possible, but not at this stage of the advance. The rôle of the cavalry was to move and fight flexibly beyond the lines of the enemy's fixed defences, but up to that point they were in the hands of the infantry and tanks who must punch a hole through those defences for their advance. Whatever the protestations of Woolcombe and IV Corps, it was not the rôle of the cavalry to assist in the capture of Flesquières, that lay within the frontal part of the German defensive system, and thus the first phase of the attack. Co-operation with the cavalry was not planned until the later move on Bourlon and Fontaine. Harper's 51st Division was conspicuous in its failure to capture Flesquières in the early stages of the battle and it was this which blocked the advance of the cavalry, and not *vice-versa*. This was summed up by Cyril Falls when he observed: "The Cavalry action on a grand scale had been a complete failure. Whatever chances of success it may have had were extinguished by the failure to take Flesquières."¹⁹⁰

The second criticism levelled at the cavalry is of lack of initiative at lower levels of command, this has implications for the tactical effectiveness of the arm which forms

another key theme of this study. Both Robert Woolcombe¹⁹¹ and Stephen Badsey¹⁹² have argued that years of inactivity had led to a cavalry force which was listless and timid, and incapable at all levels of decisive action. A curious further twist to these arguments is the view offered by Smithers that "...fortunately for themselves, the British cavalry did nothing."¹⁹³ The argument being that had the cavalry pushed forward, their self-evident uselessness and vulnerability to enemy machine guns would have led to senseless slaughter. Even Anglesey, who is normally reluctant to heap criticism on his chosen subjects follows this line, observing that the inactivity of the cavalry divisions was "... fully justified"¹⁹⁴ and "how lucky it was that there were not more 'thrusters' in command."¹⁹⁵

Kavanagh, writing in February 1918 while generally supportive of his subordinates, took a similar line;

I am confident that Maj. Gen. Mullens did everything in his power to carry out the instructions originally given him by IV Corps. The only criticism I have had to make on the action of the 1st Cavalry Division on the 20th November is that G.O.C. 2nd Cavalry Brigade when he finally started to advance by the Bois des Neufs (sic.) and carry out the original instructions given him, was slow in doing so, and did not appear to have pushed forward and supported his leading regiment with sufficient determination and resolution. His difficulties, however, were very great as his brigade was stretched out on a single narrow road with trenches and wire on either side for a long distance and their progress was of necessity slow.¹⁹⁶

Others have also been critical of this, citing the presence of a company of tanks behind Premy Chapel Ridge, tasked with co-operation with the cavalry, but left unused.¹⁹⁷

Before such criticism is accepted too readily the rôle of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade should be reflected upon. Leaving their points of concentration shortly after midnight, 4th Dragoon Guards were to be lead regiment all day as the narrowness of the advance route did not offer the option of relieving them with another regiment. Thus they were responsible for the advance to Trescault, for patrolling towards Flesquières in the morning, for the dismounted assault on Ribecourt at 2:00pm, for patrolling over Premy Chapel Ridge prior to the abortive attempt at encirclement of Flesquières, and finally for attacking La Folie at the gallop at last light. By this time they had been marching and

fighting for 16 hours, and so their conduct is perhaps more remarkable for its continued aggressiveness than for the lack of it.

It is also clear that Beale-Brown and Sewell had still not ruled out the capture of Cantaing at last light. The deployment of one squadron frontally on foot towards the village ('B' Squadron 4th Dg. Gds.), while a second ('A' Squadron) attempted to gallop it via a flank is straight out of the pages of *Cavalry Training*. As Beale-Brown observed "It was now too late and too dark"¹⁹⁸ to wait for guns and to seek out the co-operation of tanks. Indeed, had he done so the same criticism of hesitation might have been levelled with greater justification. Instead his regiments continued to fight flexibly and aggressively relying on their own internal resources. Further, as Sewell pointed out (quoted earlier) the presence of the enemy on the east bank of the canal, effectively in the rear of any attack towards Cantaing made it a dangerous undertaking. Had the Brigade not been held up for three hours earlier in the day by the events before Flesquières, the result may have been quite different. Add to this the exploits of the Fort Garry Horse across the St Quentin Canal and it is apparent that at regimental level at least there was no lack of 'Cavalry Spirit'.

Higher up the chain of command, however, the accusation of indecisiveness carries more weight. Of the cavalry divisional commanders, Mullens seems to have pushed on, but Greenly (in command of 2nd Cavalry Division) was clearly reluctant to take any kind of chance in crossing the canal at Masnières on the evening of 20 November. The rôle of corps commanders, both of infantry and cavalry, has already been considered. The conclusions of the inquiry into the Cambrai battle, although principally concerned with the events of 30 November, were that while no blame could be attached to any commanders at corps level or above, there were failures lower down and that in particular "junior officers, NCOs and men" had been at fault.¹⁹⁹ It is arguable that in the cavalry at least the reverse was true, and that while regimental and brigade commanders took the fight to the enemy as far as possible, they were let down by inertia and indecisiveness at each successive level of higher command.

Kavanagh and the Corps

Part of the command and control problem which plagued the cavalry in 1916 and 17 was the number of tiers or levels of command through which its orders had to pass. One of these levels was that of the Cavalry Corps itself. As was outlined in Chapter 1 this calls into question the function and usefulness of the Corps as an institution. Given the conclusions of the previous section, that the failure to get the cavalry forward on 20 November was in large part due to the interference of Cavalry Corps H.Q., and the widespread criticism of its commander which follows on from this, the obvious wider question arises. Did the Cavalry Corps and its leader have any positive rôle to play? Would a series of independent cavalry divisions under G.H.Q. control as was briefly the case in 1916, (described in Chapter 2) have been a better option, with divisions serving directly under infantry corps command?

The answer to this lies in precisely what a 'Corps' represents, and two interpretations of this are possible. Firstly, 'Corps' may be used in the sense implied in the term 'Regiments and Corps of the British Army', that is in an essentially 'Cap-badge' rôle as a supra-regimental organisation of specialist troops of one kind or another. Obvious examples of this are the Royal Flying Corps (R.F.C), the Machine-Gun Corps (M.G.C.) formed in October 1915, and its offspring (formerly the Heavy Branch M.G.C.) the Tank Corps. Besides an important moral rôle in supplying their members with a corporate identity, these formations were vital to their constituent units as they provided a centre for training, for the development of specialist equipment relevant to the Corps' rôle, and a voice in the ever more clamorous debate over manpower and resources. There is little doubt that the Cavalry Corps had an important function in this regard. The supplying and training of the cavalry, particularly over the winter was the responsibility of the Corps as has been discussed in earlier chapters. The moral value of the Corps was also important, as emphasised by Home on the break-up of the British and Indian Cavalry Corps in March 1916: "As regards the Cavalry the Corps formation has been done away with, ...I am heartbroken over their decision. We have all worked hard for this old Corps and hoped one day it would be used in open warfare."²⁰⁰ His contrasting joy at its reinstatement in September 1916 is evident: "It is very nice to be amongst the

old Cavalry once more. We are going to have all five Divisions and it will be a great day for us when we get going.”²⁰¹ This morale factor should not be underestimated, the cavalry suffered from a steady drain of its manpower to those young Corps mentioned above, the Tanks and the RFC, and anything that raised the profile and prestige of the Cavalry was vital to its continuing success.

Thus the administrative value of the Cavalry Corps is not in doubt. What is much more questionable, however, is its operational function. This relates to the second definition of ‘Corps’ as a formation of a number of divisions, containing all arms and capable of limited independent action. This concept of the Corps can be traced in large part to the armies of Napoleon 100 years or more earlier. Its character and function in the B.E.F. in the Great War have been thoroughly examined by Andy Simpson in both his unpublished 2001 thesis,²⁰² and his recent published paper in Sheffield and Todman’s *Command and Control on the Western Front*.²⁰³ While Simpson does not deal explicitly with the Cavalry Corps, indeed it is absent even from the list of corps excluded from his study,²⁰⁴ his examination of the function of, and definition of the rôle of other Corps serves as a useful point of comparison with that of the Cavalry.

Simpson points out that in 1914 the B.E.F. had not fully resolved the question of corps function. While two corps were deployed to France this was largely because six infantry divisions was considered too large a force to be controlled directly by the Commander-in-Chief.²⁰⁵ The concept of self-contained all-arms forces was applied at divisional level, each infantry division having integral artillery, signal and engineer components as well as the necessary ambulance and supply train, and a squadron of divisional cavalry. During 1914 at the divisional level, the cavalry was similarly organised, having the same integral assets, R.H.A. batteries, mounted signal, engineer, and medical units.²⁰⁶ Thus both infantry divisions and cavalry divisions could be considered as independent units, and indeed functioned as such. It has been noted in Chapter 2, however that in the cavalry in particular many of these assets existed at brigade level, and that at the outbreak of war even the divisional structure, let alone that of the corps, had to be evolved *ad hoc*.

From late 1915, however, the relationship between the function of division and corps began to change, and from the Somme offensive of 1916 onwards a new system had developed. Simpson identifies four main functions of Corps after this period.²⁰⁷ The first

of these relates to artillery. Prior to each organised offensive large numbers of additional guns would typically be assembled. These fell under the command of the corps artillery adviser, initially the Brigadier General Royal Artillery (B.G.R.A), later re-designated the General Officer Commanding Royal Artillery (G.O.C.R.A.). These officers controlled a force of artillery vastly larger than that assembled from within the divisions comprising the corps, and also took control of the artillery of those divisions, organising it to support the operations of the corps as a whole, supporting each division in turn as the operation required. In addition, one of the offensive lessons that was gradually appreciated by the commanders of the B.E.F. in the course of the war was that it was unrealistic to expect troops to operate effectively beyond the protective umbrella provided by this artillery.

The three further corps functions devolve from the presence of this artillery; administration, planning and reconnaissance. As the corps' larger guns were relatively immobile, corps tended to remain geographically quite static. The corps would remain in place while divisions rotated in and out of the area, and indeed different Army headquarters might also come and go from above the corps. Meanwhile the corps took control of administration within its area, roads, rail, supply dumps, supply of ammunition (particularly to the artillery) etcetera were all controlled by corps. This increasing concentration of assets at corps rather than divisional level is reflected in the concentration of the individual cavalry squadrons previously allocated at divisional level, into a 'Corps Cavalry Regiment' in May 1916.²⁰⁸ As a consequence of these factors when an operation was developed, much of the detailed planning would take place at corps level. Decisions about objectives would be made in conference between corps and army, and the artillery fire-plan developed accordingly by the G.O.C.R.A.. Individual divisions were responsible only for putting their troops in at the right time under the protection of this barrage. Finally, in support of its artillery, most corps had a dedicated RFC squadron available to direct artillery fire and conduct reconnaissance. Thus much of the information supplied to divisional and brigade commanders would have its origins at corps. This was the case not only before an attack began but, as Simpson emphasises, during the attack itself, where the 'Big picture' was best understood at corps level, supplied by information from individual divisions and

directly from contact aircraft. This picture was in turn fed back down the chain of command to the front line troops.

If the presence of Kavanagh and the Cavalry Corps Headquarters within the chain of command during an offensive, as they were at Cambrai, are to be judged, then Simpson's corps function criteria provide a very useful comparison. It rapidly becomes apparent that Cavalry Corps HQ provided few if any of these functions. Above all, as the rôle of the infantry corps grew from the presence of its guns, so that of the Cavalry Corps declined in equal measure. Equipped only with its integral divisional R.H.A. Brigades, the artillery strength of the Cavalry Corps was in relative terms insignificant. Thus it was not able to directly support its constituent divisions. Nor did it command the local administrative infrastructure, or possess special local knowledge to assist those formations. A squadron of R.F.C. aircraft was directly attached to the Cavalry Corps, charged with providing information and communication,²⁰⁹ but in the absence of guns to direct, one of the key functions of corps aircraft was lost. Also, in the event the weather on 20 November was such that little useful aerial reconnaissance was possible.²¹⁰

Given these constraints, the placing of 1st Cavalry Division under the operational control of IV Corps on 20 November seems not only the better choice of command arrangements but practically the *only* sensible option. Were the division to be controlled by Cavalry Corps Headquarters, that headquarters would have no practical support (in the form of artillery) to provide to the division, and as it would not be receiving information on the progress of the adjacent infantry divisions, and its aircraft were struggling, no help in the form of information would be forthcoming either.

In short, the Cavalry Corps had no useful operational rôle on 20 November. Its presence in the chain of command served only to hinder the advance of the cavalry divisions. It is also arguable that had 2nd and 5th Cavalry Divisions not waited on Kavanagh's word to advance, but simply moved up according to timetable behind the advance of III Corps (or been under their direct control), then the Canadian Cavalry Brigade might have reached the St Quentin Canal as much as two hours earlier. The consequences which might have flowed from that are a matter for speculation, but could have been significant. Before developing this idea to far, however, one of the other key rôles of the infantry corps must be considered, that is the provision of a heavy artillery umbrella for operations. It has been shown in a previous chapter that the advance of the

cavalry at Arras was severely hindered by the fact that it outran its artillery support. In spite of efforts to provide flanking fire from heavy guns to the south, the artillery command was insufficiently flexible to achieve this. Had significant forces of cavalry been able to cross the St Quentin Canal on 20 November, they may well have been able to inflict significant damage on un-organised German rear echelon units, but it is likely that had they encountered significant organised resistance this lack of guns would have become a significant factor in their ability to make any further progress.

Serious questions also surround the rôle of the Cavalry Corps and Kavanagh on 30 November – 1 December. There is no doubt that the arrival of the 20th Hussars and the Guards on 30 November helped to restore the line around the German break-in at Gouzeaucourt. Kavanagh's subsequent handling of the battle, however, was seriously flawed. Little or no information is available to determine what Kavanagh himself thought about the situation, his attitudes have principally to be inferred from his actions and the orders he gave. It seems his primary error was to believe (wrongly as it turned out) that the Germans in this area were intent on a further advance, when in fact they were a flank guard content to consolidate their positions on their early gains. From this misapprehension flowed a series of further errors. The first of these was that the German forces would present themselves as blocks of troops advancing across open country, and that they would thus be amenable to mounted attack, when in fact they had never ventured far beyond the existing British rear trench lines and had wired themselves in.

The next mistake was to believe that the situation was grave enough to commit his corps to battle come-what-may at whatever ultimate cost. This climate of panic was not exclusive to Cavalry Corps Headquarters and pervaded a number of parts of the British forces at that time, The B.E.F. by this point in the war was accustomed to being strategically on the offensive, the Germans had organised virtually no operational level offensive battles since Verdun, restricting themselves to local counter attack. Thus any big German attack would be a severe shock. This was compounded by the fact that Allied intelligence had, as discussed earlier, seriously misjudged the reserves available to the Germans and their capacity for offensive action. The initial success of the German attack, which took a substantial bite several miles deep out of VII Corps front

would have added to this sense of shock. This shock and surprise seems to have seriously affected Kavanagh's judgement.

The result of these factors was a strange development. The Cavalry Corps *War Diary* refers several times to the 'Cavalry Corps line'²¹¹ and indeed the Corps was given responsibility for the area between III Corps in the north and VII Corps in the south, where the German attack was centred. The allocation of a sector of the front to the Cavalry Corps implies that the cavalry would be capable of holding such a line in a similar fashion to an infantry corps. While they were indeed able to create a defence, it has been demonstrated that the Cavalry Corps lacked a large proportion of the infrastructure and assets considered normal in an infantry corps, in particular in artillery. Thus to expect them to function in the same way was demanding a lot. Rather than recognising the inherent weakness of his formation, and concentrating on a conservative, defensive strategy, Kavanagh seems to have decided that 1 December represented a historic opportunity for the Cavalry Corps to show its mettle, and in some way 'save the day'. Thus he launched a series of increasingly desperate counter-attacks, each of which lacked all the basic ingredients for success, planning, intelligence, knowledge of ground, co-ordination with flanking units, but above all guns. The price for this ambition (paid by the Mhow Brigade in particular) has already been described.

An interesting contrast with the activities of the Cavalry Corps Commander at Cambrai is provided by the commander of the Tank Corps, Brig. Gen. Elles. His 'Corps' was essentially an administrative, cap-badge organisation, with no tactical command rôle. His rather theatrical gesture of leading the attack of 'H' Battalion himself aboard the tank 'Hilda' flying a large and newly invented corps flag is widely quoted.²¹² However while he had been heavily involved in the planning of the attack and logistical preparations, the battalions of his corps were fully integrated into the command structure of the corps and divisions they were supporting. He was thus left with essentially nothing to do once the offensive had begun, except perhaps try to lead by example. It was also pointed out by Brig. Gen. Percy Hobart (himself a famous tank-man) that since all of the Tank Corps vehicles were in the first wave of the attack, Elles did not have to worry about being in a position to command any reserves later.²¹³ His acceptance of this is reflected in his own 'Tank Corps Special Order' issued before the battle: "All that hard work and ingenuity can achieve has been done in the way of

preparation. It remains for unit commanders and for tank crews to complete the work by judgement and pluck in the battle itself.”²¹⁴

This relinquishing of operational control in the battle itself might have served as a useful model for the Cavalry Corps Commander. It is not known to what extent Kavanagh would have been aware of Elles’ approach, however even had he been, it is unlikely that he would have thought it relevant. The Tank Corps while growing in stature, had yet to establish any form or separate identity comparable to that of the cavalry. Tanks were still simply adjuncts to the infantry battle like machine-guns, or trench mortars. The concept of armour as a separate ‘arm’ and of distinct armoured formations had not yet developed. Indeed armoured cars had been integrated into cavalry formations in the same way as into infantry ones (as in 1918 tanks would be). Thus the rôles of tanks and cavalry would have appeared far less analogous to the contemporary eye than they do today.

Cavalry – Tank Co-operation

Discussion of the rôle of the Tank Corps leads naturally on to the fourth major theme of this study as outlined in Chapter 1, the relationship between cavalry and tanks on the battlefield. The techno-centric and rather anti-cavalry stance of much of the writing on Cambrai has already been touched on earlier in this chapter. However the operations at Cantaing on 21 November, and (less successfully) on 1 December, have shown that rather than cavalry and tanks being opposed, or mutually exclusive forms of warfare, battlefield co-operation was both possible and planned-for from the outset. Such co-operation had been foreseen by the Cavalry Commanders, and special instructions for such operations were issued before the battle (see Appendix 4.1). Previous cavalry co-operation with armour, in the form of armoured cars has been discussed in earlier chapters, and what is notable about these instructions is that they do not suggest that tanks are new to the cavalry, or that they require new tactics, rather that previous experience of cavalry–armour co-operation remains valid. Paragraph (d) of the notes is especially illuminating:

(d) Tanks should be used as pivots for the Cavalry. They are really moving Machine Guns heavily armed, and though they do not have the pace of Armoured Motors they should be used on the same principle.²¹⁵

Cavalry had been operating in conjunction with armoured cars since the Somme battles of 1916, and their successes in this regard during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line in the spring of 1917 have already been examined in Chapter 3. Thus far from being new and wonderful, the cavalry attitude to tanks may be characterised as 'like armoured cars, but slower'.

It is useful to examine each of the ways in which horses and armour were expected to co-operate, and the degree of success in each case. The primary function of the tanks was to do the work previously carried out by preliminary bombardment – to provide routes of advance through the German wire. For the infantry this was simply a matter of advancing in the wake of each tank and stepping over the crushed down wire entanglement. For the cavalry the job was rather more complex. As was the case in the opening phase of both the Somme and Arras offensives, the routes of 'Cavalry Tracks' were identified for the lines of advance of the cavalry divisions. Three such routes were identified. 'Cavalry Track Battalions' were assembled, one each from dismounted elements of each division.²¹⁶ It was the job of these troops to clear the line of advance in each case. To assist with the wire clearance 12 specially adapted Wire-Clearing Tanks were placed at the disposal of these parties, equipped with a large grapnel attached to the rear of the tank by a hawser.²¹⁷ The idea was that the grapnel would be dragged behind the tank, which would break or drag aside the wire entanglement. The Tank Corps was content with the effectiveness of this approach, reporting

Wire pulled back to form gaps of at least 60 yards in every belt of wire to the final objective, just after midday on 20th November.

Stretch of wire limited to 60 yards definitely but much more could be done per tank if necessary. After pulling the wire away the ground is absolutely clear of every scrap of wire or obstruction such as posts etcetera''²¹⁸

However, this was not necessarily the case, Third Army Instructions, after allocating the tanks, had warned that:

6. Too great a reliance cannot be placed in the capabilities of the wire-pulling tanks. You must therefore be prepared to clear away any wire which still blocks your advance on any of the three routes.²¹⁹

This was good advice. Maunsell related in *Cavalry Journal* how “Certain tanks were detailed to assist our working parties clear the wire. The passages made by them did not enable the horses to get through. ...Even after they had cleared a space, however, the denseness of the grass tangled up with odd bits of wire, iron stakes etcetera, needed a lot of clearing.”²²⁰ This view was expressed immediately after the battle in the 1st Cavalry Division report: “It was noted that the tracks made through the belts of wire by the passage of the tanks were not practicable for Cavalry. Several such passages were personally explored and in no case was it possible to ride a horse through.”²²¹ Nor was wire the only obstacle, the commander of 4th Cavalry Division Track Battalion reported that no fewer than twenty-six separate trench lines had to be either ramped on bridged on his line of advance, a job for which tanks provided no assistance.²²²

It should not therefore be assumed that the tanks somehow swept a clear corridor ahead of the cavalry along which all they had to do was ride forward. The assertions of Col. Baker-Carr, commander of 1st Tank Brigade, that “On each section of the front, gaps in the wire, a quarter of a mile or more wide, had been made; the ‘going’ was splendid, and from midday onwards, except in a few isolated spots, organised resistance had ceased to exist,”²²³ should be regarded with extreme scepticism. Rather, as had been the case in previous offensives, the cavalry cut, dug, and bridged its way forward under its own power, albeit assisted by the wire-pullers. It is a tribute to the skill of the Cavalry Track Battalions that once again these tracks were ready on schedule.

