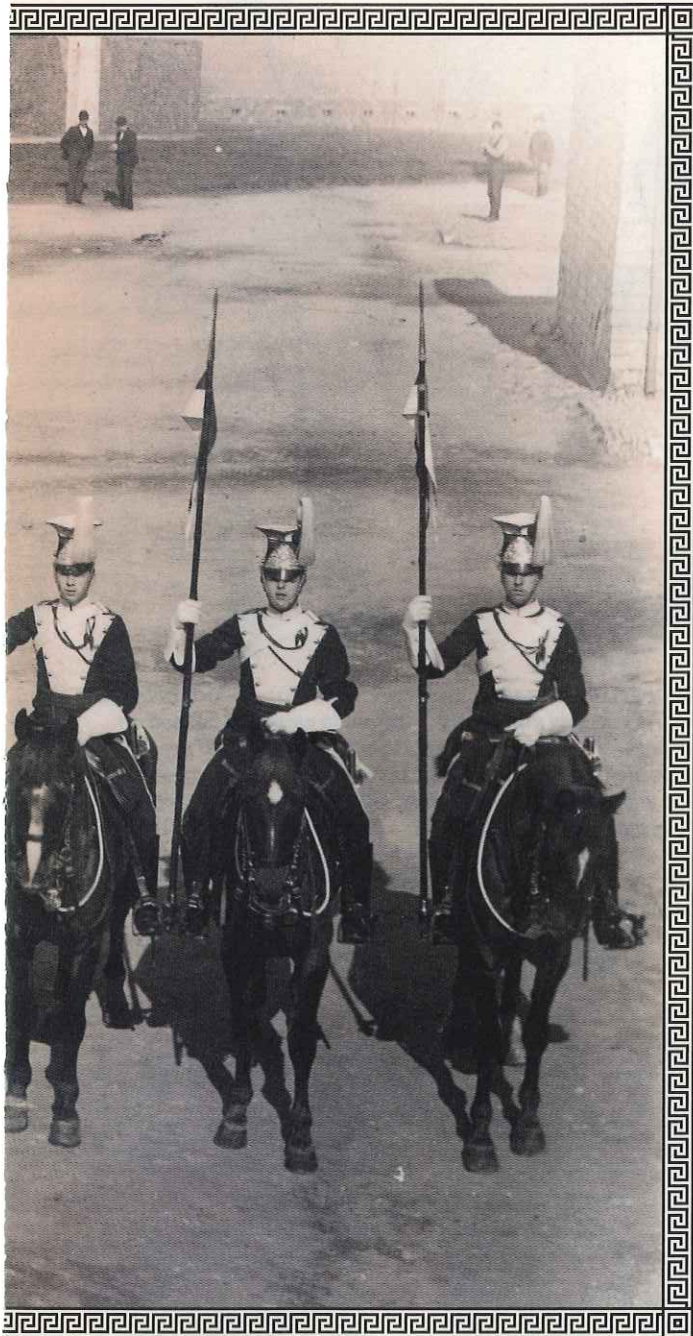




*A troop of 17th lancers in dress uniforms from around the turn of the century. These elegant white-trimmed blue tunics and fancy czapkas (helmets) would give way to khaki tunics and tin hats some 15 years later. The men are carrying the Pattern 1868 bamboo lance. Swords are the Pattern 1882. Garry James collection.*

# DEATH or GLORY!

**The Duke of Cambridge's Own—The 17th Lancers in the Great War**



The famed "Death or Glory" insignia of the 17th. This was worn on soft caps and chevrons, as well as (occasionally) on collars and helmets.

**O**n the windswept Plains of Abraham outside the city of Quebec on September 13, 1759 British General James Wolfe lay dying, felled by a bullet fired from the French forces defending their last stronghold in North America. The 47th Regiment of Foot under the command of Colonel John Hale had broken the line and, as his men put the French to rout,

the dying Wolfe heard one of his attendants yell, "They run Sir!" Wolfe responded. "Who runs?" and when the reply was "The French Sir." He praised God and said he could then die in peace. Colonel Hale, a close and personal friend of Wolfe's was tasked with being the first to bring the news of the gallant General's death home to England.