Co-operation between cavalry and tanks in the exploitation phase of the 20 November battle was never properly tested, as (as has been discussed at some length) that phase of the battle never really took place. The cavalry were however able to co-operate successfully with tanks on two occasions, admittedly on a small scale. The first was the support gained by the Northumberland Hussars at le Quennet Farm on 20 November, and the second was the attack on Cantaing by the Queens Bays the following day. Both of these small fights showed that tank firepower and cavalry mobility could be successfully combined, events overlooked by those such as Travers, keen to emphasise the contrast between the two arms.

Curiously, one of the problems highlighted by Wilfrid Miles in the Official History, and reiterated by Travers²²⁴ was the fact that where the tanks were successful, and pushed through the German organised defences into more open ground, they out-ran their infantry supports. The infantry who by that time had been following on foot some 8,000 yards (7km) had become extremely tired. As Miles puts it "... the Tank Corps had already come to the conclusion that some form of rapid transportation was needed by the infantry."²²⁵ A four-legged solution to this problem was perhaps not as far away as those fixated on technological solutions have suggested.

Travers also acknowledges that the tanks needed artillery as well as infantry support in order to be effective, but his thesis continues that the failure of this co-operation was a result of inflexibility on the part of the infantry and gunners who were not able to keep up with the new flexible warfare carried out by the tanks.²²⁶ This argument misses an essential point about the tanks at Cambrai, which was precisely their lack of tactical flexibility. The initial tank attack was highly successful, but only because each tank had a pre-prepared objective, and a thoroughly reconnoitred route to it. Once unleashed, the tanks were only able to crawl along their pre-ordained route. They were virtually blind, and communication with them was almost impossible. The suggestion that commanders were able to summon up tanks to participate in spontaneous exploitation operations neglects these basic facts.

The experience of the Cavalry Corps in co-operating with tanks after the German counter attack on 1 December is instructive in revealing the shortcomings of tanks in anything like a fluid battle. A variety of commentators, including the Commander-in-Chief, Haig, congratulated the Tank Corps on the strenuous efforts made to put tanks in the field on 30 November. Sixty-three tanks were deployed, and Fuller called it "...one of the most remarkable tank achievements of the war."²²⁷ Yet given that the Corps had started with 378 fighting tanks only ten days before,²²⁸ to field only slightly more than 15% of that number shows the massive difficulties faced by the Corps in responding to any kind of unforeseen circumstance. (The Cavalry Corps, by contrast, was able to respond to the same events with a much larger portion of its strength. The news of the German attack was received at 8.30am, the Corps had an advance H.Q. set up at Villers Faucon by 10.30 and elements of three divisions in action by noon.)

Even once these tanks had been provided, their contribution to the battle was variable. Tanks were allocated to co-operate with the Guards in their recapture of Gouzeaucourt, but did not arrive until after the fighting was over. The following day, tanks were again allocated to support the Guards on the attack on Gauche Wood. These failed to arrive, while those supporting the complimentary attack on the wood by 5th Cavalry Division lost direction and shot up Hodson's Horse before entering the wood after the fighting had ended. Lt. Col. Maunsell commented in his report on these events: "The actual presence of the tanks was more of a danger than an asset, for they attracted fire of every description and many casualties occurred to men standing in their neighbourhood. They were, in consequence requested to withdraw."²²⁹ The *War Diary* of the Ambala Brigade records a similar sentiment in its 'Lessons of 1st December': "Keep away from tanks in the advance and send them away the minute the objective is reached – they draw fire."²³⁰ To the south the tanks allocated to lead the attack of the Lucknow and Mhow Brigades of 4th Cavalry Division were not only unable to reach the arranged rendezvous, but when launched, took the wrong line and took no part in the cavalry attack, with tragic consequences for the Mhow brigade.

The conclusion suggested by these events is that cavalry-tank co-operation was certainly possible, but that it was very difficult to achieve *ad-hoc* except on a very small scale. It required a significant degree of planning, particularly on behalf of the tanks if they were to be able to participate at the right place and at the right time. Also, where this co-operation broke down, as often it did, the failure was by no means always attributable to the 'medieval' horsemen. Mechanised warfare was in its infancy, and not only did the tank-men still have a good deal to learn, but there was also still plenty of room on the battlefield for the flexible battlefield mobility provided by the horse, as was to be demonstrated as the war moved into its final year.

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CHAPTER 5

FROM OPERATION *MICHAEL* TO THE 'HUNDRED DAYS' 1918

As regards the Cavalry - people at home ask 'They had a great chance at Cambrai - is it any use keeping them? They will never have such a chance again.' That is the crux of the whole matter - on this they may do anything - make the Cavalry into latrine caretakers. I shall be glad to have a rest - that is that.

Brig. Gen. A. Home, B.G.G.S. Cavalry Corps, 22 December 1917¹

Introduction

The preceding chapters have shown how in 1917 the battlefield effectiveness of the cavalry was largely negated by poor command arrangements, and interference by senior commanders in their operations. This chapter examines the activities of mounted troops in the fighting of 1918. In particular it will be shown how these command and control problems were overcome in the Amiens offensive of August 1918 to give the cavalry one of its most operationally successful days of the war. This operational success was also repeated in the fighting of 8-9 October, examined in the later part of the chapter. Unfortunately the part played by the cavalry in the Amiens battle has predictably been much criticised, especially with regard to their relationship with tanks. The results of co-operation between mounted troops and tanks, in particular the new 'Whippet' models are also examined, in order to refute some of these criticisms.

The question of change and evolution is also considered. Firstly to what extent the character of the war really changed in 1918, as many scholars have suggested, is examined. It will be argued that this change was actually far more gradual than has often been argued, and that continuities with 1917 remained significant. Secondly, in this context while higher command and control methods evolved, the fighting methods at lower levels of command, based on pre-war principles revealed in earlier chapters continued to be ever more applicable. These are explored not only in the offensive battles of August and October, but also in the defensive fighting of March 1918 in the face of the German 'Michael' offensive. In the latter case it will be seen that a number

of the defensive errors of December 1917 were to be repeated, but that despite these constraints, the cavalry continued to be flexible and tactically highly effective.

The Reduction of the Corps

John Terraine commented that in January of 1918 'The British Army in France was now at one of its lowest ebbs of the War'² and as the remark quoted at the head of this chapter suggests, this malaise extended equally into the ranks of the cavalry. There was a feeling that Cambrai represented their best chance, and while supporters of the mounted arm were merely disappointed, those who opposed the presence of the cavalry in France took the opportunity to use them as a scapegoat for the failures of the offensive. Ironically, the cavalry was about to reach what was perhaps its peak of effectiveness in the whole war, as well as undergoing some of its severest tests yet.

Unfortunately this crisis of faith in mounted troops coincided with (or possibly contributed to) one of the fiercer periods of conflict in the ongoing dispute between Haig, as Commander-in-Chief in France, and the Prime Minister Lloyd George and his War Cabinet. There is not scope within this study to examine this dispute in depth, and indeed it has been the subject of a number of studies both objective, and partisan on both sides.³ However, in summary it may be characterised as an argument between Lloyd George and his followers who had lost faith in a decisive result in France at least in the short term, and with it faith in Haig as Commander in Chief; and Haig himself, who felt that France was the only decisive theatre of the war. The result was a starvation of the B.E.F. of manpower and resources, at a critical time when many observers including Haig felt that the collapse of Russia had placed Germany in an ideal position to mount a large attack in the west. (A view that was to be vindicated starting in March 1918).

Within this broader context of manpower shortage, the cavalry was an easy target for reduction or even complete disbandment, The maintenance of five cavalry divisions in France had been challenged by the War Office as early as May 1917, when Haig was asked to consider the dismounting of at least one division. He was also reprimanded by the War Office for the diversion of cavalry reinforcements:

In this connection it is noticed that of the cavalry drafts lately dispatched as reinforcements for Infantry units in your command, 1,000 have apparently retransferred to cavalry. The Army Council desire to emphasize that drafts sent from this country for a particular arm should not be diverted to another arm without previous reference to, and sanction of, the War Office.⁴

Haig felt strongly, as he always had, that a powerful force of cavalry remained a vital part of his offensive, and indeed defensive capability, and that to remove it was short-sighted folly. He set out his views at length in a letter to the War Office on 28 June 1917.

I hold strongly that as the war develops a time will come possibly at no very distant date when the employment of cavalry in masses will not only [be] feasible but urgently necessary in order to turn a favorable situation to full account.

I consider it of such importance that the cavalry required for this purpose should be constantly available, and fully trained, that I am unable to concur either in any reduction of the five Cavalry Divisions now in France, or in their constant readiness for action in masses been impaired by using any part of them as Divisional, Corps, or Army Cavalry even as a temporary measure.⁵

These remarks also demonstrate Haig's continuing attachment, discussed in respect of each of the earlier offensives covered by this study, to the idea of massed cavalry exploitation, which was never to be realised. However, his desire to retain the cavalry intact, albeit for the wrong reasons, is commendable.

The outcome of this contest was a partial victory for the War Office, although the Cavalry Divisions initially remained unaffected, all but three of the Corps Cavalry Regiments, (mostly regiments of Yeomanry distributed amongst the infantry corps), were dismounted in October 1917.⁶ As will appear later this short-sighted decision was to impact on the Cavalry Corps later in 1918. The Prime Minister, supported by Winston Churchill (who had taken over from Lloyd George as Minister of Munitions, and was seeking additional manpower for his tank-based ambitions), also returned to the subject in December 1917. A minute of the Cabinet Committee on Manpower spelled out their position.

The Prime Minister stated that he gathered that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff [Wilson] was in substantial agreement with the desirability of using the personnel of the Cavalry in other arms of the Service, notably in Tanks, in the Air Service and Artillery.

General Smuts pointed out that the American Army would require a large number of horses and the British Cavalry horses might be used for this purpose and a great saving of tonnage affected thereby.⁷

This time Haig, fighting to retain his own job, was unsuccessful in his defence of the Cavalry. The result of this was a reduction in strength of the Cavalry Corps in France from five divisions to three, and an accompanying reorganisation of the remaining troops. This was completed in early March 1918 (See Appendix 5.1).⁸ As part of this reorganisation the Indian regiments from within 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions were despatched to Palestine. The Canadian brigade and four of the British regiments remaining from these divisions were retained in France. (The exception being 1st (Kings) Dragoon Guards who had already been sent to India in October 1917.) Within the three remaining cavalry divisions, all of the Yeomanry regiments, (with the exception of the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars), and the three regiments of Household Cavalry were removed, the latter to be dismounted as machine gunners. These spaces were then filled by the British regiments from the former Indian cavalry divisions. The result was that 1st Cavalry Division remained almost unchanged; only the Bedfordshire Yeomanry were removed and replaced by 8th Hussars. 2nd Cavalry Division was entirely unchanged, while 3^d Cavalry Division lost three regiments of Yeomanry and three of Household Cavalry, replaced by three regiments from the Indian divisions, and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, complete. The four regiments of Yeomanry removed from the cavalry divisions were originally intended to be converted to cyclists. The regiments had petitioned to be motor machine-gunners instead and this was initially agreed, but in the end the units were broken up to provide reinforcements to the regiments remaining within the Cavalry Corps to make up losses suffered during the March fighting.⁹

The ostensible purpose of this move was to increase the cavalry force in Palestine, and at the same time to save shipping in the provision of supplies to the cavalry in France. In fact neither of these objectives was achieved. Badsey has demonstrated that the saving

in shipping across the channel was easily eclipsed by the shipping required for the movements between France and the East,¹⁰ and the net gain to Gen. Allenby in Palestine fell to only two regiments, as after he had received a reinforcement of eleven regiments from France and elsewhere, he was ordered to return nine Yeomanry regiments for dismounted service in France as machine-gunners.¹¹ The outcome of this vast re-shuffle was simply to reduce significantly the fighting power of the Cavalry Corps in France at the outset of what was to be its busiest year, without providing a major boost to numbers in other theatres, or any significant logistical savings.

The German Spring Offensive: 21 March - 6 April 1918

A substantial German attack was widely predicted in the Spring of 1918. The collapse of Russia had freed large numbers of German troops to fight in the west, while the build-up of American forces in France meant that the window of opportunity for the Germans would not be long-lasting. Haig himself told the War Cabinet in January that ‘...the coming four months would be the critical period of the war’¹² The likely point of attack was recognised equally clearly; an assault on the southern, thinly defended portion of the British line around St Quentin with the aim of driving a wedge between the British and French armies south of that point. Such an attack would fall principally on the British Fifth Army under Gen. Gough, and the southern portion of Gen. Byng’s Third Army.

It is not the purpose of this study to discuss this attack as a whole, only the rôle of the cavalry in defending against it, however the British defensive strategy may be briefly summarised. While the B.E.F had spent the war to date largely on an offensive footing, the lessons of the increasingly sophisticated German systems of defence had been learnt by 1918. In particular the use of deep defensive positions, and ‘elasticity’ in the face of attack had become the basis of the defence, drawing the enemy into a previously determined ‘Battle Zone’ behind the thinly defended Front Line, where counter-attacks would be launched.¹³ Unfortunately in the Fifth Army area much of the rearward parts of this defensive system existed only as lines on maps, or as ‘spit-locked’ trenches only a few inches deep. The forces defending them were also thinly spread. Not only was an

additional section of front taken over from the French, but the divisions expected to hold it were reduced, in common with all the British (but not Dominion) divisions in France, from twelve battalions to nine. This was a response to manpower shortages, but each division was still expected to defend the same extent of front, and to act in all ways as if it were still twelve battalions strong.¹⁴

All three cavalry divisions (of the recently much reduced Corps) were placed in support of the Fifth Army front. They were spread out approximately 12 miles behind the front line, with 1st Cavalry Division based at Flamicourt (just outside Peronne) supporting XIX Corps; 2nd Cavalry Division at Quesmy in the south near Noyon, and 3rd Cavalry Division in the centre at Athies, opposite St Quentin. The latter two divisions were tasked to support III Corps at the extreme south of the British line.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the standing orders for these units in the event of an attack were based on a misapprehension. As has been seen earlier, for example at Cambrai, it was not uncommon for cavalry brigades to form dismounted units, usually of weak battalion strength, for service in the trenches. Fifth Army's plan anticipated a fight contained within the organised defence lines of the 'Battle Zone', or at worst the similar but less fortified 'Rear Zone'. Thus it was expected that the cavalry would contribute to this fighting on foot within these defensive systems. Maj. Preston, who fought in these battles as a Machine-gun Officer, and whose lengthy accounts of the events of 1918 in the *Cavalry Journal* form a significant source for this chapter, commented:

For years our cavalry leaders had prepared and hoped for a 'Gap,' but they had always visualized the gap made by us in the German line. The possibility of the enemy making such a gap in *our* line occurred to few, if any of them.¹⁶

The German blow fell on the misty morning of 21 March. In many areas the British defences were rapidly overwhelmed. In particular to the south of St Quentin where 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were in support of III Corps, the German advance completely penetrated the 'Battle Zone' and pushed on into unfortified rear areas. Between Noon and 2.00pm on 21 March 2nd Cavalry Division was dismounted, and bussed forward to take up positions alongside the infantry on a defensive line along the Crozat Canal. 3rd Cavalry Division followed in similar fashion on 22 March. The led horses were evacuated to Carlepont, 22km (14 miles) to the west near Noyon. The cavalymen of these two divisions were to carry on a fighting retreat on foot of nearly 30km (20 miles)

west and south past Noyon over the next five days before being reunited with their horses on the 27 March.¹⁷ In the north, 1st Cavalry division was similarly dismounted on 21 March and fought for two days without its horses in support of XIX Corps.¹⁸ The narrative of this period is one of constant small delaying actions followed by repeated retreats to new positions and it will not be presented in detail here,¹⁹ however some comment is required on the wisdom of using the cavalry in this way. 3rd Cavalry Division produced an analysis of the March fighting, *Points brought to notice during recent operations*,²⁰ and Preston devoted a substantial section to 'Lessons Learnt from the Battle'.²¹ Both agree that the tactical effectiveness of the cavalry during this period was seriously hampered, and they highlight a series of issues.

The first is that the cavalryman was simply not equipped to fight on foot for long periods. He was not issued a back-pack and equipment had to be extemporised, usually by creating a roll of greatcoat and groundsheet, worn *en-banderole* rather unsatisfactorily. His mobility was of course also substantially reduced. This latter point applied in particular to the supporting machine-guns. When units were moved forward by bus many Vickers and Hotchkiss teams were forced to abandon their pack-horses and attempt to carry all their guns equipment and ammunition on foot. Preston describes his own experience where of the twelve guns in his squadron only four could be brought into action because his men simply could not carry enough ammunition, and he was reduced to driving to III Corps Headquarters in a borrowed car to collect more belt boxes.²² Only in the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was the commander of the Machine-gun Squadron 'wise enough' to insist on retaining his pack-horses when the unit was dismounted.²³ The situation was even worse in 1st Cavalry Division where the whole of 2nd Machine-gun Squadron, which normally would have provided integral fire support to 2nd Cavalry Brigade, had been detached and loaned to the infantry of 66th Division.²⁴

A similar situation applied to the artillery. Prior to the German attack all of the Cavalry Corps' integral R.H.A. brigades were detached and incorporated into the relevant infantry corps' artillery defence structures. This would have been fine had the battle remained static but as soon as the Germans broke through the cavalry divisions were forced to operate without their normal mobile artillery support, (an experience perhaps familiar to those cavalymen involved in the December fighting at Cambrai the previous year). 3rd Brigade R.H.A. did not rejoin its parent (3rd) Cavalry Division until

25 March, by which time it had fired away all its 13-pdr ammunition and as a result it had to be sent to the rear in search of additional supply.²⁵

The cavalry were thus forced into action without the mobility (and incidentally shock capability) provided by their horses, and with inadequate machine-gun and artillery support. Given these various disadvantages the dismounted cavalry acquitted themselves well in the days following the German breakthrough. Middlebrook is dismissive of their rôle in the early stages of the fighting, suggesting that their ‘...performance as infantry was of unproved and doubtful value’²⁶ and that in the years prior to 1918 ‘...the cavalry had been almost useless to the allied cause.’²⁷ Preston, however, as might be expected, takes a different view:

... The dismounted cavalry compared very favourably with the infantry. On no single occasion during these operations were cavalry driven back by a frontal attack: they only vacated a position when ordered to do so in consequence of withdrawals by people on their flanks.²⁸

He attributes this success at least in part to the overall quality of the cavalry units compared with their infantry counterparts in 1918. While many infantry units had been virtually wiped out in earlier offensives and made up with drafts of ever deteriorating quality, the cavalry ‘...still had a fair proportion of their pre-war officers and NCOs.’²⁹ In addition the cavalry had received substantial training in ‘open’ rather than trench warfare and were much more comfortable in the fluid fighting which characterised the early days of the battle. It is ironic that Haig had fought for the retention of the cavalry in anticipation of precisely this kind of fighting, albeit on the other side of the line, but at the same time the defensive scheme developed by G.H.Q. and Fifth Army had deprived them of almost all of their tactical advantages, throwing them into battle as inappropriately equipped and ill-supported infantry.

The cost to the Cavalry Corps of this fighting was substantial, the corps as a whole suffered 4,142 casualties (including over 200 officers) between 21 March and 7 April. This equates to an average of approximately 125 casualties of all types (killed, wounded, or missing) in each regiment, roughly 25-30% of their fighting strength.³⁰ However as discussed earlier the fortunate coincidence of the dismounting of a number of Yeomanry regiments immediately prior to the offensive meant that many of these

experienced cavalry soldiers could be re-incorporated into the corps *en-bloc* and the overall fighting quality of the reconstituted units was left undiminished.

Harman's Detachment: Collezy: 24 March 1918

(Figure 5.1 overleaf)

Despite the pre-planned dismounting of the majority of the Cavalry Corps on 21-22 March, it rapidly became obvious that mounted troops were urgently required. Unfortunately the led horses had been moved so far from their regiments that re-mounting formal units was not possible. Thus on 23 March orders were issued to 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions' headquarters to form scratch units out of those men available among the horse-holders and other rear echelon troops. Each regiment was ordered to find 50 men, this produced a mounted force of about 750, added to this were 600 infantry, mostly returning leave-men, and as no integral machine-guns were available, 8 Lewis guns and their crews from No. 13 Balloon Company were added to the force. 'O' Battery R.H.A. was also found to provide artillery support. The whole was placed under the command of Maj. Gen. Harman of 3rd Cavalry Division, becoming 'Harman's detachment'.³¹

The principal function of Harman's Detachment over the next few days was to provide mounted officers' reconnaissance patrols reporting to III Corps Headquarters, a rôle which was vital in supplying information on the German, and indeed Allied dispositions. However the detachment was involved in one mounted action which, while possibly not of enormous strategic significance in the offensive as a whole, is instructive as part of this study of the tactical effectiveness of mounted troops.

On 24 March III Corps, along with the dismounted portions of 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions, and a number of attached French units, held a line running north-west to south-east from a point a few miles south-east of Ham, to the river Oise in the south. Strong German thrusts at the northern end of this line broke the link with XVIII Corps to the north and temporarily created a gap around the flank of the III Corps line. On the morning of the 24th, Harman's detachment was behind this northern flank of III Corps at Berlancourt. At 8.30am the force was ordered forward to establish the situation on this

potentially open flank and reorganise and support the various infantry units in that area, in particular reforming a defensive line around the village of Villeselve.³²

A detailed account of what followed is contained in the 3^d Cavalry Division *War Diary*.³³ The mounted troops formed from 7th and Canadian Cavalry Brigades moved to the east of Villeselve and made contact with the French units at the northern end of the III Corps line, forming a north facing defensive flank. The remaining mounted men, those of 6th Cavalry Brigade under Maj. Williams (10th Hussars), were ordered forward north-east through Villeselve to make contact with, and throw back the advancing Germans ‘...using the sword only’. The force under Williams’ command consisted of three, fifty-man troops drawn from the three regiments of the brigade; 10th Hussars (Lt. Ednam), Royals (Lt. Cubitt), and 3rd Dragoon Guards (Lt. Vincent).