Colonel Hale's gallantry was rewarded with a commission to raise a new regiment of Light Dragoons and in 1763 he became the first Colonel of the 17th Light Dragoons (In 1823 the name would change to 17th Lancers). The regiment would see service in combat at Bunker Hill and Brooklyn during the American War for Independence. It would ride to fame and glory, as well as near destruction in 1854 at Balaclava, riding on the left flank during the famous charge of the Light Brigade. It again won honours during the Indian Mutiny of 1858. More honours were won in South Africa during both the Zulu War of 1879 and the Boer War of 1900-1902.

Photos by Lynne McCready

By Philip Schreier

# DEATH or GLORY!

## SERVICE IN THE GREAT WAR

The anticipated German attack on Belgium in August of 1914 found the 17th on duty in India and fearful that they might pass the entire war at that station. The 17th however was soon called to the Western Front in October of 1914, and landed at Marseilles on the 9th of November. For the next three years, through the end of the war, the 17th rarely left an area further than 20 miles of Amiens.

Colonel Douglas Haig commanded the 17th for two years during the Boer War and upon his promotion to Field Marshall (The fourth of five Field Marshalls to rise from the ranks of the 17th) and Commander in Chief, he chose one troop of the 17th to be his personal guard and escort for the duration of the war. Haig's background as a former cavalry officer imbued him with a sense that the cavalry could significantly alter the course of the war due to its speed and maneuvering ability. Divisions of cavalry kept a constant vigil for that opportunity to exploit a breakthrough in the lines and



*These insignia on the lower left sleeve are, from top: rifle marksman's badge, good conduct stripes, wound stripe. Each wound stripe, made of either bullion or brass, and began in 1916, indicated an injury received in action.*



*Despite being a cavalry unit, the 17th Lancers would experience long periods of being dismounted. When this was the case, as much gear as possible would be carried on the person. This veteran corporal is wearing the '07 pattern tunic, whipcord breeches and '08 pattern Mills web waistbelt. Note that the puttees wrap from the top down instead of the reverse, which was typical of the infantry. He carries a Mark I SMLE rifle, which though officially replaced by the Mark III was still seen in the service. His small box respirator has not been modified for cavalry use, and is being carried in a rather ineffective manner. By the end of the war it would be worn on the chest where it was more readily accessible. The blue overseas chevrons on the right cuff were introduced in early 1918. Each one indicated one year's service. The 17th's distinctive death's head insignia can be just seen on the right chevron.*



*The Pattern 1907 wool tunic was a practical affair with four capacious pockets and fold-down collar. This example is set up for a corporal of the 17th. Note the Boer War ribbons over the left pocket. Trousers were of whipcord, reinforced at the knees. Wrapped puttee replaced boots early in the war.*



**The small box respirator and its haversack. This unit replaced the earlier, less effective P and PH gas helmets. The rubberized face mask contained protective lenses, nose clips and a rubber mouthpiece. Filtering was done through activated charcoal.**

the chance to roll up the enemy's flanks and, as in the days of old, put the foe to a complete and thorough rout. Haig counted on this eventuality and based most of his tactics and doctrine on the hopes that his old branch of the service could once again prove their value in battle. No doubt when the time came, he would have his beloved 17th at the tip of the charging sword.

Combat first came for the 17th in the trenches as a dismounted reserve unit near Bethune on February 17, 1915. A wounded Lieutenant comprised the entire casualty list for this first taste of combat. For the most part the 17th passed the war guarding Haig, escorting prisoners to the rear of the lines and temporarily relieving units on the front lines. Lancers wrote of being constantly placed on alert for charges that never materialized, digging trenches and being paraded before various visiting dignitaries and royal personages. Horse grooming and maintenance consumed most of their time in addition to drill and maneuvers. "He serves who also stands and waits," almost replaced the famous regimental "Death or Glory" motto informally amongst the troops as they began to spoil for a fight.

The biggest "Battle" for the 17th came during the attack at Cambrai in 1917 as some 400 tanks deployed and hoped to accomplish that much anticipated breach of the enemy lines that



**The haversack contained, among other things, many personal items. Shown from top left, clockwise, Princess Mary tobacco tin, brass polish, "housewife" sewing kit, holdall (containing, from left, spoon, knife, button brush, button board, toothbrush), matches, cigarettes. Also shown is a wristwatch with attached "shrapnel guard."**

the new armoured units were sure to achieve. Unfortunately for the 17th their proposed line of attack depended on their crossing one solitary bridge to begin their breakthrough advance. The bridge however would not support the weight of the tanks and soon gave way and collapsed, stranding the 17th in their moment for glory.