This small force advanced north-eastwards along the road to Villeselve, turning northwards into a sunken lane leading to the hamlet of Collezy. At this point they came under machine-gun fire from the north and north-east and took temporary shelter behind a large farm to the south of Collezy. The Germans were found to be concentrated around two copses about 1000 yards (900m) to the north-east, firing at least four machine-guns. Williams immediately ordered a charge, in ‘Infantry attack’ formation; the 3rd Dragoon Guards formed the first wave, in loose line, followed by the 10th Hussars in similar formation, the Royals formed the third line, in section columns as flank guards. The force crossed the intervening 1000 yards at full gallop with swords drawn, over plough for the last 200 yards, cheering loudly as they closed with the enemy. As the 3rd D.G. line swung east to attack the easternmost copse, the Germans facing them broke and ran into the trees, but the Dragoons dismounted and followed, shooting several as they fled. Twelve prisoners were captured. Meanwhile the 10th and the Royals rode at the western copse where the greater part of the enemy lay. Between 70 and 100 Germans were killed, mostly with the sword, and a further 94 were made prisoner. Three machine-guns were captured or destroyed.

Albert Turp, a Farrier Sergeant with the Royals was a participant in this charge, he later recalled:

We had of course been taught that a cavalry charge should be carried out in line six inches from knee to knee, but it didn’t work out like that in practice and we were soon a pretty ragged line of horsemen at full gallop. We took the Germans

quite by surprise and they faced us as best they could, for there can't be anything more frightening to an infantryman than the sight of a line of cavalry charging at full gallop with drawn swords.

...I remembered my old training and the old sword exercise. As our line overrode the Germans I made a regulation point at a man on my offside and my sword went through his neck and out the other side. The pace of my horse carried my sword clear and then I took a German on my nearside, and I remember the jar as my point took him in the collarbone and knocked him over. As we galloped on the enemy broke and ran...³⁴

In the event although the supporting infantry were able to restore the line as a result of this charge, further withdrawals followed within a few hours and the ground was once again lost. However this encounter is of interest as it shows the effect of shock action against troops in the open (as opposed to in trenches), particularly against troops unprepared to meet a mounted opponent. The inability of machine-guns alone to halt charging cavalry was also demonstrated, although the cost to the 6th Cavalry Brigade detachment was severe; out of roughly 150 men, 73 became casualties (6 killed, the remainder wounded).³⁵ The potency of this fast-moving form of fighting was to be demonstrated again on a larger scale later in the year during the Amiens battle in August, as well as in October (described later in this chapter).

Moreuil Wood: 30 March 1918

(Figure 5.2 overleaf)

After several more days of retreat, all three cavalry divisions were re-united with their horses. 1st Cavalry division was remounted on 24 March, and 2nd and 3rd Cavalry divisions on 26-27 March.³⁶ One other significant mounted engagement followed on 30 March at Moreuil Wood. By this time the German advance had penetrated to within 16km (10 miles) of Amiens. In the event this was to be the high-water mark of the offensive, but that of course was not apparent at the time, and the defence of the city was considered critical as its fall would sever rail communications between the B.E.F. to the north and the French to the south. On 28 March Gen. Gough was relieved of command of Fifth Army, and his place taken by Gen. Rawlinson (although the force

continued to be known as 'Fifth Army'). Rawlinson was given the specific responsibility of defending Amiens with what remained of Gough's force, and all three cavalry divisions were to be concentrated near the city for this purpose.³⁷

The events following were described in the *Cavalry Journal* by Maj. Gen. Pitman,³⁸ who had taken over command of 2nd Cavalry Division from Maj. Gen. Greenly on 22 March.³⁹ The division had forced marched north towards Amiens over two days and arrived at Boves, 8km (5 miles) south east of the city on the night of 29 March. The division was four brigades strong having the Canadian Cavalry Brigade attached from 3rd Cavalry Division, the remainder of which was still some distance away to the south. 1st Cavalry Division was meanwhile engaged in holding the line to the east of the city. In the early hours of 30 March information was received of a strong German thrust north-west towards Amiens along and to the south of the line of the Amiens-Roye road. If continued this would carry the Germans onto high ground in the triangle formed by the junction of the rivers Avre (flowing south-east to north-west) and Luce (flowing east to west), virtually overlooking Amiens. The village of Moreuil lay in the valley of the Avre to the south, while the high ground between the rivers was occupied by the Bois de Moreuil, a triangular wood with one angle towards Amiens in the north west and its base along the Moreuil to Demuin road on the south-east.

At 7.00am on the morning of 30 March orders were passed by telephone to 2nd Cavalry Division from XIX Corps to advance as far as Moreuil and restore the line. Pitman travelled by car to brief his two nearest brigades in person. These were the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, who were ordered to move around to the north of Moreuil Wood, and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, whom he ordered to advance directly westwards across the Avre to the threatened point.⁴⁰ The Canadians arrived at Castel, in the Avre valley opposite the wood at about 9.15am.⁴¹ The Brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Seely, was up with the leading troops and he ordered his advanced guard regiment, Royal Canadian Dragoons, to attack the wood. The leading squadron under Capt. Nordheimer was to attack the nearest (north-western) corner of the wood while the two following squadrons were to circle around the wood to north and south and link up behind it. Capt. Nordheimer's men were able to establish themselves in the north-western corner of the wood, but came under heavy rifle and machine-gun fire along the south-western side of the wood. Capt. Nordheimer himself being fatally wounded. The second squadron under

Capt. Newcomen attempted to push along the south-western side of the wood towards the southern corner but only reached about half-way along the face of the wood before they were forced into cover in the trees. The third Squadron under Maj. Timmis galloped along the north face of the wood but came under such heavy fire from the wood and points further east that he was forced to swing left and take shelter in some dead ground north of the wood.⁴²

A few minutes later the second regiment of the brigade, Lord Strathcona's Horse, arrived at the north-western corner of the wood. One Squadron (Capt. Trotter) was dismounted and sent eastwards through the trees to clear the northern face of the wood. A second squadron under Lt. Flowerdew was sent to follow Timmis' R.C.D. men, mounted, around the north-eastern corner of the wood. Thanks to the work of Trotter, Flowerdew was able to reach the north-eastern corner of the wood without difficulty. These men were followed by the third squadron of L.S.H. under Lt. Morgan who dismounted at the eastern end of the north face of the wood. Morgan's dismounted L.S.H. squadron, along with Trotter's men from that regiment, and the survivors of Nordheimer's R.C.D. squadron were then organised into a line by the Strathcona's commander Lt. Col. MacDonald, and began to sweep south through the wood.⁴³

The events that followed have become the stuff of legend, Lt. Flowerdew was to be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, and the scene painted by Alfred Munnings, an image which Anglesey chose for the dust jacket of the relevant volume of his *History of the British Cavalry*. However the sources differ on what actually took place, and whether indeed the event was a magnificent charge, or a more disorganised scuffle, with at least part of the mounted combat being the attempt of Flowerdew's men to escape the attentions of their supposed victims.

The action began when Flowerdew mounted a bank at the north-eastern corner of the wood and, confronted with a force of Germans, charged down the eastern face of the wood, before ostensibly rallying, charging back through the enemy, and finally retiring into the eastern face of the wood. Seely, the brigade commander (who was not present at the charge) gave an account in his own memoirs based on the V.C. citation of 'two lines of enemy each about sixty strong, with machine guns in the centre and flanks; one line being about two hundred yards behind the other'. Anglesey relies heavily on Seely's account and interprets these two lines to be a line of Germans forced out of the

wood by the dismounted parties, and a second line of reinforcements approaching the wood. Seely's account is however highly coloured and is not necessarily to be considered reliable. His record of his conversation with Flowerdew is representative:

I galloped up to Flowerdew, who commanded the leading squadron of Strathcona's, as we rode along together I told him that his was the most adventurous task of all, but that I was confident he would succeed. With his gentle smile he turned to me and said: "I know, sir, I know, it is a splendid moment. I will try not to fail you."⁴⁴

It is hard not to be cynical about the 'Boy's Own Paper' quality of this narrative. Pitman more prosaically describes the target of the attack as '...a party of about 300 of the enemy retiring from the wood.'⁴⁵ This corresponds with the description given in the Canadian Cavalry Brigade *War Diary*.⁴⁶ The Strathcona's *War Diary* on the other hand describes '...2 lines of machine-guns, about 20 in all,'⁴⁷ although this is likely to be an exaggeration. An altogether different perspective is provided by a German account of the action, translated and published in the *Cavalry Journal* in 1927:

...a small body of Strathcona's Dragoons, some sixty in number, succeeded in breaking right through the front line and pushing on in rear of the leading companies in the direction of Moreuil. Here they came upon a platoon of No. 2 Company [of 101st Grenadiers] in the act of being relieved, and by this platoon and by a machine-gun section of the 2nd Battalion the Canadians were received with a most murderous fire. Only a few of the dragoons succeeded in making their escape... A small scattered party of them came suddenly on the rear of No. 7 Company and endeavoured... to cut their way through. But very few, however, succeeded in doing so; not one of them allowed himself to be taken prisoner – each man had kept the last round in his pistol for himself!⁴⁸

The last sentence clearly shows that hyperbole was not limited to Seely's version of events. Unlike German cavalry, pistols in the Canadian cavalry were the preserve of Officers, NCOs and specialists. What is not disputed is that Flowerdew's squadron suffered very heavily. Seely, quoting the VC citation, put their loss at 'about 70 per cent'.⁴⁹ The Strathcona's *War Diary* gives losses for the action as a whole among all three squadrons at 157 out of the 350 present 'including horseholders etc'⁵⁰ (or nearly 45 per cent). No doubt many of these were Flowerdew's men.

No information has been uncovered concerning German casualties, British accounts refer only to ‘...killing many with the sword.’⁵¹ Nor is it clear what effect on the fight as a whole the charge produced. The Strathcona’s *War Diary* was in no doubt:

...their action had a great moral effect on those of the enemy who were still fighting in the wood. Hearing the clatter of hooves behind them and thinking themselves surrounded their resistance to our dismounted troops slackened considerably.⁵²

However it is not clear whether the troops attacked were already retreating out of the wood, or were reinforcing it, or even as the German account suggests, both. What is clear is that the struggle for the wood continued for at least another six hours. Not only were all the Canadians engaged but as the 3rd Cavalry Brigade arrived, its squadrons were also committed to the fight; the 4th Hussars joined the struggle on the south-western face of the wood at about 10.00am, supported by the 16th lancers at about 12.15pm and finally the 5th Lancers at about 3.00pm, until ‘The whole of the 3rd cavalry Brigade was thus in action in the wood.’⁵³ Nor was the whole wood captured, and although the cavalry was able to occupy the majority of the eastern face of the wood, the southern tip adjacent to Moreuil itself continued to hold out.

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade narrative admits:

The losses were severe, most regiments having lost from half to one third of their officers, and a similar proportion of their men, and it would have been impossible to have held the wood but for the prompt arrival of General Bell-Smythe’s [3rd Cavalry] Brigade who reinforced our weak points and bore the brunt of the fierce fighting later in the day on the western face of the wood.⁵⁴

The cavalry were able to hold on until 2.30am on the 31 March when the two brigades were relieved by infantry of 8th Division.⁵⁵

Thus the German advance towards Amiens had been halted on this part of the front, and congratulatory telegrams were sent from Rawlinson to 2nd Cavalry Division headquarters.⁵⁶ While the action as a whole was successful, however, its individual parts are subject to a degree of criticism. Pitman offered a summary of his views on the performance of his own division. He comments favourably on the function of the division as a mobile reserve; when the German advance was identified his mounted troops were able to respond quickly to plug the gap. He is critical, however, of Seely’s

tactics on arriving at the wood. He commented that “The tactical handling of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade at Moreuil Wood on March 30 must not be taken as an example of how to make use of available troops.”⁵⁷

Seely seems to have been overcome by his sense of the urgency of the occasion and committed troops to battle as and when they arrived. Thus the three Royal Canadian Dragoons squadrons were committed towards three separate objectives widely dispersed, and as Lord Strathcona’s Horse arrived they too were broken up in a similar fashion. Also, these troops were committed to battle without the support of artillery or machine-guns, even though both were present with the brigade. All of the evidence suggests that the German *101st Grenadiers* had been in possession of the wood for some time, indeed they were about to undergo a relief when the Canadians arrived.⁵⁸ Thus it was not a race for the ground. A more considered, and well prepared attack might well have achieved the same result at less cost. As it was the fight was quickly left in the hands of junior squadron commanders, and succeeded due to a combination of their aggression and skill, combined with a degree of surprise on the part of the Germans. Any credit gained by the Canadians in this fighting did not save their already unpopular commander; Seely was relieved of command of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade on 21 May 1918 and replaced by his able subordinate Lt. Col. R.W. Paterson, (formerly C.O. the Fort Garry Horse).

Flowerdew’s charge itself does not appear to have been decisive. Indeed it is possible to read in the German account of the charge not a squadron rallying to charge back through its foes, but a disorganised effort to cut an escape back along the route of the charge, followed by a flight into the cover of the trees. What it did provide, however, as was also the case at Villeselve, was a moral effect, not only on the Germans immediately present, but on wider British public opinion. Moreuil Wood and Flowerdew’s VC were extremely valuable as what in modern parlance would be termed ‘Good P.R.’ in what were otherwise dark times for the B.E.F. The battle also occurred at the turning point of the campaign, no further advance towards Amiens was achieved by the Germans, although to what extent the small action at Moreuil Wood was a key to that is questionable.

What the Moreuil Wood fight does show, however, notwithstanding the usefulness or otherwise of Flowerdew’s heroics, is that the cavalry remained a mobile and effective

fighting force. No doubt Seely could have done a better job in command, but his brigade was still able to move at speed to the threatened point, and successfully retake a piece of strategically important ground from the enemy, in the face of machine-guns and artillery. Heavy losses were incurred, but it was not the one-sided massacre of popular imagination.

Gough and Kavanagh

As the Front stabilised the Cavalry Corps remained in action up until 7 April when the last elements were relieved in the line and the divisions withdrew to rear areas. Their performance since 21 March was assessed very favourably at the time, Home commented on 25 March “The Cavalry barometer stands very high again, it was very low a month ago.”⁵⁹ This praise was repeated by Gen. Gough in his own account of the battle in his memoir *Fifth Army*:

The cavalry had played a great part in the battle. Their mobility, and their capacity to cross any country on horses and therefore to get rapidly from place to place made them far more powerful than their mere numbers would suggest. ... Their great value during these ten days should never be forgotten. Had the Germans been able to make use of cavalry of the same calibre during these events it is more than probable that the whole course of the battle would have been altered.⁶⁰

Even the staunchest opponents of the cavalry in more modern writing have also been forced to acknowledge the rôle of the cavalry in the March retreat, and as Gough highlighted, the importance of the lack of equivalent German cavalry in the attacking force. Some of this literature has been examined in the opening chapter of this study.

The German lack of cavalry was recently (2006) considered by David Zabecki in his detailed study of the German March offensive. He concluded that two factors influenced this decision. Firstly that unlike the much vilified Haig, Ludendorf discounted cavalry from his calculations on the Western Front at an early stage, none of his doctrinal publications of this period even consider mounted troops.⁶¹ Secondly, the German army suffered from a chronic shortage of transport, both motor and equine, and to bring even

the infantry divisions involved in operation *Michael* up to establishment of transport, thirteen divisions in the East had to be stripped of their transport vehicles and horses, and rendered essentially immobile. Thus with every available horse pulling wagons for the infantry, and very poor stocks of fodder to feed even those horses, re-mounting a significant force of cavalymen was never a realistic possibility.⁶² Ludendorff described this situation in his memoirs:

Trench warfare offered no scope for cavalry. The formation of regiments of dismounted cavalry... was now continued. ... Their horses were urgently required for the reorganization of the artillery and for our transport. The wastage in horses was extraordinarily high, and the import from neutral countries hardly worth consideration. The homeland and the occupied districts could not make good the shortage. There were many gaps.⁶³

Thus the non-use of cavalry by the Germans in March 1918 was not so much a strategic miscalculation, as Terraine has suggested (quoted in Chapter 1), rather it was a logistical necessity.

What is not widely appreciated about the British cavalry during the campaign is that, as was examined earlier, the cavalry divisions achieved much of their success precisely *without* the mobility so praised by Gough, as his defensive plan denied them their horses, machine guns and artillery for most of the first half of the battle. What he did not remove however was their training, and experience, proving that mobile warfare rests at least as much in the mind of the soldier as in his means of transport. As has been demonstrated in earlier chapters, at regimental and troop level the cavalry continued to be a flexible and highly professional force. As Home put it in his diary of 16 April 1918: "Thank Heaven we still have three Cavalry Divisions made of the old stuff and properly officered. We can stop a break through anywhere."⁶⁴ Hyperbole perhaps, but with a strong grain of truth.

The effectiveness, particularly the moral effect, of small groups of mounted men against un-entrenched opponents was also demonstrated, even the scratch mounted forces available were able to overawe and defeat machine-gun armed opponents. Unfortunately, as Moreuil Wood was to demonstrate, question marks still hung over the capabilities of the higher commanders. It is arguable that this encounter was won by the

aggression and determination of leaders at squadron and troop level, despite, rather than because of the control exercised by their brigade commander.

As with the disappointments after Cambrai the previous year, recrimination and scape-goating was quick to follow the March-April fighting. Fortunately the spotlight had temporarily moved away from the cavalry. The chief casualty was Gen. Gough, who was removed from command of Fifth Army on 28 March and replaced by Gen. Rawlinson.⁶⁵ It is probable that quite apart from the failure or otherwise of the defence in the March fighting, Gough was a victim of the on-going feud between The Prime Minister and Haig. Charteris recorded on 5 April:

He [the Prime minister] is of course looking for a scapegoat for the disaster to the Fifth Army and has apparently decided to go for Gough. DH [Haig] is furious about this. It would certainly be most unfair if Gough were held responsible. He had a dozen divisions to hold a front of 42 miles and he was attacked by 50 divisions.⁶⁶

Gough was a close friend of Haig, and as such a suitable surrogate for the Commander-in-Chief himself. Ironically, it would appear that Gough's loss was Kavanagh's gain. The Cavalry Corps commander had not come out well in the aftermath of Cambrai, and it seemed likely that it would be he who would be sacrificed. Kavanagh mentioned in a note to the commander of 1st Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. Mullens on 27 February "...it seems I am for home."⁶⁷ However, this did not happen, the performance of his corps, in contrast to that of Fifth Army in general transferred the pressure to Gough, who it seems had previously been supporting Kavanagh's dismissal. Home recorded in his diary of 25 March:

Heard on 22 [March] that the CC [Corps Commander; Kavanagh] was going to be sent home, so got Barrow to let me go out on the 26th to see what was the matter. I found that Goughie was the matter and had evidently reported badly on the CC – this was the result. Luckily the CC was in a strong position and the result is that Goughie has gone home and that Henry Rawlinson succeeds him.⁶⁸

Given that both Gough and Kavanagh were close to Haig, and both, like their Commander-in-Chief, cavalrymen, it seems unusual that they should apparently be in competition, but if nothing else it further contradicts the myth that there was some form of cavalry 'club' in the upper reaches of the B.E.F. For the present, however, the

Cavalry Corps retained its commander and as an arm its star was at least briefly in the ascendant.

The Battle of Amiens 8 August 1918: The Plan

(Figure 5.3 overleaf)

The German attack towards Amiens in March 1918 was followed by a series of other blows, falling all along the length of the Allied front. None, however was to make gains as significant as those made against Fifth Army and gradually the German offensive resources were worn down. The last great attack was made on the Marne front on 15 July 1918, and while initially successful was rapidly contained, and French and American counter-attacks followed. The balance thus started to shift as the Allies looked to change to the offensive themselves.

On 24 July, while the Marne fighting was still in progress Gen. Foch as overall Allied commander called a conference with the three national Commanders-in-Chief, Haig, Pershing, and Petain, to outline his offensive plans.⁶⁹ It was these plans which provided the basis for the Anglo-French offensive of 8 August. If the degree of success of that offensive is to be judged, and the rôle of the cavalry in it assessed, then the original objectives of the battle need to be considered in some detail. Foch spelled out three areas where attacks were required to relieve pressure on the Allied front, and in particular on the railway system behind the front. Two of these, Château Thierry and St Mihiel lay in the Franco-American portion of the front, but the third lay opposite Amiens where the salient created in March threatened not only the Paris-Amiens railway, but also the junction point of the French and British armies. He further defined his ideas concerning this third area in a formal order issued on 28 July:

1. The object of the operations is to disengage Amiens and the Paris-Amiens railway, also to defeat and drive back the enemy established between the Somme and the Avre.
2. To do so the offensive, covered in the north by the Somme, will be pushed as far as possible in the direction of Roye.⁷⁰ [about 40km (25 miles) south-east of Amiens]

Prior to this, beginning around 5 July, Gen. Rawlinson, in command of what had now become the British Fourth Army had been developing an offensive plan to relieve the pressure on Amiens,⁷¹ so when presented with Foch's scheme this accorded well with his own plans. Rawlinson, as has been alluded to earlier in this study, was more of a 'Bite and Hold' general, and his plans for relieving Amiens reflected this. In this he was also guided by the terrain. The attack front lay between the River Somme in the north, running broadly west to east, and the junction with the French First Army, running south-east along the Amiens to Roye road. The ground within this triangle was highly suitable for an attack, the terrain was rolling, and the going firm with minimal shell damage. The initial German defences were also relatively weak, having been extemporised after their March attack: "...their front line consisting of very rough trenches with no dugouts worthy of the name, and few communication trenches."⁷² However, the opportunities for an advance in this area were not limitless. At a distance of about 10km (6 miles) east of the existing front lay the 'Old' or 'Outer Amiens Defence Line'. This was a system constructed in 1916 which had originally faced east, and thus was mostly wired behind the trenches when attacked from the west, but it still represented a potentially defensible position. A few miles further east still lay the edge of the old Somme battlefield from 1916;

...a wide stretch of country which had been fought over in the 1916 Somme battles and was completely covered with shell-holes and pieces of old wire, overgrown with thistles and rank grass. This shell-crater area – the near edge of which was a line running roughly north and south through Foucaucourt – was extremely difficult for infantry and well-nigh impossible for tanks and cavalry.⁷³

Rawlinson thus developed a plan with strictly limited objectives, aiming at an advance to the 'Old Amiens Defence Line' and a consolidation there. This would still represent an advance of about 10km (6 miles) on a front about 16km (10 miles) wide, substantial progress by the standards of the Western Front.

The attack was initially scheduled for 10 August. It would be led by two corps; the Australian Corps (of five divisions) on the left, between the Somme river in the north, and the Amiens to Chaulnes railway line to the south; and on the right, by the Canadian Corps (of four Canadian and one British divisions) south of the railway and extending south as far as the boundary with the French along the Amiens to Roye road. To the

north of the Somme III Corps would provide a flanking attack, and to the south of the Roye road the French XXXI Corps would advance in parallel with the Canadians. Supporting the infantry attack were over 500 tanks of various kinds, in particular 72 of the new 'Whippet' light tanks (of which more later).⁷⁴

All three divisions of the reduced Cavalry Corps were to be used in the offensive. In contrast to Rawlinson's attitude to cavalry two years earlier, this time they were fully integrated into the attack. Two divisions were to move up as soon as the battle started and leapfrog through the infantry and push through to capture the more distant targets. 3rd Cavalry Division was placed under the command of the Canadian Corps on the southern side of the advance, while one brigade (1st Cavalry Brigade) of 1st Cavalry Division was placed under Australian Corps' control immediately north of the railway. Each cavalry brigade would be assisted by a company of sixteen Whippet tanks. 2nd Cavalry Division, and the remainder of 1st Cavalry Division would remain in reserve under Cavalry Corps' control, but unlike in earlier battles no word from Corps would be required to launch the leading brigades, which would advance automatically under local control. In the light of the command and control problems of previous offensives, discussed in earlier chapters, this devolution of command was critical to the success of the cavalry, and is one of the most significant aspects of this battle in relation to the themes of this study. The mission of the cavalry was stated explicitly in the *General Staff Instructions* drawn up between 1 and 4 August:

- (a) The first mission of the Cavalry Corps on 'Z' day will be to secure the line of the outer Amiens defences, and hold it until relieved by infantry of the Canadian Corps.⁷⁵

This plan had a great deal to recommend it. Rawlinson and his staff appear to have learned the lessons of Arras and Cambrai the year before. The new deeper defence systems used by both sides by this point in the war not only provided an environment with much more opportunity and freedom of movement for mounted troops, but also, their very depth created a necessity for forces which could advance faster than men simply on foot, to tackle the deeper recesses of the defensive system itself. This reflects a change from the vision of cavalry performing a 'breakthrough' function after the local tactical battle is complete, to one of their integrated participation in the tactical battle itself. The devolution of command to infantry corps commanders had also been tried

before, with varying degrees of success, but this time the cavalry were not simply to wait until their chosen commander launched them forward, but to advance independently and carry on their mission without external prompting. The integration of cavalry and light tanks was also a progressive step, but the success or otherwise of this will be examined later.

Had the battle of Amiens, and the operational success of the cavalry in it, been judged by historians on the basis of the plans drawn up prior to 4 August, no doubt it would have been judged an unqualified success (except of course for those who as with the Messines battle in 1917 might have criticised its *lack* of ambition). However Haig and Foch met again on 3 August.⁷⁶ By this time Foch was so pleased with the progress of the counter attacks on the Marne that he pressed for a widening of the objectives for the Amiens offensive. The battle had already been brought forward two days to 8 August in order to increase the pressure on German reserves, and perhaps he saw the opportunity for inflicting a significant defeat on the enemy. Haig responded by naming a series of deeper objectives, not only Roye and Chaulnes themselves, on the near edge of the destroyed zone but also Ham, 24km (15 miles) to the east of Roye, beyond the river Somme – Canal du Nord line.⁷⁷ This was embodied in an addition to the orders for the Cavalry Corps issued on 6 August:

6. With the above object in view, the Cavalry Corps, as soon as they have accomplished their first mission (*vide* Fourth Army No.32 (G) para. 13 (a) [quoted above]), will push forward in the direction of the line Roye – Chaulnes with the least possible delay.⁷⁸

As has been seen earlier in this study, it was characteristic of Haig to add ‘wider horizons’ to the limited plans of his subordinates, and it is arguable that in this case as in many others these ambitions were unrealistic. Here, however it must be asked to what extent he really believed in these objectives and whether their inclusion was more of a political gesture to Foch than a military expectation. What is certain is that the failure of the offensive to reach further than Rawlinson’s original target, the Old Amiens Defence Line, has provided ammunition to critics of both Haig and the cavalry ever since.

The Cavalry on 8 August

In preparation for the offensive the Cavalry Corps was brought up to positions to the west of Amiens, and then on the night of 7/8 August filed through the town to an assembly area in the 'V' of the Amiens–St Quentin and Amiens–Roye roads. This move was made in a single column over 28km (18 miles) long, but apart from a delay caused by a broken-down tank, passed without mishap.⁷⁹ The divisions were formed up by 2.30am, prior to 'Zero' hour for the infantry which was due at 4.20am. The battle began at 4.20 with, as at Cambrai, no preliminary bombardment but with creeping barrages ahead of the infantry and tanks. The infantry were rapidly onto and through the German first lines, and as the day dawned to a thick mist "...the issue of the day was never in doubt."⁸⁰

3rd Cavalry Division was tasked to support the Canadian Corps on the right (southern) side of the attack. Their line of advance lay roughly south-east towards the 'Outer Defence Line' at Le Quesnel. This would take the division across the only significant obstacle on the battlefield, the east-west flowing river Luce. Thus two contingencies were prepared for; a crossing by the bridges at Ignaucourt, or failing that a push further east around the head of the river valley. Patrols (of the Fort Garry Horse from the Canadian Cavalry Brigade) were on the move almost as soon as the battle began to establish the viability of these bridges. Lt. Col. Ewing Paterson*, who was temporarily in command of the 7th Cavalry Brigade, wrote an account of events for the *Cavalry Journal* in 1921. Crucially, he observed;

...this decision [to advance] was left entirely to the G.O.C. 3rd Cavalry Division without having to await orders from Infantry Corps or Division Headquarters, as had so often happened in previous engagements, the consequence having been that the fleeting opportunity had nearly always been lost.⁸¹

The critical importance of this development has been highlighted earlier in this chapter. Thus only just over an hour after 'Zero' at 5.40am the division began its move along a

* Not to be confused with Brig. Gen. R. W. Paterson, commanding the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in the same division. Ewing Paterson also went on (as Brig. Gen.) to command the 6th Cavalry Brigade in October.

prepared cavalry track up to the front line and across. Infantry fighting was continuing on either side of the cavalry line of march as they advanced.

At 9.15 the bridges were reported intact and the Division began its first 'bound' as far as the river valley on the south side of the Luce at Ignaucourt.⁸² The first troops across the river were Lord Strathcona's Horse at 9.20am, this regiment then pushed on southwards to the boundary with the French on the Amiens – Roye road. Here they met up with 'Brutinel's Independent Force', a column of Canadian motor machine-guns, cyclists, and truck mounted mortars tasked with protecting the flank of the attack along the road, capturing 50 prisoners and a gun en route.⁸³ The two leading brigades of the Division, Canadian on the right, and 7th on the left were formed up across the river with their accompanying Whippets, and supporting R.H.A. and R.C.H.A. batteries, and machine-guns by 11.00am. Again without the necessity for further orders⁸⁴ the two brigades then pushed on to their next objectives.

On the right (south) the Canadian Cavalry Brigade advanced towards Beaucourt village, and to the east of it Beaucourt wood. While the initial advance was made rapidly on horseback, with few casualties due to the speed of movement, as the village and wood were reached the Canadians were forced into a dismounted fire-fight. Eight Whippets attempted to support this attack but they too were forced back by fire from a German field gun used in the anti-tank rôle. Beaucourt village was eventually captured after a fierce fight, but it was not until reinforcements of Canadian infantry arrived at about 4.30 in the afternoon that the wood to the east fell.⁸⁵

On the left of the Canadians, 7th Cavalry Brigade advanced eastwards. They were faced with the village of Cayeux on their left front near the Luce valley, then stretching for over a mile (2km) southwards along a crest the trees of Cayeux wood. To the right was a gap of about half a mile (1km) to the woods and village of Beaucourt. Ewing Paterson, in command of the brigade described it as "... a most formidable looking position."⁸⁶ The Brigade advanced with the Inniskillings (6th Dragoons) on the right and 7th Dragoon Guards on the left with 17th Lancers in reserve. The Inniskillings were brought to a halt in a copse some distance short of Beaucourt wood, forcing the 7th Dragoon Guards to swing left (eastwards). The latter regiment was now faced with the length of Cayeux wood, and:

... without a moment's hesitation gave the order to charge, and with one loud yell... were down the hill, across the open space, up the rise and into the copse, capturing the key to the position.⁸⁷

Due to their being echeloned by the change of face to the left, each squadron of 7th D.G. made a separate assault into the edge of the southern part of the woods, however each was individually successful. Over one hundred prisoners were captured, (although some subsequently escaped), as well as in excess of twenty machine-guns and a battery of field artillery.

Capitalising on this success, the 17th Lancers pushed through the wood on the left (north) of 7th D.G., but on emerging from the wood towards Caix, the next village to the east, they came under heavy fire. Paterson himself had his horse shot from under him. In a textbook response, the 17th threw a squadron north successfully outflanking the offending guns, and the advance continued, reaching the 'Amiens Outer Defence Line' and the Divisional first objective by 2.30pm. A number of further prisoners were captured along the way including several complete field hospitals, and more artillery pieces.⁸⁸

Ewing Paterson reviewed his brigade's actions and provided several observations. Speed was of the essence, the German machine-gunners were unable to bring fire effectively on men charging towards them, and it was only in the last 60 yards that significant casualties were suffered, moreover "...once the men were on top of the enemy they put up no fight and appeared completely demoralised."⁸⁹ He was warm in his praise for his supporting R.H.A. battery and the initiative of its commander, but his supporting tanks had simply been left behind by the rapidity of the advance. He summed up the moral effect of large numbers of British cavalry appearing in what had been the German rear areas "A German officer when asked why he and his men had surrendered, said 'Look, Look.' Pointing around the country, 'and wherever you look you see British cavalry.'"⁹⁰

With the capture of Beaucourt wood to the south later in the afternoon by Canadian infantry the last brigade of 3rd Cavalry Division, the 6th, was pushed through between the two advanced brigades, and took up a position along the Outer Defence Line south of the 7th Cavalry Brigade. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade had already been relieved by infantry during the afternoon and in due course the rather depleted 7th Cavalry Brigade

was replaced by infantry at around 9.00pm, while the fresher 6th Cavalry Brigade held part of the line overnight.⁹¹ As the two brigades of 3rd Cavalry Division withdrew that night Paterson suggests they "...had good cause to be content."⁹² The division had advanced 11km (seven miles) and captured large numbers of prisoners and equipment. With the exception of the village of le Quesnel on the extreme right, all the divisional first objectives had been reached.

Advancing alongside 3rd Cavalry Division, to the north, were 1st Cavalry Division. The rôle of this division was divided; 9th Cavalry Brigade, advancing south of the Amiens – Chaulnes railway line was to move through the northernmost part of the Canadian Corps line, while 1st Cavalry Brigade advanced to the north of the railway, under the immediate command of the Australian Corps. 2nd Cavalry Brigade and the Divisional Headquarters would follow 9th Brigade south of the railway. Not only was this line of advance not hindered by the river crossing required of the 3rd Cavalry Division, but also each brigade could rest its inner flank on the railway line, a great aid to direction in the foggy morning.⁹³

On the 9th Brigade front south of the railway the advance was led by the 15th Hussars on the left and the 19th Hussars on the right. Both had some initial difficulty crossing the debris of the old front lines, but by 11.00am the two regiments passed through the advancing Canadian infantry at Guillaucourt, about 6km (four miles) beyond the front line, and just short of the infantry's second ('Red Line') objective.⁹⁴ At 11.15am the Hussars were ordered forward onto their objectives in the Old Amiens Defence Line.⁹⁵ The historian of the 15th Hussars described the subsequent moves:

There is little doubt that many felt that this moment was worth all the years of waiting. As the 15th swept past the position just captured by the Canadians, these latter leapt to their feet, and loudly cheered the regiment as it passed by. The distance to be covered was about two thousand yards, and almost at once the 15th came under machine-gun-fire, a few men and horses fell, but the momentum was gained, the forward rush continued, and in a remarkably short time all squadrons reached their objectives, dismounted and occupied the old trenches.⁹⁶

Once again speed and aggression had proved effective in the face of machine-gun fire, and the brigade objectives were all achieved by around 1.00pm.

In due course 2nd Cavalry Brigade, (in reserve to this point) was sent forward to prolong the line to the right of 9th Cavalry Brigade and link up with the left of 3rd Cavalry Division to the south, thus by around 1.30pm the whole of the Outer Defence Line south of the railway, with the exception of the southernmost portion around le Quesnel was in cavalry hands. During the afternoon 2nd Cavalry Brigade pushed patrols out beyond the line to reconnoitre the villages further east, but these were met with heavy fire and it became apparent that the German defences were hardening and no further advance was possible.⁹⁷

To the north of the railway 1st Cavalry Brigade advanced with 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen's Bays) in the lead. At about 9.15am the Bays passed through the Australian infantry on their 'Red Line' objective just short of the village of Harbonnieres. Coming under fire as they came into sight of the village, two squadrons of the Bays galloped forward, gaining a position in a valley south of the village and near the railway line. In the process a number of Germans were killed or captured and several machine-guns overrun. A further attempt was made to move north-east circling around the rear of the village anti-clockwise, but this was beaten back by heavy fire from the line of a road leading out of the village to the south-west. An attempt was then made to clear this opposition using Whippet tanks, but this too was beaten back with the loss of two tanks knocked-out and one broken-down, as well as further loss to the cavalry. At this point the regiment consolidated its position to the south of the village, with a south facing defensive flank along the railway, supported by machine-guns, and by the brigade R.H.A. battery on a ridge to the rear.⁹⁸

At about 9.45, 5th Dragoon Guards were ordered forward around the north side of Harbonnieres, however their mission was essentially to ignore resistance from the village and ride on to the Outer Defence Line. This was quickly accomplished (at a trot) despite taking fire from the north side of the village, and the 5th D. G. pushed on across the trench line. At this point three trains were sighted in the distance, one of which was famously captured by 'A' Squadron after it had been disabled by an aerial bomb complete with its full complement of German soldiers allegedly returning from leave.⁹⁹ Two squadrons of 5th D.G. continued to cause havoc beyond the Outer Defence Line until about 10.30am, overrunning a dressing station near Vauvillers, and three batteries

of artillery, although it was only possible to disable a few of the guns of the latter before abandoning them. Both squadrons then withdrew to the Defence Line.¹⁰⁰

During this period it would appear that the remaining resistance in Harbonnieres itself had collapsed, prompted by the arrival of 5th Australian Division infantry at about 10.30am, as the cavalry *War Diaries* do not record any further fighting for the village, and by 12.15pm Brig. Gen. Sewell commanding 1st Cavalry Brigade was able to report to 1st Cavalry Division that his brigade was established on its objective along the Amiens Outer Defence Line.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately heavy fire from the village of Vauvillers in particular made any advance beyond this objective impractical.

By early afternoon on 8 August the Cavalry Corps had achieved all its initial objectives. Their orders were now to wait on the consolidated Outer Defence Line until relieved by the infantry, before pushing on more deeply into the German rear areas. Vigorous patrolling was carried out beyond the Defence Line, but it became increasingly apparent that German reinforcements were arriving and the defence hardening. Thus no further advances were made that day. Rawlinson, however remained optimistic and new objectives based on an advance of another 8km (5 miles) on 9 August were assigned.¹⁰² Infantry attacks were launched on the following days, and the cavalry brought up in readiness each time to exploit any gains made. But although the front was advanced most of the distance initially proposed by Rawlinson, almost to Chaulnes, it was clear that, as so often had been the case in the past, the offensive had run out of steam. Rawlinson put an official end to operations on 11 August, ordering the Cavalry Corps back into reserve around Amiens.¹⁰³

Success and Failure on 8 August

The operational success or otherwise of the cavalry forms one of the themes of this study. Unfortunately, in the case of the Amiens battle the criteria by which this might be judged vary according to the standpoint and biases of the judge, and not all have been kind to the cavalry. The Commander-in-Chief, Haig, seems to have been well pleased with the performance of the cavalry on 8 August. He recorded in his diary on 13 August 1918:

General Kavanagh explained to me the nature of the operations carried out by the cavalry. These were highly successful, and I feel sure that without the rapid advance of the cavalry the effect of the surprise attack of the 8th would have been much less and very probably the Amiens outer defence line would not have been gained either so soon or so cheaply.¹⁰⁴

It would seem difficult to contradict this verdict, the Cavalry Corps had captured virtually all its primary objectives by lunchtime on the first day of the offensive. Their haul of prisoners was also impressive, Preston estimates this at about 3,000¹⁰⁵ out of an overall total for the British and Dominion forces of around 18,000.¹⁰⁶ Large numbers of machine-guns were also overrun, as well as several batteries of artillery, several hospitals and at least one train (5th D. G. claimed 20 officers and 740 other ranks as prisoners from this one capture alone).¹⁰⁷ In terms of equipment captures, as well as personnel it is also likely that the impact of the cavalry on the German defenders was under-represented in the statistics as in many cases prisoners were passed back to the infantry, or simply ignored as the cavalymen rode on towards their objectives.¹⁰⁸ The moral effect of the cavalry on the defenders should not be underestimated either. The opinion of one German officer on large numbers of horsemen loose in his rear areas has already been quoted earlier.

Various figures are available for casualties, Preston provided a figure (up to 12 August) of 1054 human casualties in the Cavalry Corps,¹⁰⁹ although by his own admission figures vary. Edmonds in the *Official History* offered a lower figure of 887, (with a horse loss of 1,800) out of a total loss of all arms in the offensive of 22,202.¹¹⁰ The latter figure represents an average of something over 1,000 casualties per participating infantry division (including those in reserve). The cavalry was not significantly involved in the fighting after the first day, nonetheless, 1,000 casualties over three divisions is not an excessive loss compared with that of the infantry. Within the Cavalry Corps the casualties were fairly evenly spread, although naturally those brigades most heavily involved in the fighting suffered most heavily, the Canadian Cavalry Brigade suffering the most heavily with 196 casualties of whom 25 were killed.

Clearly, contrary to the widely held misconception both during the war and since, where the going was good, machine-guns alone were not an insuperable obstacle to mounted troops, Preston summarised the position:

These three days' operations showed the great value of mounted troops in exploiting the success of a surprise infantry attack *so long as the ground was such as to permit rapid movement* [his italics]. It was not so much the actual enemy machine-guns that held up the cavalrymen in the latter stages, as the fact that the broken ground prevented manoeuvres to avoid and outflank these machine-guns. And it cannot be too strongly emphasised that the infantry and tanks were equally unable to cope with these conditions.¹¹¹

The verdict of subsequent historians has not been as kind to the cavalry. As elsewhere, Sir James Edmonds led the attack, claiming "the attempts to use cavalry as a mounted arm in direct attack before every machine gun had been captured or silenced brought little profit in spite of the gallant efforts of the squadrons."¹¹² Others were less subtle; McWilliams and Steel observed as recently as 2001 "The glaring failure of the day was the performance of the cavalry."¹¹³ Schreiber, in his work on the Canadian Corps claimed that "...the stubborn resistance of German machine-gunners," combined with artillery, meant that the cavalry were riding to "...certain death",¹¹⁴ and elsewhere that the use of cavalry was "...a pathetic attempt to fulfil the atavistic hopes and beliefs of old cavalry officers, including Field Marshal Haig."¹¹⁵ As the successive chapters of this study have shown, such extravagant opinions occur with depressing regularity in the literature of the war. The views of Prior and Wilson, and John Terraine, have also been examined in the introduction to this study, but fall along similar lines.

It would appear that criticism of the rôle of the cavalry on 8 August has had as its focus two main points. The first point is that no 'breakthrough' occurred, and it is argued the cavalry had no rôle in the battle unless a breakthrough was achieved. Secondly, the horsemen failed to co-operate effectively with the tanks, not only failing to produce significant results in combination, but also hampering the tanks from achieving the success that might have been possible had they operated on their own. As McWilliams and Steel put it "The Whippet tanks were seriously handicapped by being attached to the cavalry."¹¹⁶ The refutation of each of these misconceptions form two of the major themes of this study, and both have already been touched upon in earlier chapters.

The first of these criticisms can be linked to Haig's extension of the objectives. As so often in the past he did not allow his vision to be constrained by a 'Bite and Hold'

attack, and suggested the possibility of a deeper and more complete success. As has been discussed earlier it is questionable to what extent Haig himself believed that this would occur, and to what extent it was a gesture towards Foch who was eager for results which would support his attacks in the south. However, once the revised orders of 4 and 5 August had been issued, mentioning the Roye-Chaulnes line and even Ham, away to the east, these objectives became the criteria by which the offensive as a whole, the success of the cavalry, and even Haig himself have subsequently been judged. This is despite the fact that these revised orders made very little difference to the operation as carried out, the basis of the operation continued to be the limited attack up to the Amiens Outer Defence Line originally conceived by Rawlinson. Were the success of the operation to be judged on the basis of Rawlinson's original plan up to 4 August, (to which hardly any changes were made in spite of Haig's promptings) it could only be judged a success.

Criticism of the cavalry can also be attributed to a failure to acknowledge the *tactical* rôle of mounted troops. This study has shown that as the battlefield deepened from the start of 1917 onwards, and the German defences became more flexible, the opportunities for mounted troops to contribute significantly to an all-arms battle at the tactical level grew steadily. 8 August represented a high point in this process. Not only was the rôle of the cavalry in capturing local tactical objectives early in the battle fully acknowledged in Rawlinson's plan, but their positioning well forward at the start of the battle, without the necessity for orders from corps commanders before advancing, allowed them to live up to their potential. Many commentators, however, remain wedded to the idea that the only rôle for cavalry was one of exploitation, and that their contribution to a tactical, 'Bite and Hold' battle was minimal, or superfluous. Prior and Wilson observed "The cavalry, for example, would only play a part if Haig's wildest dreams came true; [i.e. a complete breakthrough] Rawlinson's more modest purposes could be accomplished without them."¹⁷ This view neglects the important part played by the cavalry in attaining those 'modest purposes' not only more quickly, but as Haig commented (quoted above) more 'cheaply', as the Cavalry Corps casualty figures testify.