The chance for "Death or Glory" would come again in March of 1918 as the German Operation Michael threat-

ened to push the entire BEF (British Expeditionary Force) into the English Channel. Here the 17th was put to good use and proved their worth as a cavalry regiment. Their ability to maneuver rapidly and plug various holes in the front lines greatly contributed to the defense of the BEF. At one point during the offensive in April, the 9th BN of the AIF (Australian Imperial Forces) became stranded in the open near Villers-Bretonneux. A

# DEATH or GLORY!

spirited 600 yard open field charge by the 17th rescued the stranded ANZACs and won for the unit 6 Military Crosses, one Distinguished Conduct Medal and six Military Medals. This was to be the units finest moment, its 15 minutes of fame (almost to the second!) for the Great War period.

The war, which claimed 20 million casualties worldwide would only claim 60 members of the 17th, about half the casualties it suffered during the fateful charge before the Russian guns at Balaclava nearly 65 years before. Haig's pet regiment would never get to exercise his theory that one great push by the cavalry through a breach in the lines could end the war in a matter of volleys and charges. Ironically Haig's attitude on this tactic would become a source of great criticism in the years following the war, tarnishing his reputation as a commander and postponing the 17th Lancers chances for "Death or Glory" until the next World War.

Regimental honours consisted of Festubert (1914), Somme (1916) Cambrai, St. Quentin, Avre, Hazelbrouck, Amiens & Mons (1917) and France & Flanders (1914-1918).

## UNIFORMS

When the 17th left India in October of 1914 they had been accustomed to a

number of years of 100 plus degree temperatures. The sudden change to the weather of the western front caught scores of the Lancers by surprise and was quickly followed by the invalidating of many due to their being unaccustomed to cold conditions. The 17th Lancers uniform was standard to the cavalry units that saw service on the western front between 1914-1918.

Tunics consisted of the standard SD (Service Dress) tunic of the 1907 pattern. It was made from unlined serge wool in a pale green color called khaki, pronounced CAR-key. The rolled down collar and four pockets made a comfortable tunic for "walking out" but proved to be a miserable article for fighting. The uncuffed sleeves and cut of the arms made it nearly impossible to shoulder and aim a rifle when encumbered with the standard bandoleer equipment and gas mask. A small pocket sewn into the lining of the tunic provided a place to hold a small first aid bandage.

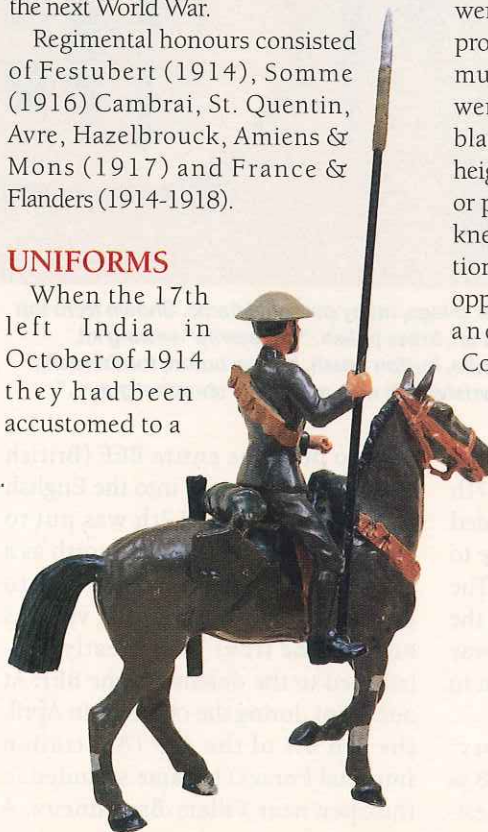
Trousers were of the standard cavalry issue, a whip cord style of breeches with a patch of doe skin stitched to the inner thigh of each leg to provide protection from wear against prolonged rubbing against a saddle. Knee high boots were standard cavalry issue but soon proved to be worthless in the wet and muddy trench environment. They were soon replaced by the standard black infantry boot (three-quarter's height) and worn with leather leggings or puttees that were wrapped from the knee to the foot. (The infantry traditionally wrapped their puttees in the opposite direction, starting at the shoe and working up to the knee. Contemporary photographs show troopers still wearing their spurs even with the

three-quarter boots and wool wraps. The special puttee wrap and the spurs allowed the trooper to retain a sense of esprit d'corps and a touch of personal privilege that set him aside from the common infantryman. Much in the same manner that the WWII U.S. Paratrooper set themselves aside from the rest of the service by blousing their pants into the tops of their jump boots.

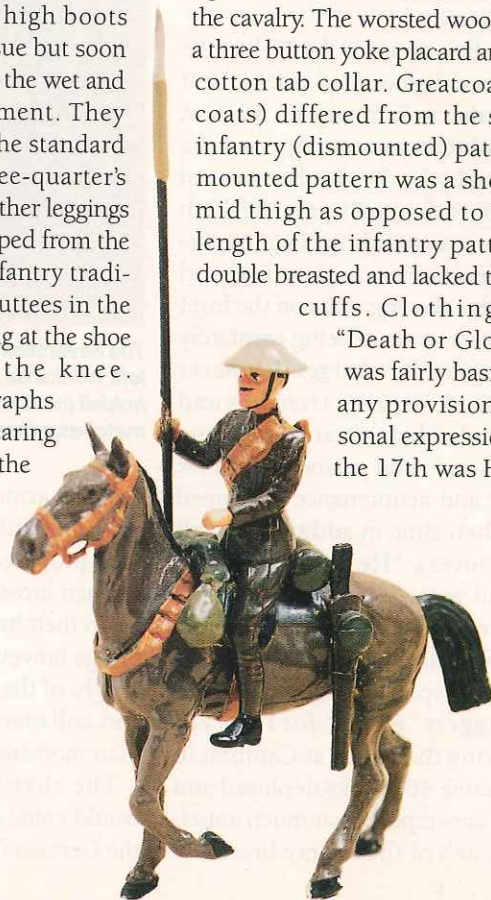
Headgear consisted of the same styles worn by the rest of the service, a stiff SD (Service Dress) cap with the unit crest affixed to the front. The famous "Death or Glory" cap badge was originally designed by the Lancers first Colonel, John Hale. The deaths head motif (skull & cross bones), according to Col. French Blake, was first used in a military fashion by the army of Frederick the Great in 1741 by his "Totenkopf" Hussars. The unit soon became known as the "Tots" and eventually the "Death or Glory" boys as a reference to their unit crest. Steel helmets soon replaced the stiff cap in mid-1916 and was required wear for all front line troops.

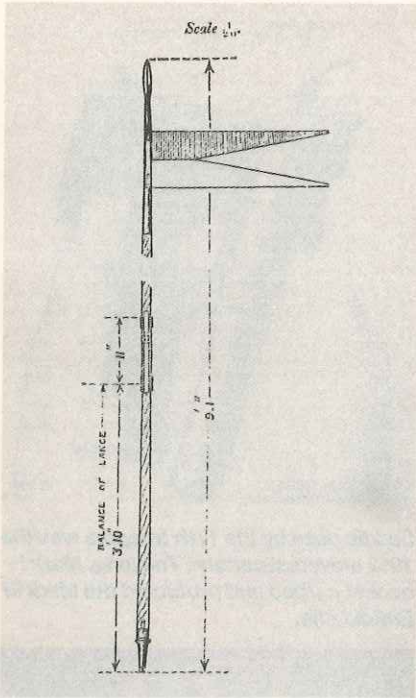
The standard grey back shirt was also regular issue to all branches including the cavalry. The worsted wool shirt had a three button yoke placard and a white cotton tab collar. Greatcoats (overcoats) differed from the standard infantry (dismounted) pattern. The mounted pattern was a shorter cut, mid thigh as opposed to the knee length of the infantry pattern, was double breasted and lacked the roll up cuffs. Clothing for the

"Death or Glory" boys was fairly basic, lacked any provision for personal expression and as the 17th was Haig's pet