The second platform for criticism of the cavalry was the success or otherwise of co-operation with tanks (already discussed in some detail in relation to the Cambrai battle

in Chapter 4). Whippet tanks were attached to each brigade, but this, as before at Cambrai, led to a good deal of scape-goating of the cavalry for the failures of the tanks. This criticism followed two strands. The first of these was that somehow the tanks could and should have been used on their own in some grand deep penetration operation. McWilliams and Steel summarised this argument:

The tank officers had anticipated a powerful, concentrated thrust that would swing south and ravage the German rear areas ahead of the French First Army. Tied to the vulnerable cavalry, however, the Whippets were spread out over a wide front, which reduced their impact and eliminated the possibility of a concerted swing southward.¹¹⁸

Anglesey traces the origin of this piece of wild speculation to Fuller, while pointing out that it was Fuller himself who proposed the combination of Whippets with cavalry to Rawlinson in the first place.¹¹⁹ The Whippet tank under discussion, in spite of its glamorous name was only marginally quicker than its larger Mark V colleagues; 7mph (12kmh) on good going but only half that cross-country, and it was certainly no more reliable mechanically. Thus the idea of massed tank exploitation was no more viable in August 1918 than it had been in December 1917. In any case, as has been discussed earlier, the broken terrain beyond the Outer Defence Line would have been as much a bar to tank advance as it would to that of horses. Thus the suggestion that tanks could have achieved what cavalry did not remains a fiction in the minds of tank enthusiasts rather than a realistic possibility. Nonetheless the tank supporters were quick to make their point. Home was painfully aware of this within a few days of the battle, writing on 12 August:

The Cavalry had a chance of doing a job and carried it out splendidly. In the papers a great deal of credit is given to the tanks, especially the Whippets, they being the latest toy. We shall have to get a tame correspondent and have the S. African business once more: nothing but advertisement.¹²⁰

The second strand of criticism related to the success or otherwise of the direct co-operation between the horsemen and the tanks. The historian of the 6th Tank Battalion offered a comment on this in 1919, which has become the standard view among later historians;

As a result of the Amiens battles, it was found that the present Whippet was not suitable to operate with mounted troops. One of two things invariably occurred; either the cavalry wanted to move forward at the gallop, in which case they out-distanced the Whippet, or the Whippets were able to move forward and the cavalry were prevented by machine-gun fire or barrage.¹²¹

The first part of this statement is undoubtedly accurate. After the early phases of the battle the tanks struggled to keep up with the cavalry. With the cavalry brigades advancing as rapidly as they did this is hardly surprising. Lt. Col. E. Paterson, commanding 7th Cavalry Brigade stated: “The whippet tanks, owing to the rapid advance from Bois-de-Morgemont and the difficulties of bad going and steep undulations, never appeared in the picture.”¹²²

The second part of the argument, that the tanks were able to get forward where cavalry were not, is not supported by the evidence. In fact it was often coming under fire that prompted the cavalry to gallop in the first place, rapid movement being a proven tactic in the face of enemy machine-guns. The *War Diary* of Lord Strathcona’s Horse bears this out;

A heavy crossfire of MGs developing from Beaucourt it was considered inadvisable to move more slowly under this fire, and Major Torrance was ordered to get on to the more covered position without reference to the tanks. ... The distance between the Advance Squadron and the main body at this time had become considerable because in accordance with instructions the main body had not sent ahead of the Whippets.¹²³

Thus the tanks were often left behind precisely because the cavalry were under fire. Equally unfortunately for the tanks, the contrast between the vulnerability of cavalry to machine-gun fire, and the relative invulnerability of tanks was not borne out by reality either. As has been shown the cavalry were able to use their mobility to minimise casualties. Tanks on the other hand drew fire, and were vulnerable to anti-tank fire from German artillery, (fired both indirectly, and in the specific anti-tank rôle over open sights,) but lacked the protection of rapid mobility. They were thus no more able to confront well emplaced enemy troops by frontal attack than were the cavalry. The losses of three tanks in the unsuccessful attack to the south of Harbonnières demonstrated this, and the two tanks brought up to support the failing Canadian Cavalry Brigade attack

against Beaucourt were equally unsuccessful.¹²⁴ In fact no occasions have been identified on 8 August where the cavalry advance was halted but the tanks were able to push on.

Only where there was good ground and room to manoeuvre were tanks alone, cavalry alone, or the two in concert, able to progress. Where this was possible, useful co-operation took place. Tanks co-operated with 1st Cavalry Brigade in the clearance of Bayonvillers, and joined with the initially successful advance of the Bays along the north side of the railway "...obtaining very good practice on all kinds of targets",¹²⁵ before joining in the attacks around Harbonnieres. The two arms, mechanical and equine, were thus a good deal less mutually incompatible than may have been argued. Nonetheless the cavalry remained sceptical of the immediate potential of the Whippets, and worried about their impact on the mobility of horse-mounted troops. An after action report prepared by Cavalry Corps at the end of August observed:

- (a) the recent operations have proved that;
 - (i) these tanks cannot keep up with the advanced bodies of Cavalry fighting in open warfare, and that therefore if an attempt is made to use them, the action of the Cavalry is delayed and opportunities lost.¹²⁶

Thus "... the task given to Whippet tanks should be a strictly limited one."¹²⁷

A significant amount of space has been given to this debate, but although the tanks may have been lauded in the press of the day, it is easy to over-emphasise any contemporary split between supporters of mechanical technology, and those of horseflesh. Only with the benefit of hindsight, and the wholesale replacement of equine by petrol power in the later twentieth century has it been possible to envisage a wholly mechanical, horseless army. Such a vision simply did not exist between 1914 and 1918, and those such as Travers,¹²⁸ who have castigated the commanders of the day for not embracing the technology more fully, essentially miss this point. It should also be remembered that significant numbers of tank officers were cavalrymen, the commander of 6th Tank Battalion itself is listed in operational orders as 'Lt. Col. C. M. Truman (12th Lancers).'¹²⁹ Clearly his new job did not over-ride his old regimental affiliation. Thus while problems of co-operation undoubtedly existed, these should not be viewed as a 'rivalry' between 'old' and 'new' arms, more as a developing mobile arm (mechanical and equine) seeking to absorb a new piece of equipment.

One of the most telling facts which challenges the supposed anti-horse stance of the tank enthusiasts is the preferred mode of transport of tank officers. The nature of the tanks of the day meant that communication among the crew of a single tank was very difficult, and tank to tank communication essentially impossible. The result of this was that at Cambrai most tank officers in the rôle of section leader or above (excepting of course, famously, their Brigadier), advanced on foot. This allowed them the flexibility to move around and liaise with their infantry counterparts.¹³⁰ When ‘Whippet’ tanks were introduced to co-operate with the cavalry, the faster pace of advance meant that these officers simply mounted, not on tanks but on horses. The history of the 6th Tank Battalion records

The difficulties of company commanders in keeping touch with the tanks on such a wide front were enormous, and they were compelled to be mounted. This fact largely accounted for our heavy casualties among senior officers.¹³¹

Nor was this practice limited to operations in co-operation with cavalry. A posthumous Victoria Cross was awarded to Capt. Richard West of 6th Tank Battalion, for his actions during two operations in August and September of 1918. His citation records that he commanded from horseback, and had several horses shot under him, before becoming a casualty himself. On both occasions he was co-operating with infantry formations:

He therefore rode forward on horseback to our front infantry line in order to keep in touch with the progress of the battle and to be in a position to launch his tanks at the right moment.¹³²

Clearly these men had no quibble with the use of horses on their newly ‘mechanised’ battlefield.

This discussion, however has more to do with the historiography of the battle than the operation itself. In summary, 8 August was a significant operational success, in which the Cavalry Corps (assisted by the tanks) played no small part. At last a plan had been evolved which placed the cavalry well forward in the right place at the right time, with realistic objectives, and removed the dead hand of corps level command. This allowed the local commanders to act with boldness and initiative within an ever deepening battlefield, the outer reaches of which were at the limits of the tactical range of a conventional infantry and artillery attack. The battle also pointed the way to how the war would ultimately be won, not by a sweeping mobile victory but by well organised

localised blows of overwhelming power, delivered with an ever increasing frequency. Unfortunately, the usefulness of cavalry in the latter type of fighting rather than the former, seems to have been widely overlooked.

The Cavalry Corps: August - October 1918

Even as the last phases of the fighting around Amiens were in progress, a further diminution of the power of the cavalry was being contemplated. On 25 July Sir Henry Wilson in his capacity as Chief of the Imperial General Staff produced a lengthy document; 'British Military Policy 1918-19'.¹³³ Amongst other things this document laid out the notorious 'Plan 1919' whereby the final offensive against the Germans would be delayed for a full year. Haig was dismissive of much of its content, but significant in the context of this study were Wilson's remarks concerning the cavalry. He argued that one cavalry division should be dismounted entirely and used as tank or machine-gun troops. A second could be retained under G.H.Q. command but this would no longer require a Corps Headquarters establishment and this could be reduced to a simple training inspectorate. The third remaining cavalry division would be broken up as corps cavalry, "...the need for which has been greatly felt during this year's campaign."¹³⁴ This last remark is viewed with some irony as it was Wilson who was instrumental in the dismounting of almost all of the corps cavalry in October of 1917. Wilson continued to push this policy at a conference of senior officers on 11 August, despite the protestations of Kavanagh. Home, recording the meeting, commented "The CC [Kavanagh] tackled the latter [Wilson] on the question of doing away with the Cavalry Corps. H.W. said that he intended doing so. They will regret it."¹³⁵

The timing of these meetings was unfortunate. While the Amiens attack had been very successful it was widely accepted that now the battle-front had reached the destroyed zone of the previous years' fighting there would be little further opportunity for large scale mounted action, at least until the British armies emerged on the far side of the 'Hindenburg' line and the German prepared defences. At the same time Wilson was right in that as the armies advanced the need for mounted troops in the corps and divisional cavalry rôle was acute. As the historian of the Oxfordshire Hussars put it

“...the moment the war became one of movement every unit in the Army from corps down to platoon, began screaming for mounted troops to help them – their previous opinion of their uselessness having suddenly changed.”¹³⁶ Kavanagh and Haig were thus forced to accede to the demands for dispersal of some of the remaining cavalry among the advancing armies, while trying to retain a mounted striking force in the Cavalry Corps. Haig continued to look beyond the immediate fighting to a point when the wholesale German retreat would begin and mounted troops would be vital. He wrote in his diary on 1 September:

I therefore wished the Cavalry Corps to be kept as strong as possible, and at the present time merely to detach the *minimum* number of squadrons necessary for Divisional and Corps requirements. By this procedure I hoped to have an efficient Cavalry Corps ready to act vigorously when the decisive moment comes, and reap the fruits of victory.¹³⁷

Nonetheless on 4 September he directed Kavanagh to break up the 2nd Cavalry Division, sending a brigade to each of the First, Third, and Fourth Armies. This provided 27 squadrons, a further 12 squadrons remained in still-mounted corps cavalry regiments, notably those from the Dominions; King Edward’s Horse, the Canadian Light Horse, and the 13th Australian Light Horse. Thus 39 squadrons were available for the 59 divisions of the B.E.F. The duties of these small parties of mounted men, operating often in small troop or patrol sized units, were un-glamorous but constant, keeping the advancing infantry in touch with the enemy. There is not space in this study to provide the detail of all these small operations, and many have been thoroughly described in Preston’s exhaustive account in the *Cavalry Journal*,¹³⁸ however his conclusions are instructive:

There can, however, be no doubt that the decision to break up one cavalry division was the only wise one under the circumstances. Some people might think that *army* cavalry was a luxury, but in September 1918 *divisional* cavalry was clearly a necessity. Once the final British advance began, infantry divisional commanders and brigadiers needed mounted men almost every day.¹³⁹

Little can be said against this, the squadrons had to go; if any blame is to be apportioned it should fall on Henry Wilson who in 1917 had dismounted the troops whom these men replaced. Unfortunately as a consequence it left the Cavalry Corps

pitifully weak. Haig still clung to his view that a moment would come for the cavalry. He had already tried to bolster its strength with the addition of 4th (Guards) Brigade infantry in buses, as well as additional motor machine-gun batteries “with the object of exploiting the situation which I hope will arise after we get the Marquion – Canal du Nord line.”¹⁴⁰ Interestingly the attachment of infantry in buses to the cavalry, rather than being an innovation of 1918, can be seen in Haig’s plan for Loos in 1915, discussed in chapter 2, showing the continuity of thinking of the C.-in-C. if not of the wider Cavalry Corps. Even with these additions a force of six cavalry (and one infantry) brigades on the whole front of the B.E.F. was never going to be decisive. Preston made the rather telling comparison with the forces under Allenby in Palestine, where the impact of mounted troops was undeniable:

Sir Edmund Allenby had 4 cavalry divisions to 7 infantry divisions, as compared with Sir Douglas Haig’s 3 cavalry divisions to 59 infantry divisions, and the strength of the hostile forces in each case is even more significant; the Turks had only 3,000 sabres and 32,000 rifles - equivalent to 1 cavalry and 4 infantry divisions – whereas on September 25th 1918 the Germans had no less than 71 divisions opposite the British.¹⁴¹

In the light of these figures the Cavalry Corps, however effective it might be on a local level, was becoming strategically somewhat irrelevant.

As the force shrank Haig became ever more guarded about its use, commenting on 6 September “I do not propose to employ the Cavalry Corps until I judge the situation favourable for obtaining decisive results.”¹⁴² Meanwhile the Corps would be withdrawn for training to prepare them for such a day. A large scale ‘Scheme’ was carried out by the Cavalry Corps on 17 September, based on exploitation of a collapse of organised enemy defences. Haig rode out in person to observe this exercise and wrote a lengthy critique of its results to be circulated to regimental commanders and above.¹⁴³ The time taken out of the Commander-in-Chief’s schedule for this kind of micro-management is not beyond criticism, but it clearly demonstrates his continuing aspirations for the Corps. Home’s view on the matter was more sanguine: “I hate these Schemes. They are so much more difficult to arrange than actual fighting.” However, “...the Chief enjoyed his day with the Cavalry. It was luckily a fine warm day and that has a great deal to do with the tempers of the great.”¹⁴⁴

Mobile Columns – Mobile Warfare?

When the dispersal of 2nd Cavalry Division, and Haig's conflicting ambitions for a unified cavalry force are considered, these must be placed in the context of the pattern of fighting which had developed by 1918. Haig clearly believed that the B.E.F. was on the cusp of a significant change, from the trench warfare familiar up to that point, to a flowing, *mobile* battle, pursuing a defeated and demoralised enemy. It has become a pattern among scholars to identify a period starting with Amiens on 8 August when this new warfare took place, and indeed the term 'The Hundred Days', has been borrowed from its original context describing the Waterloo campaign of 1815, to cover the three and a half months between Amiens and the Armistice on 11 November. Edmonds suggests that this term was current as early as 1919, when Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd published *The Story of the Fourth Army in the 'Battle of the Hundred Days', August 8th to November 11th 1918*.¹⁴⁵ However, the question must be asked to what extent the combat of this period was significantly different from that which had passed before, and if so what brought this about?

It is true that from Amiens onwards the B.E.F. was consistently successful, and the battle-front was more 'mobile' than it had been for years, however while a series of victorious attacks moved the armies across France, the character of each of these attacks was not dissimilar to those which had gone before. The presence of the former battlefields of 1916 and 1917 and their influence has been discussed already, and it is possible to divide the 'Hundred Days' into two phases, the fighting up to and through the Hindenburg Line from August to the end of September, and a more mobile phase after that. Sheffield considered these 'first fifty days' and observed:

In spite of the dramatic nature of the initial advance, the Battle of Amiens in many respects followed the pattern of previous battles. Like the first day of Arras, initial success became more difficult to exploit as impetus ran down on subsequent days and resistance grew stronger.¹⁴⁶

He further describes the B.E.F. "...sequencing a series of shallow battles rather than persevering with futile attempts to fight deep battles of penetration."¹⁴⁷ This presents a vision of fighting methods and conditions which are very similar to what had gone

before. The difference being that the 'learning curve'¹⁴⁸ which the British forces had followed had refined their approach to battle to the degree that, in combination with an equivalent decline in German resources and fighting quality, local victories could be achieved. Looking specifically at the cavalry, a direct tactical lineage can be traced between what the Cavalry Corps achieved in August 1918, and what it strove towards at Arras and Cambrai (with the varying amounts of success discussed in earlier chapters). While it has been argued in this chapter that the cavalry played a valuable rôle in the Battle of Amiens, this was not necessarily because the nature of the fighting had fundamentally changed, (compared with Arras or Cambrai) but that the cavalry had developed their skills within the existing context.

This leaves the second 'fifty days' after the breaking of the Hindenburg line, the period which many have seen as the period of true 'open warfare'. Again the change in the nature of the fighting seems to have been anticipated more than realised. Haig held his remaining cavalry divisions in readiness for their great exploitation manoeuvre, but in the event only committed them to action once, on 8-9 October, a battle which was a significant success for the cavalry (discussed in the next section) but not the crushing blow to a defeated enemy which he might have anticipated. Kavanagh was asked by Haig in 1919 to sum up his thoughts on this period. Kavanagh in reply described a situation:

(b) When after continued defeats the enemy's morale is so lowered that he is ripe for the action of masses of cavalry.

However, he went on:

The situation described in (b) had been arrived at on the morning of the Armistice, and two cavalry divisions were on the march east of the Scheldt, when orders were received to stop them.¹⁴⁹

Apparently in the eyes of the G.O.C. Cavalry Corps, the moment which Haig had been waiting for did not arise until the last moments of the conflict, by which time, (perhaps recognising that fact) the Germans had given in. Indeed a week before the armistice Haig offered use of the Cavalry Corps to both Generals Byng and Rawlinson (commanding Third and Fourth Armies respectively) and both declined the offer,¹⁵⁰ despite the fact that both had shown themselves amenable to the use of cavalry in the past.

Another development during 1918 which some scholars have viewed as a key indicator of the changing nature of the fighting is the ‘all-arms mobile force’, what Griffith called with some hyperbole the “Cavalry brigade battle group”.¹⁵¹ Cavalry had been co-operating successfully with armoured cars, and indeed their own integral brigade level machine-guns and artillery since 1916, and co-operated successfully with cyclists at Arras in 1917, however attention has focussed on the creation in 1918 of *ad-hoc* all-arms forces including truck borne infantry and mortars, as well as cyclists. Thus the character and performance of these forces requires examination.

The first instance of the formation of such a unit in 1918 was ‘Brutinels independent Force’ assembled for the Amiens battle of 8 August.¹⁵² This force did not include any cavalry, consisting of motor machine-guns, cyclists, and truck mounted trench-mortars, nor was it particularly flexible, being essentially tied by its wheeled vehicles to the Amiens – Roye road which was its line of advance. Its ‘independence’ was also questionable, the unit was not intended to penetrate deeply into the German position, but rather to run up and down the road acting as a flank-guard to the Canadian Corps to the north. Its rôle was therefore a strictly limited one, of a specialist character, rather than a step towards genuine mobile warfare.

At the start of September the same commander was called upon to lead a similar force during the assault on the Drocourt-Quèant or ‘D-Q’ line, part of the ‘Hindenburg’ system of defences. The Canadian Corps, part of First Army, was to attack this defensive system on 2 September, with an axis of advance along the Arras-Cambrai road. In addition to the D-Q defences themselves the possibility existed of achieving a bridgehead across the Canal du Nord, where the road crossed the canal some 6km (four miles) beyond the German front lines. Using the road as a line of advance, a plan was developed for a force consisting of two motor machine gun brigades, an artillery battery, a cyclist battalion, and trench-mortars in motor-lorries, to push through the main infantry attack and drive on down the road to the canal at Marquion. This time the force would be accompanied by two regiments of cavalry; 10th Hussars from 6th Cavalry Brigade, and the Canadian corps cavalry; the Canadian Light Horse, along with a section of 6th Machine-gun Squadron.¹⁵³

The cavalry portion of the force included O.C. 10th Hussars, Lt. Col. Whitmore (encountered previously in Chapter 3 at Monchy in 1917). He provided a scathing

critique of this operation in the *Cavalry Journal* in 1925.¹⁵⁴ Whitmore points out that as the column was likely to pass beyond the infantry, into the area bombarded by its supporting artillery, a corridor was left 1000 yards (950m) wide astride the road which was excluded from the Allied creeping barrage. It was down this 'cylindrical funnel' that the force would advance. As he explained, his difficulties were manifold:

If he [the force commander] deviates more than 500 yards on either side of his centre of advance he comes under the bombardment of the artillery, both heavy and light, of his own attacking corps. His area of operations is certain to be bombarded by the enemy holding the crossings in front of him. He has no opportunity of disposing his horses when a dismounted attack on the canal crossing becomes necessary. And the road by which he has advanced has by now become seriously obstructed by all conditions of traffic which necessarily follows in the wake of a successful attack.¹⁵⁵

Fortunately for Whitmore and his men, the fighting on this attack front remained too heavy all day for the force to advance, and the Germans withdrew behind the canal overnight on 2-3 September, hence their services were not required. What would have become of them had this foolhardy scheme been attempted is not pleasant to contemplate.