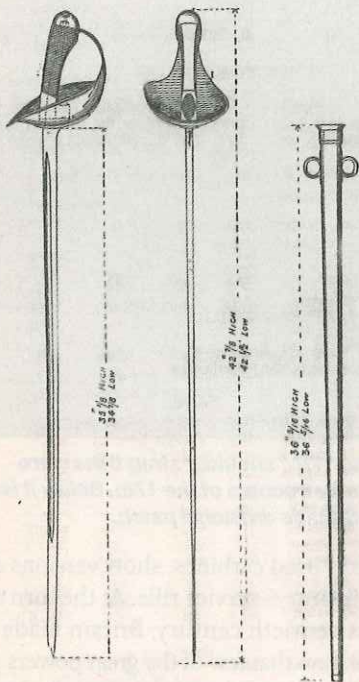


*This lead soldier depicts the 17th's saddle gear pretty well. Note the mess tin affixed to the rifle bucket and the spare bandolier around the mount's neck.*





Though little used during the war, the Pattern 1894 lance was still seen on escort duty and during ceremonial occasions. It had an ash stave and measured 9 feet, 1 inch, overall. The red and white flag was furled at the front.



The Pattern 1908 cavalry sword, despite initial criticism, was eventually acknowledged to be one of the finest weapons of its type ever designed. Its long, thin straight blade was intended solely for thrusting. Though of bright metal, during the war, the guards were blackened and the scabbard painted khaki or covered with leather.



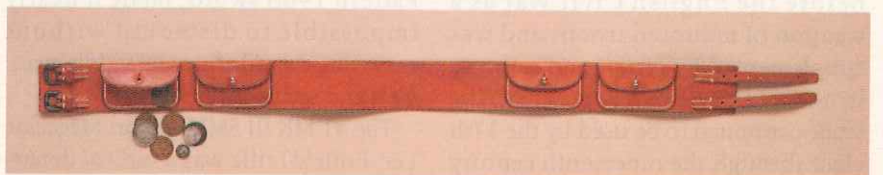
The primary British Battle rifle of the Great War was the Mark III Short Magazine Lee Enfield. One of the finest battle rifles of all time, the SMLE's magazine held 10 rounds of .303 ammunition. It was rugged, reliable and accurate. The same pattern was issued to infantry and cavalry.



When dismounted, the trooper carried his water bottle in a leather harness, slung over the right shoulder. The distinctive round cavalry mess tin was worn strapped to the outside.