Thus the assembly of a 'mobile force' by optimistic operational planners did not necessarily imply a realistic prospect of 'mobile warfare' actually taking place. Merely assembling the troops does not automatically predicate the appropriate conditions for their employment. It is arguable that Haig, as so often in the past, laid out a vision of a mobile war of pursuit, but that this never really came about. At the same time a series of battles were fought, conducted in a style which had much in common with offensives of the preceding years. However, the increasing success, and quickening tempo of what were in fact 'Bite and Hold' battles, led to the impression, both among his subordinate commanders, and among later scholars, that a truly 'mobile' phase of the war had arrived. Much of the success of this process was due to the B.E.F.'s ability in 1918 to equip and supply repeated large scale attacks on different parts of the front only days apart, instead of the months of logistical build-up which would have been required earlier in the war. However even this successful attacking cycle could only be maintained at a certain level. It is arguable that had a German collapse such as Haig

envisioned actually taken place, the Allied logistical effort, which was stretched almost to breaking point already by the existing speed of advance, would have been unable to cope with a faster movement.¹⁵⁶

The presence on the battlefield at Amiens, and again in October, of the Cavalry Corps has also contributed to the impression of a 'new' character of the fighting. For many observers this is a clear indicator of a change in the nature of the war, given that in previous years their participation was presumed to be impossible. This study has argued that the latter impression is wrong, and that mounted troops had a legitimate place in the fighting of 1916 and 1917. Thus no wholesale change in the character of the fighting was required for the Cavalry Corps to be successfully involved in 1918. Travers has criticised the high command of the B.E.F. in 1918 for not embracing what he sees as a technological alternative to the 'Semi-traditional forms of warfare'¹⁵⁷ carried on in 1918. He vastly overstates the potential of the available technology as an alternative, but his stress on the continuity (or 'tradition') supports the idea of a continuum between the fighting of 1918 and what went before.

Much of this debate over the character of the war, and the nature of offensive tactics has focussed at a high level, in the ambitions of Haig and his Army commanders. At the same time, however the war was being fought and won at a lower command level. The nature of the German defence allowed attacks to be carried out not only at corps and army level, but also by individual divisions and even brigades. This type of attack when carried out in 1916 or 1917 has rightly been criticised, but in 1918 it was a key part of keeping the pressure on the retreating German forces. It has been argued¹⁵⁸ that the 'mobile' character of the war is evident at this level, whether or not it is apparent in large scale set piece attacks.

For example in early October the 55th (West Lancashire) Division formed all-arms advanced guards in its infantry brigades "so as to follow up rapidly should any considerable retirement of the enemy take place."¹⁵⁹ Each infantry brigade in the division was allocated an 18pdr battery and a machine-gun company as well as trench mortars on G.S. wagons, and medical and engineer units. Cavalry was included in each force from the corps cavalry regiment, but this consisted only of a Section; i.e. a Corporal's patrol of 8 men, hardly a battle-winning number of mounted troops. This

force would be unleashed on the enemy when a suitable moment arrived by the issuing of a “Scurry’ telegram”. However:

As events turned out, the method of withdrawal of the enemy did not enable the Corps to issue any definite order for an advance at a particular time, and consequently the “Scurry” telegram was never issued from Divisional HQ.¹⁶⁰

Thus even at this lower level of command, while the expectation of a mobile battle had trickled down from above, this did not necessarily translate into actual mobile fighting.

Nonetheless, a study both of Preston’s account of 1918 in the *Cavalry Journal*¹⁶¹ or of individual regimental histories¹⁶² does show these small forces of cavalry in daily contact with the enemy, in a way which was not the case earlier in the war. There is no doubt that cavalry troops were able to fulfil in 1918 a rôle which had been a traditional part of their duties for several hundred years and had only fallen out of use since 1915; that of reconnaissance. It was in reconnaissance, as well as despatch riding, and prisoner control, that the regiments of Cavalry dispersed as corps troops in August 1918 earned their keep. The German withdrawal meant that each time they broke contact with the advancing British troops their new positions had to be identified before an attack could be developed.

Good intelligence and communications are a vital part of military operations. Thus the rôle of the cavalry as reconnaissance troops was a vital one and should not be underestimated. It is not the same, however, as the use of mounted soldiers in the actual assault on those enemy positions or in the exploitation of any success. Once the latest German rearguards had been located, the assault upon them was typically an infantry and artillery affair. Indeed even if the local commanders had wanted to include horsemen in their plans of attack the cavalry were simply not there in sufficient numbers. A regiment of cavalry per infantry corps equates to a squadron per division, and a troop (30 or so men) per infantry brigade. Deduct those engaged on communications duties and prisoner escort, and each infantry brigade commander was left with little more than a handful of cavalymen, under the charge of a junior NCO.

This scarcity of ‘mobile’ resources was not limited to the cavalry. Griffith has successfully demonstrated that as the front of attack widened to incorporate the whole of the B.E.F. in 1918 the number of tanks available to any one division was pitifully small, and attacks were typically mounted without tank support.¹⁶³ Thus far from

commanders spurning these mobile options, the 'semi-traditional' infantry/artillery battle which Travers criticises, was forced upon the B.E.F. by the unprecedented scale of the fighting.

The Last Hurrah: 9 October 1918

(Figure 5.4 overleaf)

The mounted soldiers distributed along the front as corps and divisional cavalry continued to be in action almost daily until the moment of the armistice (and in some cases for a few hours after it), however only one opportunity arose for large scale cavalry action. This was during the 'Second Battle of Le Cateau' between 8 and 10 October. By the beginning of October the B.E.F. had penetrated the last of the significant German defences. The assault of 29 September had carried Fourth Army through the main 'Hindenburg' defence line, (memorably with the assault of 46th Division across the St Quentin Canal at Riqueval,) and continuing attacks up to 5 October overcame the supporting 'Hindenburg Support' and 'Beaurevoir' lines.¹⁶⁴ Haig's 'Second Phase' of the campaign, that beyond the formal trench lines, was potentially about to begin.¹⁶⁵

By 5 October Fourth Army occupied a line facing broadly north-east, about 10km (6 miles) beyond the line of the St Quentin Canal, and beyond the recently captured villages of Beaurevoir and Montbrehain. Their axis of advance followed a Roman road which branched off the St Quentin to Cambrai road at Riqueval then ran straight north-east, passing just to the north of Le Cateau 20km (twelve miles) from the front line of 5 October, and ultimately on to Mauberge and Mons. On 5 October Gen. Rawlinson issued orders for an attack by three Corps; IX, II American and XIII, astride the road, with the objective of a line through the villages of Serain and Premont. The attack would be on a front of approximately 12km (eight miles) with infantry objectives around 6km (four miles) into the German position.¹⁶⁶ The Cavalry corps was tasked with exploitation beyond the infantry objective line, potentially as far as Le Cateau, but specifically as far as the railway station and junction at Busigny, approximately 10km (six miles) beyond the infantry start line. The cavalry attack would be made initially by 1st Cavalry Division with 3rd Cavalry Division in support. The order to advance would

rest with the Corps Commander, Kavanagh, a retrograde step in command and control, compared with the automatic advance at Amiens, but unlike on previous occasions, he placed himself at the forward Headquarters of 1st Cavalry Division early in the battle so as to be well placed to judge the moment to move.¹⁶⁷

Starting at 5.10am, the infantry assault was initially successful. Fighting for the objective villages of Premont and Serain was reported to 1st Cavalry Division Headquarters by 9.00am and in response to this the lead brigade (9th Cavalry Brigade) of 1st Cavalry Division was sent up to try to get through between the two villages.¹⁶⁸ This advance was described by the historian of the 15th Hussars:

...the countryside presented an attractive appearance. The broad belt of destroyed and devastated areas had now been left behind, and stretched out to view lay the rolling highly cultivated countryside of agricultural France, untouched by war since 1914. ...

Nevertheless this peaceful prospect was deceitful, for the German retreat was not by any means disorganised, and the rearguards were most skilfully placed¹⁶⁹

The lead regiment, 19th Hussars rapidly encountered heavy fire. Kavanagh characteristically ordered the division to push on in strength, but Maj. Gen. Mullens, commanding 1st Cavalry Division made his own reconnaissance and determined that "...there were no signs of a disorganised retreat, and considerable resistance from both machine gun and artillery had been met with..."¹⁷⁰ He therefore pushed his two remaining brigades out to either flank to try to find a way around the two villages.

The period from 11.00am to around 2.00pm was filled by a series of increasingly desperate efforts by the three cavalry brigades to get forward, but without success. This included a number of relatively costly and ultimately unsuccessful mounted attacks on German machine-gun and artillery positions. Two troops of 19th Hussars did succeed to the south of the villages in capturing a battery of field guns at the point of the sword, but in so doing took so many casualties that, realising their weakness, their erstwhile prisoners turned on them with hand-grenades and the cavalymen were driven off with further casualties.¹⁷¹ One of the fatalities was Lt. Col. Franks, who had led the regiment since 1915, all of the officers who accompanied him in the attack also became casualties. The event was described by Sqn. Sgt. Maj. Brunton of 'C' Squadron:

The charge was sounded, squadrons rapidly formed into line, and away we went hell for leather; it was a mad ride through shell fire. We rode clean through the guns, killing many gunners by the sword. Those that were spared bombed us as we passed through.¹⁷²

Nor were casualties among the cavalry restricted to those charging artillery batteries, German aerial bombing was also a problem, particularly where the cavalry were forced to dismount, as led horses made a tempting target and could make no reply if attacked.¹⁷³

By mid afternoon, Rawlinson decided that the infantry attack by XIII and II American Corps' infantry should be renewed, and the cavalry were withdrawn in readiness to support this attack, however by 4.00pm it became apparent that this renewed assault would have to wait until the following day. Water supply was also becoming a significant problem, so the cavalry divisions were withdrawn west of Beurevoir overnight. Even after this withdrawal the Corps continued to be troubled by German aerial bombing, which caused several casualties.¹⁷⁴ Preston argued that this intensive bombing of the cavalry was a specific German tactic born of their fear of the potential of the Corps, but he offers no evidence of this from the German side.¹⁷⁵

8 October cannot be considered a particularly successful day for the cavalry. The German defences had not deteriorated to the degree seen on 8 August, allowing freedom of movement within and behind their lines, and their careful positioning of machine guns and artillery, combined with close air support show that they were by no means a spent force. Preston excuses this by arguing that the cavalry corps and divisional commanders were mindful of Haig's strictures on keeping the corps intact, and that they were thus less aggressive than they might have been. He describes the 1st Cavalry Division casualties (at around 200) as "light" and further argues that "... the principle [was] accepted that, in the attack, reserves should be used to exploit a success rather than redeem a failure; and that if there was no success it was better to admit it and try again another day in another way."¹⁷⁶ These two observations are hard to reconcile with the evidence of the *War Diaries*; clearly 19th Hussars sustained significant losses around Serain and Premont. Also, far from finding 'another way' Kavanagh responded to the news that they were held up by ordering Mullens "to push on to Marez in force."¹⁷⁷ (i.e. straight up the Roman road) with the remainder of the division, clearly attempting

precisely to 'redeem a failure'. Fortunately Mullens chose a liberal interpretation of this order, throwing 1st and 2nd Cavalry Brigades out to the flanks, albeit without making any greater progress.

The following day was more successful. Having ended the day on 8 October on a line through the villages of Premont and Serain, Fourth Army repeated the attack on 9 October. The infantry objectives this time were to be the villages of Marez, and then Honnechy and Maurois, representing an infantry advance of another 8km (five miles) along the Le Cateau road. The attack on this part of the front was to be carried out by XIII Corps and supported by the Cavalry Corps which would once again seek to exploit towards and beyond Le Cateau.¹⁷⁸ As 1st Cavalry Division had borne the brunt of the fighting the day before, the two cavalry divisions were exchanged, and 3^d Cavalry Division would lead the advance with 7th Cavalry Brigade as advanced guard, keeping in close touch with the infantry.¹⁷⁹

After a 5.20am start in thick mist, the infantry once again made rapid progress. The Headquarters of 3^d Cavalry Division received word at 8.45am that the infantry had taken the village of Marez, (an advance of about 4km (two and a half miles)) and that "...touch with retreating enemy had been temporarily lost."¹⁸⁰ Clearly an opportunity presented itself for the cavalry which had not arisen the day before. In response to this Maj. Gen. Harman, commanding 3^d Cavalry Division ordered an advance. The lead brigade, 7th Cavalry Brigade had been broken up into patrols and spread along the front in contact with the infantry. It would take time to reform this brigade as a striking force. Harman therefore ordered the two remaining brigades to leapfrog through the advanced guard brigade and the infantry and push on towards Le Cateau; 6th Cavalry Brigade on the southern side of the main axial road and Canadian Cavalry Brigade to the north.

First into action were the Canadians. The leading regiment, the Fort Garry Horse reached the limit of the infantry advance to the northeast of Marez, at about 9.30am. The infantry was held up by significant German machine-gun fire from the edge of the bois de Gattigny, about one mile (1.6km) ahead. The Machine guns accompanying the Fort Garry Horse, and the four guns of 'A' battery R.C.H.A. were quickly brought into action against the edge of the wood, and at about 11.00am a mounted attack was launched, one troop of Fort Garry Horse attacking frontally while a further four troops swung left and entered the woods from the west. The frontal attack was extremely

costly "... most of the troop became casualties." But the flanking attack succeeded in clearing the wood "... killing a great number of the enemy with the sword."¹⁸¹ Around 200 prisoners were captured, along with a 5.9" howitzer, an anti-tank rifle, a trench mortar, and around 40 machine-guns,¹⁸² many of the latter abandoned in the face of the frontal charge.

While this attack was in progress Lord Strathcona's Horse had extended the left of the Fort Garry Horse in a wide flanking move around the northern end of the bois de Gattigny pushing on towards and to the south of the village of Bertry and capturing further prisoners; a party of 30 fleeing from the Fort Garry attack to the south, and a further group of 45 who were successfully charged by one squadron of L.S.H. in a line of rifle pits north of the wood.¹⁸³ By midday the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was within striking distance of, (and taking machine-gun fire from) the villages of Maurois and Honnechy, astride the Le Cateau road, the original infantry objectives.

To the south of the main road, 6th Cavalry Brigade had joined the leading infantry on a line close to the railway south-west of (and short of) Honnechy by about 11.00am, however heavy fire was encountered from the village at that point and the infantry attack had stalled. The brigade commander, Ewing Paterson, made his own reconnaissance at about 11.30am to be told that the infantry "... were so exhausted and the resistance so strong that it was not intended to advance further that day."¹⁸⁴ At about 11.50am a conference was held of all the senior cavalry commanders, Kavanagh was present along with Gen. Harman, commanding 3rd Cavalry Division, as well as Brigadiers E. Paterson (6th C.B.) and R.W. Paterson (Canadian C.B.).¹⁸⁵ It was decided that "... a vigorous attempt should be made to capture Honnechy and Reumont [the next village a further mile (1.6km) up the road] or the whole advance would peter out."¹⁸⁶ The plan required a frontal attack on Honnechy by the Royal Dragoons and 10th Hussars, while 3rd Dragoon Guards circled the village to the south, and the Fort Garry Horse attacked from the north. The flanks would be protected by the remainder of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade to the north, and by the Inniskilling Dragoons to the south, borrowed from 7th Cavalry Brigade for the purpose. The attack was timed for 2.00pm, at which time the infantry attack would also be renewed.

As the commander of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade returned to his headquarters he discovered that in fact the northern village, Maurois, had already fallen to an attack by

two troops of the Fort Garry Horse.¹⁸⁷ Thus when the divisional attack began at 2.00pm the Royal Dragoons were able to pass to the north of Maurois, (which masked them from Honnechy, which was still in German hands) and push on towards Reumont, re-crossing the Roman road and taking up a position to the south-east of the village, while the Canadians encircled it from the north. The German garrison of Reumont withdrew, but a number were captured before they could escape, the Fort Garry Horse also “...killing a number of the enemy with the sword,”¹⁸⁸ no doubt those who did not surrender with sufficient alacrity.

Meanwhile to the south, 3rd Dragoon Guards moved around Honnechy to attack the village from the south-east. They were under heavy fire from their flank and rear (despite the efforts of the Inniskillings to provide flank protection) and had to close up to pass under the embanked railway line via a bridge over the Honnechy-Busigny road. They soon opened out again and approached the village at a gallop. The attack was a rapid success, Honnechy was occupied by 2.40pm,¹⁸⁹ and infantry of XIII Corps followed the Dragoons in and were able to complete the clearance of the village shortly after.

Thus by about 3.00pm the 3rd Cavalry Division occupied a line facing north-east from south of Reumont across the road and as far north as Troisvilles (captured earlier by Lord Strathcona’s Horse). At about this time word was received via Fourth Army that German units retreating from the fighting opposite Third Army to the north were passing across the front of the cavalry on the Inchy to Le Cateau road. This traffic was brought under artillery fire by a battery of 4.5” howitzers attached to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade as well as their own R.C.H.A. guns.¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile 6th Cavalry Brigade was ordered to advance on Le Cateau and cut the roads leading out of the town. Unfortunately most of this brigade were dismounted holding positions south of Reumont and the strength of the opposition ahead of them made any further advance impossible. The plan was therefore revised to send the Canadians forward north of the Roman road, supported by 7th Cavalry Brigade.¹⁹¹

The Canadians advanced at about 5.00pm and in fading light Lord Strathcona’s Horse established a line of posts cutting the road from Inchy along a front facing north-west from Troisvilles to above Neuville. On their right the Royal Canadian Dragoons, hardly engaged so far that day, pushed forward to the high ground overlooking the river Selle.

The lack of progress of 6th Cavalry Division south of the Roman road meant that the Fort Garry Horse had to form another defensive flank on the right along the line of the road overlooking Le Cateau. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was thus strung out in an elongated rectangle with one regiment on each of three faces. These posts were to be held until daylight on 10 October when the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was relieved and 7th Cavalry Brigade took over the positions.¹⁹²

The high ground overlooking the river Selle, and the villages of Montay and Neuville was the limit of the cavalry advance. Orders were issued for 7th Cavalry Brigade to push on across the river on 10 October, but advancing patrols soon came under heavy fire and it was apparent that the Germans had consolidated their positions on the far bank. Gen. Kavanagh recalled both Cavalry Divisions into reserve in the course of the day and they took no further significant part in the fighting.¹⁹³ In fact such was the strength of the German position that it was to be a week before Fourth Army renewed its attack, by which time artillery had been brought forward and a new set-piece assault prepared.¹⁹⁴

9 October was clearly much more successful from a cavalry point of view than the day before. The 3rd Cavalry Division had advanced about 14km (eight miles) from the infantry start line on a front of about 5km (three miles) and over 400 prisoners had been captured, along with over 100 machine guns, and various field pieces, trench mortars and other equipment. Furthermore the rapidity of their retreat had prevented the Germans from carrying out their routine destruction of the abandoned villages, a fact which if not of great significance to the advancing Fourth Army was certainly important to the local inhabitants.¹⁹⁵ Nonetheless it was on this day's fighting that Sir James Edmonds gave his widely quoted verdict that "...the cavalry had done nothing that the infantry, with artillery support and cyclists, could not have done for itself at less cost;"¹⁹⁶

This remark has gained such wide currency that it deserves detailed examination, and it can be challenged on a number of points. If the infantry advances of each day, 8 and 9 October are measured, both show an advance of around 6km (four miles). Although the cavalry was not able to progress on 8 October it was able to get forward about 13km (8 miles) on 9th. In each case the infantry attack was launched at around 5.00am and by about 9.00am had more or less run out of steam; references occur in the *War Diaries* to the 'exhaustion' of the infantry. It is no coincidence that the range of an 18lb field piece

was around 6,500 yards – 6km (four miles).¹⁹⁷ It is thus probably fair to say that a set piece infantry attack had the potential only to get forward as far as the reach of its barrage, or about 7-8 km (5 miles) at most. A hiatus would then occur at which point either the German defence was sufficiently dislocated to allow cavalry to push through as on 9 October and effectively ‘double’ the gains made, or alternatively the Germans continued to resist to the point that a renewed set-piece was required. Edmonds’ assertion that infantry could have pushed on a further 8km (five miles) without cavalry assistance is deeply questionable. Also, his qualification that the infantry could do so ‘with artillery support’ misses the essential point that beyond the range of the guns firing from behind the start line, that artillery support was very difficult to provide. The presence of the cavalry was thus arguably an important element which could ‘add value’ to an attack by increasing the gains made beyond what was possible with infantry alone.¹⁹⁸ That this was not possible every time does not detract from its usefulness on the occasions when an additional advance was possible.

Whether or not the infantry could have made similar gains ‘at less cost’ is also open to question. In addition to the approximately 200 casualties in 1st Cavalry Division on 8 October, 3rd Cavalry Division suffered a further 395 human casualties on 9 October.¹⁹⁹ This represents an average of 300 per division over both days, a figure remarkably similar to that suffered in the Amiens fighting of 8 August. No detailed infantry loss figures for these two days have been identified, but that the infantry would have done better in terms of casualties is unlikely.

It has also been argued that after the “heavy defeat”²⁰⁰ of 8 October the German army planned to re-establish a defence behind the river Selle and that on the 9th “only weak rearguards faced the Allied forces.”²⁰¹ Many of the defenders withdrew overnight on 8/9 October to occupy the ‘Hermann’ position beyond the river, and only ‘defended localities’ remained facing the XIII corps and the cavalry the next day.²⁰² There is no doubt that the cavalry found their advance on the 9th possible in a way that it had not been the day before. However it is equally true that those rearguards were strong enough to require a significant set-piece infantry attack, and as just discussed, the potential depth of that attack was limited; only by the use of cavalry was it possible to bring the Fourth Army into a position to challenge the new defences along the Selle within 24 hours, albeit that these were not formally attacked until some days later.

Contact with, and pressure on the enemy was thus maintained in a way which would not have been possible without mounted forces.

1918 in Retrospect

Preston concluded his study of 1918 thus :

It may or may not be true to say that we should have defeated the Germans just the same in the autumn of 1918 even without our cavalry. But it is certainly true that, had it not been for that same cavalry, there would have been no autumn advance at all for the Germans would have defeated us in the spring.²⁰³

He was clear that the rôle played by the cavalry in defence in March was crucial, but that later on its importance was more arguable. The success or failure of the German March offensive was at times finely balanced, and probably hung on a range of factors any one of which might be seen as critical. No doubt the part played by the cavalry was important. However it was equally the case that the cavalry was quite badly handled, both in terms of its dismounting at a vital point in the battle, and also in the tactics applied by Seely at Moreuil wood. Thus while the troops themselves deserve a great deal of credit, that owing to their leaders is rather less.

In August 1918 there seems to have been, at some levels within the B.E.F. at least, a full appreciation of what cavalry could do and how to integrate them into the developing all-arms battle. Amiens on 8 August was a model example of how to integrate mounted forces into a set piece attack and get the best out of them. Much of the credit for this falls ironically to Rawlinson, who in the past had not seemed keen to embrace the potential of cavalry. Both the design of the infantry attack on 8 August, and the rôle allocated to the cavalry, also show a clear continuity with the battles of 1917, lessons appear to have been learned and tactics developed which proved highly successful on the day. The 9 October fighting showed that this was not an isolated episode, but that a system had been developed whereby the limited progress achievable by a well executed infantry attack could be significantly expanded upon by well handled cavalry. In short while ultimate 'breakthrough' was never at issue, a five-mile gain could be converted into a ten-mile gain by the well timed intervention of mounted troops. Unfortunately the

wider ambitions of Haig, and the ammunition this provided for his critics, has meant that this tactical achievement has largely been neglected.

After Amiens, however, the ever widening extent of the offensive, and its increasing tempo of attacks meant that the small number of horsemen available to the B.E.F. was never going to be more than an occasional presence in what continued to be an infantry and artillery fight. The proportion of cavalymen in the manpower of the B.E.F. in France and Belgium on 11 November 1918 is recorded in official statistics as 0.56% of the total force, or 0.77% of the combatant strength (this latter figure compares with 58.19% for the infantry, or more comparably 0.62% for cyclists).²⁰⁴ Haig's constant campaigning to retain any cavalymen he could was laudable insofar as more mounted troops would no doubt have been useful, but was ultimately based on a false premise. He continued, as he had since 1916, to believe in a day when the German defences would be broken to the extent that an independent force of cavalry could sweep through and create havoc in their rear areas. This day never came. Thus he was doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. There is little evidence that he ever truly recognised the tactical function of cavalry *within* the German defensive systems, and in co-operation with other arms, preferring still to see them as an independent exploitation force.

The degree to which the fighting ever evolved into the 'mobile' or 'semi-mobile' warfare advocated by some historians is also questionable. Various all-arms columns were assembled, no doubt following the urgings of the Commander-in-Chief, but there is little evidence of actual combat by these forces. Certainly the value of both cavalry, and armoured cars or motor machine gunners grew as the year progressed, but this was essentially in the rôle of reconnaissance units. The set-piece fighting still remained the domain of the infantry and guns, with the occasional assistance of a few tanks, if for no other reason than that too few cavalry were available.

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Themes of this study

A series of questions were raised at the outset of this study (Chapter 1) concerning the performance of the British and Dominion cavalry on the Western Front during the period 1916-1918. This time-frame was chosen because it was thought to represent the part of the struggle when 'trench warfare' was most fully developed, and that an examination of the rôle of cavalry in that theatre and period would go to the heart of the debate on the usefulness of the arm in the war as a whole. Four principal questions were asked:

- How 'effective' was the cavalry on the battlefield of 1916-1918? This question concerns the ability of mounted troops to survive in the environment created by modern artillery and machine-guns, their ability to move around the battlefield, and crucially their ability to inflict casualties on, and demoralize their opponents at a tactical level.
- How did the arm evolve? Much has been made of the changes in equipment and doctrine amongst other arms in the B.E.F. The question arises to what extent the cavalry changed its approach to the fighting in line with the wider changes in the nature of the war.
- How well led was the Cavalry? Questions of Command, Control, and Communications ("C3") are key to understanding the way in which the First World War was fought. They are equally key to any assessment of the rôle of the cavalry.
- How did the cavalry interact with new technology and Tanks in particular? History has not been kind to the cavalry in this regard, but the truth of the matter is a lot less clear cut than it has suited many historians to believe.

The conclusions drawn from the four case studies forming the main body of this thesis are summarised below in relation to each of these questions. In addition a fifth larger question is also addressed, this is the overall 'success' of the cavalry, the extent to which they were able to achieve at an operational level the tasks set out for them, or

whether despite being tactically effective, the limitations of command and control prevented them from fulfilling their true potential.

Tactical Effectiveness

It is clear from all the operations studied in this thesis that the cavalry were effective in combat at a tactical level, in spite of the prevailing conditions of the battlefield (or as effective as their infantry counterparts, at any rate). The first factor in their favour was their mobility. It has been shown on a number of occasions that the premise that the cavalry were incapable of moving around on the battlefields of the Western Front is simply false. Barbed wire and shell holes, while a challenge, were not an insurmountable obstacle, and the character of the battlefield did not in and of itself prevent the cavalry from participating in the fighting. A good deal of effort had to be put into the preparation of cavalry tracks, and in forward planning, but this was no more or less of a problem for the cavalry than it was for other arms. Indeed the Tank Corps, supposedly the solution to the problem of trenches and barbed wire, arguably never reached a degree of mobility comparable to the cavalry. Thus the battlefield was not necessarily any more hostile an environment for a horseman than for any other soldier. It has also been argued that the character of this battlefield evolved as the war progressed, and far from becoming more hostile, actually created ever greater opportunities for cavalry action.

The analysis of the battle of 14 July 1916 in Chapter 2 clearly demonstrated the ability of mounted troops to move around the battlefield. Nor is there any evidence in later operations that ground was a significant constraint. At Cambrai in 1917, as discussed in Chapter 4 it was not the ground but command and control issues which delayed the cavalry advance. Amiens, and other battles in 1918 as discussed in Chapter 5 showed that when these command issues were at least partially resolved, the cavalry was able to move deep into the German positions and onto objectives beyond the immediate reach of the infantry.

The fighting at Monchy-le-Preux during the Arras battle, described in Chapter 3 also showed that the cavalry possessed a firepower capability disproportionate to their small

numbers due to the presence of large numbers of machine-guns, both the Vickers of the MGC(C) and the Hotchkiss guns integral to the regiments themselves. This firepower, combined with their mobility made the cavalry a potent force on the battlefield. Their ability to move ahead of the advancing infantry and to take and defend ground was demonstrated on a number of occasions. The combination of mobility and firepower has a very modern ring to it, but it excludes the third, and at least equally important tool at the disposal of a mounted soldier – shock action with cold steel. The ability of mounted troops to seize ground, and to hold it with rifle firepower and automatic weapons is a concept found more acceptable by those critical of the cavalry arm. It would be quite possible to accept all that has been argued for so far, while still holding on to the idea that shock, ie. cavalymen charging with sword or lance in hand, was nonetheless obsolete. For many writers the very idea of a soldier using cold steel from horseback stands as a metaphor for obsolescence; or as Badsey put it: “...as a touchstone of all that is reactionary, foolish, and futile.”¹ On some occasions mounted shock creeps into the narratives of these historians, but it is excused as somehow peculiar or exceptional. A. J. P. Taylor described the action of the 7th Dragoon Guards at High Wood as “...a sight unique on the Western Front.”² Similarly, while the earlier comments from Prior and Wilson concerning the cavalry at High Wood have already been examined in Chapter 2, they revisited the subject in their 2005 work *The Somme*:

Nevertheless they [7th Dragoon Guards] actually managed to spear sixteen Germans with their lances (certainly one of the strangest episodes in all the fighting on the Western Front and sixteen of the unluckiest victims)...³

The suggestion is that these events were so bizarre and unusual as to be of no account, a German soldier might equally live in fear of being struck by lightning. Traditionally also, ‘cavalry charges’ have been viewed as a feature of the fighting of 1914, and of the latter days of 1918, and as such, as indicators of the different character of the war during those periods. While this may have been the case in 1914, the evidence of 1916 and 1917 serves to undermine the supposed separate character of 1918. It is one of the themes of this study that there was a strong continuity between the style of warfare before and into 1918, and the evidence of shock combat further supports this.

This study has described not one or two but a whole series of episodes of shock action. Table 6.1 (overleaf) lists those occasions discussed in this study when a

significant force of cavalry (at least a squadron) attacked enemy forces and inflicted casualties with close quarter weapons, (sword, lance or revolver). This excludes occasions when the Germans fled as the cavalry approached and no contact was made, but does include occasions where although contact was reached, the cavalry were ultimately unsuccessful, as it is closing with cold steel, rather than holding ground which is at issue here.

Table 6.1: Occasions of Arme Blanche Combat 1916-18

Location	Date	Offensive/Operation
High Wood	July 1916	Somme
Gueudecourt	September 1916	”
Guyencourt	March 1917	Advance to Hindenburg Line
Saulcourt	March 1917	”
Villers Faucon	March 1917	”
Monchy-le-Preux	April 1917	Arras
La Folie Château	November 1917	Cambrai
Cantaing	November 1917	”
Noyelles	November 1917	”
Manières – Crevecoeur Road	November 1917	”
Catelet valley (‘Kildare Trench’)	December 1917	”
Collezy	March 1918	Operation ‘Michael’
Moreuil Wood	March 1918	”
Cayeux Wood	August 1918	Amiens
Harbonniers	August 1918	”
Vauvillers	August 1918	”
Premont	August 1918	”
Gattingny Wood	October 1918	2 nd Le Cateau
Honnechy	October 1918	”
Reumont	October 1918	”

Twenty separate fights are included. High Wood was far from unique, indeed the spread of these actions across almost all the major operations of the last three years of the war (with the exception of those around Ypres) shows that such combat was relatively commonplace, and certainly was not suicidal, as some have attempted to suggest. This is not to suggest that shock was always the best choice, the attack of the Inniskillings at Epehy during the German counter-attack at Cambrai is an example of a costly and hopeless failure. However, as has been explained this attack was forced on the local commanders from above, rather than being a tactic selected by the men on the spot. Their response to their orders on that day showed that regimental and brigade commanders at least, while happy to include the mounted charge in their portfolio of options, knew equally well when it was not appropriate.

The significant morale effect of sword-armed horsemen in rear areas should also not be underestimated. Several instances have been highlighted in earlier chapters where German forces were significantly demoralised by the prospect of being attacked at close quarters by horsemen, and fled or surrendered in consequence. The counter-balancing positive effect on Allied foot troops is also significant. Both at Arras, and at Amiens cavalry were cheered on their way by the infantry, creating the wider impression that the battle must be going well somewhere if they were advancing. The importance of the absence of cavalry from the German order of battle in March 1918, given the fragile morale of the retreating Allied troops, has also been discussed, and this no doubt stems from a fear, not that they might outflank, or shoot at the retreating troops, but that they would literally 'ride them down' with swords. Thus the 'arme blanche' was by no means obsolete, and the sword, like the bayonet, was simply one of an arsenal of weapons that included the machine gun, the rifle and the artillery shell.

The effectiveness of the cavalry was also enhanced by character of the soldiers within its ranks. To a much greater extent than was possible in the infantry, cavalry units were kept up to strength with experienced men (there were no 'New Army' cavalry regiments). Even in March 1918 the dissolution of the Yeomanry units in the Cavalry Corps and their re-posting into the regular regiments meant that the proportion of 'old soldiers' in these units was very high. Training for Haig's vision of independent operations behind the front, albeit on the German side of the line, also meant that these men were much more comfortable on a fluid battlefield. This was relevant defensively

in March 1918, as discussed in Chapter 5, as well as in attack. Cavalry soldiers were more used to extemporising defensive lines with their flanks un-supported, than were their infantry colleagues. A criticism of the cavalry discussed in the opening chapter of this study, was that trench warfare had left them tactically stale and inflexible, if anything in 1918 the reverse was true, it was their infantry counterparts who were most disconcerted by leaving the trenches.

Unfortunately, while disproportionate firepower, mobility, and where appropriate its shock capability, were critical to the effectiveness of cavalry, on various occasions, particularly in defence, the senior command managed to deny them each of these advantages. The lack of heavy artillery in the Cavalry Corps, (as well as other corps assets typical in infantry corps) has already been discussed. Both at Cambrai in 1917 (in Chapter 4), and in March 1918 (in chapter 5) this problem was exacerbated by the removal of R.H.A. batteries from the cavalry brigades at crucial moments, thus denying them what little integral artillery firepower they had. Machine-gun units were sometimes also detached. In spite of this the cavalry were expected to make infantry-style counter attacks without the support of any significant bombardment. These attacks, for example at Cambrai, were predictably costly and unsuccessful.

The premature dismounting of the cavalry in March 1918 and the removal of the horses many miles to the rear was also a mistake. Not only did this deny the Corps its vital mobility, which would have been a great asset in the fluid fighting of that period, it also had a further impact on its firepower. The cavalry were not equipped to transport their machine-guns, or more importantly supply them with ammunition without their horses. Thus the removal of the horses not only slowed the cavalry down radically it also left them with significantly less combat power. The dismounting of the cavalry also denied them their shock capability. The creation of ad-hoc mounted units in 1918, and the occasions when these were used in a shock rôle, such as at Collezy on 24 March, demonstrates that had there been more mounted troops available this tactic might well have proved more widely useful.

Evolution: The Learning Curve

The study of any aspect of the war between 1914 and 1918 rapidly reveals the evolving character of the war; each offensive and campaigning season was different from those which had preceded it. Scholars vary over the degree to which this evolution was a product of technological change, increasing expertise among the soldiers or their leaders, or even a blind ‘natural selection’ process. A key concept in the study of this process in the Allied armies is the idea of the ‘Learning curve’, the idea that the British army in particular learned gradually from its mistakes, and over time developed a highly effective, and indeed war-winning range of fighting techniques.

It is hard to see much evidence of evolution in the cavalry arm below brigade level. In fact what is quite striking is that the reverse appears to be true. As the war progressed the cavalry increasingly fell back on tactical methods that came straight from the pre-war pages of *Cavalry Training*. (This is discussed in Chapter 3.) This should not, however be regarded as a retrograde or unfortunate step. The cavalry tactics described in that book were the result of long and at times heated debate, and were in fact remarkably appropriate to the conditions of the war. The emphasis on the use of firepower to suppress objectives while highly mobile forces advanced by a flank to finally close with cold steel made good use of the varied capabilities of the cavalry. The continuity of manpower in the cavalry discussed above was also probably a factor. Whereas the infantry of the pre-war B.E.F. was almost entirely destroyed in the first years of the war to be replaced by a ‘New’ army requiring fresh training, and with little tactical or doctrinal background to fall back on, the cavalry through continuity of manpower was able to retain much of its pre-war ‘tactical culture’.

In spite of this the rôle of the cavalry did evolve as the war progressed. It was not so much that the cavalry changed, but that the nature of the war changed around it. In short, the battlefield became more ‘cavalry-friendly’ as the war itself evolved. The key to the widening rôle of cavalry was the development of the ‘post-Somme’ deep defensive system. In 1916 as long as British forces were hurling themselves at a very strong, but very shallow German defensive line, there was little rôle for the cavalry as the ‘breach’ envisioned by Haig was never created. Subsequently as the Germans

moved to a far deeper, but more porous defensive system, the importance of horsemen grew in proportion. A lower density of defences, and strong-points with gaps between, rather than solidly defended lines offered ready-made 'gaps' for the cavalry to exploit, but not by riding on to capture railheads deep in the rear, rather by outflanking and attacking positions within the fighting zones themselves (the 'Battle zone' and 'Counter-attack zone' of the German system). The cavalry were also called upon to take advantage of the increasing fluidity of the battlefield to seize by 'coups de main' objectives which would then be temporarily defended by automatic weapons before being handed on to supporting infantry. Gueudecourt in 1916 (Chapter 2), Monchy in 1917 (Chapter 3), or Honnechy and Reumont in October 1918 (Chapter 5), were all examples of this practice.

The ever increasing depth of German defensive systems from the battle of Arras onwards also created the problem that a 'Bite and Hold' attack, however ambitious, was limited in its potential by the battle range of its principal weapon, marching infantry. It had been demonstrated, and seems to have been understood by 1918 that the maximum assault depth that could be expected of infantry on foot was about 5,000 yards (4.5km). With defensive systems developing to depths of 10,000 yards (9km) or more, this would never be decisive. Despite experiments at the mechanical transportation of troops in tanks, (which poisoned them with fumes and moved slower than the infantry could walk) or lorries, (which were vulnerable to fire and had no realistic cross-country mobility), the horse remained the only practical means of projecting rifle and more particularly machine-gun strength into the furthest parts of the enemy defences.

A clear opportunity can therefore be identified on the evolving battlefield of the Western Front for the successful use of mounted troops. However this is with the benefit of historical hindsight. The question arises whether this opportunity was ever fully identified at the time, and whether the cavalry was handled appropriately, at all levels of command, to take full advantage of it. This is discussed in the next section. Secondly, while the B.E.F. was predominantly on an offensive footing strategically, several occasions arose where the cavalry was forced to fight *defensively*, in particular in March 1918. Here it is arguable that a misunderstanding and misapplication of deep-defence principles was to put the British Fifth Army at a distinct disadvantage.

Command, Control, and Communications

The third question examined in this study is that of command. It has been argued above that below brigade level the cavalry was tactically effective, and remained so throughout the period under consideration without much alteration to its methods. Clearly, however its rôle in operations changed as the war progressed. This was a product not only of the changing character of the fighting, but also the interaction between those changes, and the developing understanding by higher commanders of how cavalry could be included in operations.

Inevitably any analysis of this process begins with the Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F. during the relevant portion of the war; Douglas Haig. The cavalry owed a substantial debt to Haig for its very survival on the Western Front. As has been discussed in Chapter 5, he was a powerful advocate for retention of mounted forces on several occasions, particularly after Cambrai and in early 1918. However his keen support for the arm should not be confused with a clear understanding of its rôle. At a tactical level Haig had a very modern concept of how cavalry should function. He advocated combined arms tactics, extensive use of machine-guns, and a firepower and shock balance which was vindicated on several occasions during the war. The continuing applicability of the tenets of his 1912 *Cavalry Training* in the spring of 1917 or in 1918 has been described. Unfortunately at an operational level it is arguable that Haig misunderstood the nature of the war from 1916 right up to November 1918, not only in the sphere of the cavalry but right across the board. His plans and objectives for the Somme battles of 1916 began with, and persisted with the idea that the German defences were susceptible to a 'breakthrough', that the trench system was a finite rigid structure which would fail catastrophically if put under enough pressure (analogous to a dam bursting). The rôle he envisioned for mounted troops was one flowing through, and exploiting this breach (real or metaphorical) in the enemy defences. His anticipation of this long-awaited event was apparent in his thinking concerning every subsequent offensive, and indeed he was still preparing for this change in the nature of the fighting when he arranged for the Cavalry Corps field exercises of September 1918 (discussed in Chapter 5).

Evidence of this unchanging outlook is contained in the Cavalry Corps *War Diary*. Haig wrote to the Cavalry Corps commander, Kavanagh, and Lt. Gen. Ivor Maxse (in his rôle as Inspector General of Training) on 6 September 1918 with his thoughts about the proposed cavalry field day, stating: "I do not propose to employ the Cavalry corps until I judge the situation favourable for obtaining decisive results."⁴ Appended to this letter was a copy of the notes of a meeting held by Haig with Army Commanders, dating from two years before; 18 March 1916, the content of which he presumably still considered relevant, viz:

The action of mounted troops in the offensive battle under existing trench warfare conditions follows on the action of infantry and artillery, who must first effect a breach in the enemy's outer systems of defence.⁵

In short he saw the cavalry rôle in September 1918 in identical terms to that of March 1916. It is one of the contentions of this study that this return to 'mobile warfare' anticipated by Haig never happened, even in 1918. What took place instead was a more subtle change in the character of the fighting *within* both sides' defensive systems, and it was this process which led to the development of an environment in which mounted troops had ever increasing scope for action.

Among Haig's subordinates, the Army commanders of the B.E.F. the degree of recognition of these changes was variable. As will be discussed, while Gough for example was quick to see the new potential for cavalry, others like Rawlinson were slower, albeit that the latter had a greater opportunity in the final phase of the war to embrace and make use of the new tactical realities. In the planning for 1 July 1916 discussed in Chapter 2 there is little evidence of any appreciation of a rôle for the cavalry in the initial infantry and artillery battle. Haig was wedded to the idea of deep exploitation, and Rawlinson, commanding Fourth Army, while not a believer in a breakthrough, had no use for horsemen in his limited 'Bite and Hold' plan. Indeed there was little reason for him to seek it, the German defences, and thus his planned 'bite' were both comparatively shallow. Nor as the fighting progressed did Rawlinson include the cavalry in his subsequent plans. His orders for September delayed their advance until after the artillery, showing clearly that he did not consider them an important part of the battle he was intending to fight.

In April 1917 at Arras, discussed in Chapter 3, Gen. Allenby produced a slightly more progressive plan than that used on the Somme, in that it brought the cavalry divisions involved in the offensive closer to the attack front. Indeed the cavalry divisions' 'Final position of readiness' was beyond the infantry start line, an innovative step. However there was little expectation that the cavalry would be involved in the fight *within* the German defences. No move was expected of the cavalry until the infantry had reached their final 'Green line' objectives. The order for the cavalry to move, even to the 'Final position of readiness' was not received by the Corps until more than nine hours after the battle had begun (2.40pm, after a 'Z' hour of 5.30am). This left little time or daylight for the cavalry to contribute to the battle. It is also arguable that the fighting around Monchy on 11 April, which brought the cavalry into action, was not intended as a combined arms fight within the German deep defences, (albeit that is what it became) but the result of Allenby's misapprehension that a genuine breakthrough had been achieved and that his forces were "... pursuing a defeated enemy."

At Cambrai in the autumn of 1917, discussed in Chapter 4, Gen. Byng did not push the cavalry as far forward at the outset, having 'Advanced Concentration Areas' around 8km (5 miles) behind the front lines at Fins. However a set time was provided for their forward movement, 'Z+2½', or 2½ hours after the infantry attack began at 6.20am. Indeed, 1st Cavalry Division moved off ahead of schedule only two hours after the battle had begun. Unfortunately after that, as has been described, ambiguities in the chain of command and the (no doubt well-meaning) interference of Kavanagh effectively wrote the cavalry out of a significant rôle in the battle, and left them subject to unjustified vilification ever after.

Interestingly, it might be argued that the confusion developed precisely as a consequence of attempts by the two Corps commanders concerned; Woolcombe and Kavanagh, to involve the cavalry in the fight *within* the German defences and divert them from their breakthrough/exploitation rôle. It has also been argued in this study that the cavalry was able both to survive and to fight quite effectively within the confines of the German positions west of the St Quentin canal, as the activities of Brig. Gen. Beele-Browne's 2nd Cavalry Brigade demonstrated. However, these *ad-hoc* successes should not be taken as justification for the actions of those higher commanders. If the cavalry was intended to fight within the defended zone this should have been planned for from

the start, there was no place for this kind of chopping and changing during a Great War offensive.

Only in 1918, as discussed in Chapter 5, and ironically in the hands of Gen. Rawlinson, who appeared such a sceptic in 1916, did the Cavalry Corps finally operate in a pre-planned rôle within a combined arms 'Bite and Hold' battle. Even then this was tempered by the broader ambitions of Haig, who continued to await the collapse of German resistance. Nor did Rawlinson apparently see cavalry as always a necessity in his attacking schemes, when later in the first week of November both he and his colleague at Third Army, Gen. Byng, were offered use of the Cavalry Corps again, both declined.

Another key factor in the failure of the cavalry to reach its full potential in these offensives was the nature of the communications available to these commanders. The presence of wireless sets within the cavalry at Cambrai, for example, has been commented upon. Contact aircraft were also available, but in spite of these advances, the telephone, or more often the despatch rider or messenger were the principal means by which higher commanders could follow a battle. These lines of communication were simply too slow to allow commanders above divisional level to exercise real-time command over their troops. Time and again the cavalry were forced to wait until released by corps and army commanders before they could move forward. This all too often meant that they were late in setting off, and missed exactly the fleeting opportunities it was their job to exploit. Only at Amiens where start times were pre-programmed and required no higher approval were the cavalry able to move quickly into the battle.

These difficulties were exacerbated by the pyramidal structure of the lines of communication. Adjacent units in the front line were connected only by a chain which led back through numerous tiers of headquarters, via corps or even army command. The ability of cavalry commanders to co-operate effectively with their colleagues from other arms was severely hampered by this. The 14 July 1916 fighting described in Chapter 2 is an example of this, where brigade and divisional commanders of infantry and cavalry were able to physically meet on the battlefield, but lacked the authority to spontaneously co-operate with each other without reference to higher commanders who were inevitably out of touch with events.

Only one army commander seems to have clearly grasped these problems and their impact on the potential of cavalry in trench fighting, and to have done so at an early stage, he was also a cavalryman; Gen. Gough. In August 1916, as the Somme battles raged, G.H.Q. distributed to Army commanders a document submitted by Gough, in which he in turn credited the ideas of the G.O.C. 3rd Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. Vaughan. In it Haig's idea of a widespread collapse of resistance was rejected:

1. It is never safe to say that the enemy is demoralized as a whole. Demoralization, especially in trench warfare, only affects a portion of the hostile troops at a time and is only temporary. Our aim must be to get the cavalry in contact with those troops that are temporarily demoralized.⁶

Gough argued that a combination of detailed planning, good communications, and close co-operation between arms, would be required to bring this about. He advocated the allocation of a 'zone of action' to each cavalry division and giving the divisional commander freedom to act independently within that area. He rejected the top-down command which was to blight subsequent offensives,

5. The governing factor of the whole question is, with whom should the decision for the cavalry to intervene lie? If with the Army Commander or the Corps Commander, owing to the delays involved in getting the information back, and the orders out, it will probably be impossible for the cavalry to take advantage of any temporary demoralization.⁷

The paper ended with the rather rueful conclusion:

7. Unless some such scheme is adopted there is little probability of the cavalry intervening at the right time and place.⁸

Unfortunately both at Arras and at Cambrai he was to be proved right. As was discussed earlier in relation to the Ypres offensive of 1917 (in Chapter 4), Gough has widely been characterised as a cavalry obsessed 'Thruster' sharing Haig's unrealistic dream of a breakthrough. The 1916 paper suggests a much more thoughtful approach to mounted warfare, at odds with that of Haig. Evidence of this can be seen in the preparations for the Fifth Army attack at Bullecourt in support of the Arras offensive, in April 1917. Here Gough was provided with one cavalry division to support his attack, ostensibly with the aim of linking up with the two cavalry divisions allocated to Third Army. However at an army commanders' conference prior to the battle he objected that since

his operation was intended only to capture a portion of the Hindenburg Line defences, the cavalry division would not be needed. In the event he retained it at Haig's insistence.⁹ (It saw no action.)

Hints of Gough's vision for the cavalry can be detected in his plan for the Ypres battle in July 1917. Here was an offensive designed as a high-tempo sequence of shallow 'Bite and Hold' attacks, supported at local level by forces of cavalry integrated into the infantry attack. Unfortunately any analysis of Gough's aspirations or tactical innovations for the Ypres battle becomes clouded by the failures of the offensive as a whole. This was followed by his use as a scapegoat for the failures of the defence in March 1918, (and here it has been argued the cavalry *was* rather poorly handled at the higher command levels), leading to his dismissal at the end of March 1918. It was thus left to Rawlinson to see through the victories of 1918.

Within the Cavalry Corps itself, the effectiveness of the arm also suffered due to the inadequacies of its commander, Kavanagh. The disastrous effects of his desire to be involved in the chain of command during the Cambrai battle in 1917 have been discussed in Chapter 4. During the same battle he can also be accused of misunderstanding the appropriateness or otherwise of shock action in defence. Kavanagh seems to have turned to mounted action not in response to its immediate tactical appropriateness (in terms of ground or opponents) but rather in proportion to his own concept of the criticalness of the moment. He was prepared on 30 November 1917, to attempt (as he saw it) to 'save the day' by launching a series of cavalry charges which the commanders on the ground knew to be suicidal. In the event only one was actually carried out, but it was a disaster for the Inniskillings who were obliged to attempt it. Similarly, at a lower level of command, Brig. Gen. Seely's handling of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade at Moreuil Wood in 1918 is open to similar criticism. 'Desperate times require desperate measures' but it is equally true that cooler heads might have handled both of these crises less hastily and with less drama, and ultimately fewer losses to the cavalry.

Overall, it is hard to see much skilful leadership or doctrinal originality in the higher ranks of the mounted arm. The Corps was rather unimaginatively led. That it was able to perform so well came down to the individual skills and morale of its soldiers and junior leaders. Before too harsh a judgement is made of its senior commanders, however

it must be remembered that their rôle was not only to direct the operations of the Corps but also to lead it morally and create the required esprit de corps. In this latter function Kavanagh emerges in a better light. Little evidence of the character of 'Black Jack' Kavanagh has been uncovered in this study, but it seems that he was highly regarded both by Haig, (who as has been shown treated him on a par with Army commanders, rather than with his peers commanding infantry corps) as well as by his subordinates. On his appointment to lead the Cavalry Corps in September 1916 Home commented "I am glad Kavanagh is going to command as he is a real leader of men, and knows his job, has a mind of his own."¹⁰ His reputation as a fighting soldier had been made in command of 7th Cavalry Brigade in the fierce fighting around Ypres in October 1914, and a judgement on him at that period was offered by one of his soldiers, Trooper Lloyd of the Life Guards:

Our brigade seemed to get a call almost every time we were out, so we became known to the troops in the salient as 'Kavanagh's Fire Brigade.' ...The shortage of casualties on those occasions was largely due to the masterly way in which we were handled by our Brigadier. He never spared us, but wherever the brigade went he took the lead, and there was no braver man in it than himself.¹¹

One interpretation of this is that while Kavanagh was a brave and popular leader, capable of inspiring his men, his grasp of the niceties of higher command was lacking. This would accord with his tendency to respond to crises with aggression, either directly on the telephone to his subordinates, or indirectly in ordering mounted charges, (both of which occurred on 1 December 1917) rather than by taking a more considered approach. Such a 'Thruster' might be a success at brigade level, but commanding a corps was a different, more subtle matter.

Tanks and the Mobile Battle

The fourth question set out in this study concerned the relationship between cavalry and tanks. Consideration was given in the introduction to this study (Chapter 1) to the way cavalry and tanks have been set-out essentially in opposition by many historians of the Great War. Simply put, the argument follows that trench warfare had rendered the

cavalry redundant, then the appearance of tanks broke the deadlock, but the re-appearance of cavalry (and cavalry commanders) on the newly mobile battlefield then interfered with the potential of the new tanks to win the war. This is of course a gross oversimplification but it goes to the heart of the matter, a choice is offered; old-style horses, or new armour, and the two are mutually exclusive.

This study has shown that while there was a degree of inter-corps and inter-arm rivalry, this opposition simply did not exist during the war itself. Despite the growth in mechanical transport in the B.E.F. the horse remained by far the dominant form of motive power on the Western Front (aside from railways), no one would have seriously suggested that the horse might be removed from the military scene altogether. Thus armoured forces developed within a framework in which the presence of horses was taken for granted. Nor did armour appear on the battlefield suddenly or fully developed. Armoured cars, (as opposed to tanks,) had been in France since the opening shots of the war in 1914, and their co-operation with cavalry from 1916 onwards has been discussed. Thus the cavalry were able to assimilate the appearance of tanks on the battlefield much more smoothly and organically than has been widely acknowledged. This inter-relationship is exemplified by the fact that in 1918 ex-cavalrymen were riding in tanks, and the commanders of tank battalions were on horseback.

Criticism of the cavalry has also stemmed from a misunderstanding of the capabilities of the tanks. The heavy tanks (Marks I to V) simply were not weapons of exploitation. Brig. Gen Hobart commented of Cambrai:

The Mk IV tank was not a suitable weapon for mobile warfare,... The task given to the Tank Corps by the Army was to get the infantry through the Hindenburg Line.¹²

The job of these vehicles was to crush the wire to allow the infantry into the German defences and to destroy machine gun positions. It was not to drive on into the enemy rear areas, nor would they have been capable of doing so. Thus while there is little doubt that the cavalry failed in its task of exploitation at Cambrai, this was not a task that could or should have been performed by tanks.

Even with the arrival of the Whippet in 1918, the Tank Corps still did not have a weapon capable of deep exploitation, and indeed although a 'light tank', the Whippet was only marginally faster than its heavy counterparts. Thus these vehicles could not

have superseded the cavalry as some have suggested. Thus in no sense did the appearance of tanks render the cavalry obsolete. Sometimes the two arms were able to co-operate directly together on the same part of the battlefield, on other occasions this was less successful, most often however they were in different places with different jobs to do. Cavalry and tanks should be seen as two complimentary components of the wider B.E.F. fighting machine, each doing their job within an increasingly co-ordinated and successful overall package which included infantry, guns, aircraft, and all the other instruments of war.

It is also one of the key arguments of this study that the transition from the 'trench warfare' of 1916 to the supposedly 'mobile warfare' of 1918 was a much more gradual and less marked process than has been previously suggested. The battlefield started to deepen with the changes in German defensive methods at the end of 1916, and this trend continued until the end of the fighting. Further, the moving battle-front of 1918 was created more by an increasing tempo of fighting, made possible by improved logistics, and by the frequent iteration of 'Bite and Hold' attacks, than by any great 'revolution' in how the war was fought. Tanks were an important part of this evolving picture, but were not necessarily the catalysts for any dramatic change. Indeed by the latter stages of 1918 the scale of the fighting and the width of the active front, exacerbated by the relative scarcity of tanks and the difficulty of moving them between attacking corps, meant that tanks became a luxury during that fighting rather than a necessity.¹³ It is therefore possible to see the circumstances of the Tank Corps and the Cavalry Corps as analogous rather than opposed, both contributing to, and participating in, but neither dominating, an evolving infantry and artillery battle. Also by 1918 this battle was taking place on such a scale that neither corps was numerically in a position to make more than a marginal contribution.

A Final Verdict: Success or Failure?

The final question that arises is that of 'success'. Was the cavalry able to achieve the objectives set out for it by those planning its rôle in the battles in which it participated? Given the tactical effectiveness at lower levels of command discussed earlier in this

chapter this question is focussed more at the operational level (that is to say in operations at the scale of corps and army). Was the cavalry able to play its larger part in each offensive as a whole and fulfil its commander's objectives?

The short answer to this is that it was not, that the cavalry was mostly unsuccessful at an operational level. However it is one of the contentions of this study that this failure was not inevitable and intrinsic to the cavalry as an arm, but was the result of a combination of factors which do not relate to the troops themselves but to their commanders. This can be seen in each individual offensive examined in this study. In 1916 the rôle of the cavalry defined by Haig and Rawlinson was the exploitation of a breakthrough of the German positions. That this breakthrough was not achieved was not the responsibility of the cavalry, despite the odium which has fallen on them as a result. Similarly at Arras in 1917 the cavalry was not able to reach the deep objectives defined for it by Third Army. Again, however, it is arguable that these objectives were unrealistic and reflected Gen.Allenby's mis-reading of the battle as it developed. The offensive at Cambrai in 1917 was stunningly successful in its early stages, and there is no doubt that the cavalry failed to take full advantage of this situation. However this was the result of command and control failures outside the control of the cavalry divisions themselves, rather than their own ineffectiveness. Only at Amiens in 1918 were the cavalry completely successful in obtaining the goals initially set out for them in the offensive. Unfortunately, even here Haig inserted into the plan deeper objectives which were completely unrealistic, and these have remained to cast a shadow over the achievements of the corps on that day. Thus operational success always eluded the cavalry, but this had more to do with exaggerated expectations than failures within the corps.

There is a further reason why the contribution of the cavalry to the outcome of the war was not decisive. They were present in the B.E.F. in such small numbers that they could only play a small part in comparison to their colleagues in other arms, and as the war developed in 1917 and 1918 to allow greater potential for the cavalry to contribute, their numbers in proportion to the size of the B.E.F. as a whole, dwindled almost into insignificance. The question of whether 'more cavalry, better led' would have been helpful on the Western Front is ultimately like many counterfactual arguments, somewhat sterile, however it is reasonable to argue that the cavalry that was present,

when it was offered the chance to get into battle, acquitted itself well, and showed that at brigade and regimental level it was an effective fighting arm.

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Key

T Troop leader (Subaltern)

III 8-man Section in two ranks
III (commanded by Corporal)

III Hotchkiss-gun section
IIIH

'Deployment Distance' Sufficient width to allow the troop to form into two-rank line of Sections, a minimum of 40 yards, often much more.

Appendix 3.1: A Note on the Recent Cavalry Fighting up to 7th April 1917

**A NOTE
ON THE
RECENT CAVALRY FIGHTING
UP TO 7TH APRIL 1917**

ISSUED BY THE GENERAL STAFF

APRIL 1917

The following deductions are drawn from the experience of the cavalry recently acting on the front of the advance over open country:-

- (a.) Very careful reconnaissance of the ground, as well as the enemy's position, before attacking is essential. Reconnaissance by aeroplane is not sufficient. Patrols must be used freely, usually mounted by day and dismounted by night.
- (b.) When the locality to be attacked lies in a depression, it is often advisable to allot objectives on rising ground beyond. This gives a better chance of cutting off a retreating enemy and prevents losses, especially to led horses, from hostile bombardment directed on the locality after its capture.
- (c.) Short, sharp bombardments immediately prior to attack (registration having been carried out unostentatiously beforehand) gave good results. Very careful observation is required to enable a lift to be made at the right moment. Cavalry will seldom, if ever, have enough guns to set up a regular barrage, but with careful arrangements for observation, and a rapid and bold advance of the artillery if the attack succeeds, it should be possible to give some cover to the advance, to shell the retiring enemy, to search for likely hostile observation parties, and to engage a counter-attack.
- (d.) Advances were made successfully over exposed ground moving at a gallop, extended.
- (e.) Combination of rapid turning movements with frontal attacks and covering fire (to hold the enemy's attention) gave good results. Armoured cars proved very useful in frontal attacks and seemed to attract most of the hostile fire.
- (f.) When attacking, a sudden opening of hostile machine-gun or rifle fire from a flank may be dealt with by detaching a troop or squadron to gallop at the gun or riflemen while the main body continues its advance.
- (g.) Rapidity of execution is essential. Any hesitation after a decision has once been formed is fatal. Manoeuvring for ground and cover from view during an advance, if delay is entailed, will seldom give results sufficient to compensate for the loss of time involved.
- (h.) It is advisable, in attacking localities, to tell off pursuing detachments beforehand. They must follow the attack closely. A limit should usually be laid down beyond which pursuit is not to go. Within this limit pursuing detachments must act with extreme boldness.

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS
10th April 1917

(PRO Ref; WO33/816)

Appendix 3.2: Human Casualties 3rd Cavalry Division 9-11 April 1917

Unit		11 April						Total 9-11 April						
		Officers			Other ranks			Officers			Other Ranks			
		Killed	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Wounded	Missing	
3 rd Cavalry Division.	6 th Brigade.	Brigade HQ				1							3	
		3 rd D.G.	1	3		19	68	2	1	2		18	75	3
		1 st R.D.				2	22	1		1		2	28	
		Nth. Som. Yeo.		4		4	12			3		5	17	
		6 th MG Sqn.		2		1	5			2		3	4	
		C Battery RHA				3	14					3	16	
		Brigade total	1	9		29	122	3	1	8		31	143	3
	7 th Brigade.	Brigade HQ												
		1 st Life Guards												
		2 nd Life Guards												
		Leics Yeo.											1	
		7 th MG Sqn.												
		K Battery RHA				1	6							
		Brigade total				1	6						1	
	8 th Brigade.	Brigade HQ	1			2			1				2	
		R.H.G. (Blues)	1	3			17	4	1	3			17	4
		10 th Hussars	2	7		25	<i>150</i>	5	2	7		25	150	5
		Essex Yeomanry	<i>1</i>	<i>12</i>		<i>18</i>	<i>94</i>	<i>10</i>	1	12		18	94	10
		8 th Mg Sqn.		3		8	28	2		3		8	28	2
		G Battery RHA		1		3	14			2		3	14	
		Brigade total	5	26		56	303	21	5	27		54	305	19
		Divisional Total	6	35		86	431	24	6	35		85	448	24

Notes

Bold figures are taken from tables in Preston (1931).

Italicised figures are from Whitmore (1920), where casualties are listed by name.

Other figures are extracted from Divisional and Brigade *War Diaries*.

Discrepancies between Preston's overall totals and those for 11 April only, reflect minor losses on the first two days of the offensive.

Appendix 3.3: Equine Casualties – Cavalry Corps 1-14 April 1917

	Killed	Died	Destroyed	Total	Non Fatal Losses	Overall total
1st Cav. Division	31	55	55	141	-	200 (est.)
2nd Cav. Division	273	154	37	464	308	772
3rd Cav. Division	563	18	24	603	382	985
Totals				1208		1957

Bold figures are from Cav. Corps D.D.V.S. *War Diary*.

Remainder are from unit diaries (See main text).

Appendix 4.1: Notes on the Use of Tanks with Cavalry

NOTES ON THE USE OF TANKS WITH CAVALRY*

1. The sphere of activity and the radius of the tank is limited and the pace of advance is slow.
These are the main disadvantages
2. On the other hand, the tank can break through wire, move into villages held by Machine Guns and sit on strong points held.
3. Its use to Cavalry advancing is very great, but in legislating for Cavalry action supported by tanks the following points must be borne in mind.
 - (a) Tanks work in sections of 3 tanks.
 - (b) They must be given definite objectives, and successive waves of tanks must be used, instead of giving tanks successive objectives.
 - (c) Cavalry must not wait for tanks, but must push on. On the other hand, if held up, the arrival of tanks will be of the utmost use.
 - (d) Tanks should be used as pivots for the Cavalry. They are really moving Machine Guns heavily armed, and though they have not the pace of Armoured Motors they should be used on the same principle.
 - (e) Therefore Cavalry use their mobility to get round the flanks of every village or position held by the enemy, whilst tanks move straight on it.
4. Attention is drawn to the Training Note on Tanks which has been issued to all concerned.

Cavalry Corps

10 November 1917

*'Cavalry Corps Instructions for Operations GY, Appendix C', Cav. Corps GX 272/39, 10 November 1917, Contained in Cav. Corps *War Diary*, November 1917 Appendix VII, WO95/574

Appendix 5.1: Reorganisation of the Cavalry Corps March 1918

Orders of battle from Becke A. F. (Ed) 1935 *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 1 The Regular British Divisions* (H.M.S.O. London)

Cavalry Corps November 1917

1st Cavalry Division

1 Cav. Bde	2 nd DG (Bays)	5 th DG	11 th Hus	*	*	*
2 Cav. Bde	4 th DG	9 th Lcra	18 th Hus	*	*	*
9 Cav. Bde	15 th Hus	19 th Hus	Beds Yeo.**.	*	*	8 th Hus

2nd Cavalry Division

3 Cav. Bde	4 th Hus	5 th Lcra	16 th Lcra	*	*	*
4 Cav. Bde	6 th DG (Carab)	3 rd Hus	Q. Own Ox. Hus	*	*	*
5 Cav. Bde	2 nd D (Greys)	12 th Lcra	20 th Hus	*	*	*

3rd Cavalry Division

6 Cav. Bde	3 rd DG	R.Dgns	N. Som. Yeo.**	*	*	10 th Hus
7 Cav. Bde	1 st L. Gds	2 nd L. Gds	Leics Yeo.**	7 th DG	6 th D (Innis)	17 Lcra
8 Cav. Bde	R. Hse Gds	10 th Hus	Essex Yeo.**	(Can.Cav. Bde) R.Can Dgns	L. Strath. Hse	Ft Garry Hse

4th Cavalry Division

Sialkot Cav. Bde	17 th Lcra	6 th Cav.	19 th Lcra	Div broken up		
Ambala Cav. Bde	8 th Hus	9 th Hse	30 th Lcra			
Lucknow Cav. Bde	1 st (Kings) DG	29 th Lcra	36 th Hse			

5th Cavalry Division

Mhow Cav. Bde	6 th D (Innis)	2 nd Lcra	38 th Hse	Div. broken up		
Secunderabad Cav. Bde	7 th DG	20 th Hse	34 th Hse			
Canadian Cav. Bde	R.Can Dgns	L. Strath. Hse	Ft Garry Hse			

* Unchanged ** Units broken up to reinforce Cav. Divisions April 1918

Indian Regts shown shaded

Cavalry Corps March 1918