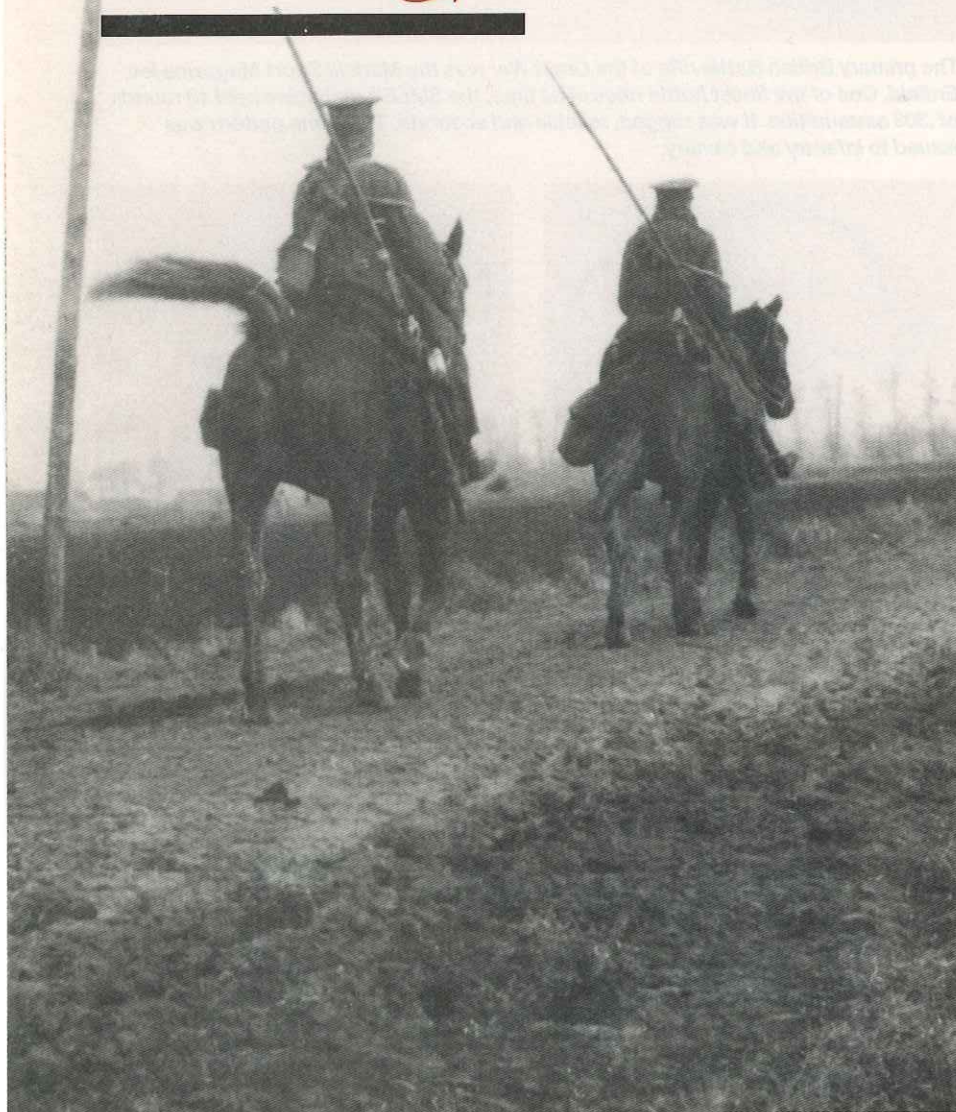


Troopers of the 17th carried their Enfield clips in Pattern 1903 90-round leather bandoliers. Each pouch held two, five-round clips. Ammunition was issued in cotton bandoliers.



Though privately purchased, many men wore leather or cloth money belts beneath their tunics to protect their valuables.

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*Two mounted troopers with lances, somewhere in France. Note that they are still wearing their early war stiff caps. Imperial War Museum.*

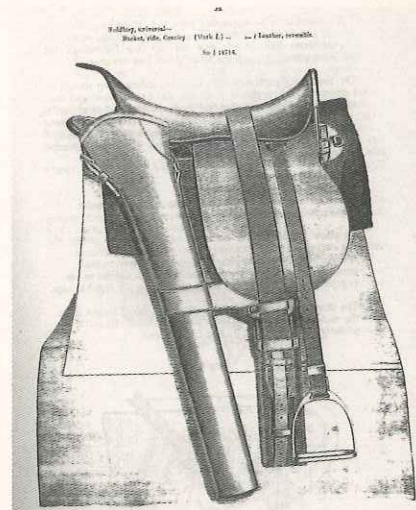
regiment, they were always drilled and polished to a higher level of professionalism than most other line regiments.

## EQUIPMENT

The lance had been in use since before the English Civil War as a weapon of mounted troops and was supplemented by pistols and carbines by the mid-seventeenth century. The lance continued to be used by the 17th clear through the nineteenth century and it wasn't until 1903 that it was retired for ceremonial uses until it was

re-issued as a weapon in 1909. As a weapon or even as a ceremonial ornament, the lance was a cumbersome and useless in almost any century. During the Great War the lance, in combination with the #1Mk III SMLE rifle and Pattern 1908 sword, made it nearly impossible to dismount without removing the rifle from its saddle scabbard and securing the lance.

The #1 MK III SMLE (Short Magazine Lee-Enfield) rifle was a radical departure for standard British armament. Typically, the mounted service had



*Saddle used by the 17th troopers was the 1912 universal pattern. The long, Mark I bucket carried and protected the Mark III Enfield rifle.*



*Brass "17L" shoulder strap titles were worn by troopers of the 17th. Below it is a hand-made divisional patch.*

always used carbines, short versions of the infantry's service rifle. At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain made a transition that few of the great powers at the time considered worthwhile. The Army decided on one rifle design to serve both mounted and dismounted troops. The SMLE was a medium length bolt action rifle that offered the long range accuracy that the infantry required coupled with a shorter, more maneuverable rifle almost of carbine

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length that could still be handled with ease from the saddle. Coupled with the pattern 1907 blade bayonet, the rifle made a formidable weapon in the trench or from the saddle. The detachable magazine held 10 rounds of .303 ball ammunition of the MK V pattern, twice what any other standard rifle was capable of holding. The common sliding ladder rear sight was set from 100 to 2,000 yards. The magazine was actually never meant to be detached from the rifle for reloading, however it was designed to be recharged by the employment of stripper clips each holding 5 rounds of .303 ammo. Most Lancers were issued 150 rounds of ammo as their standard complement.

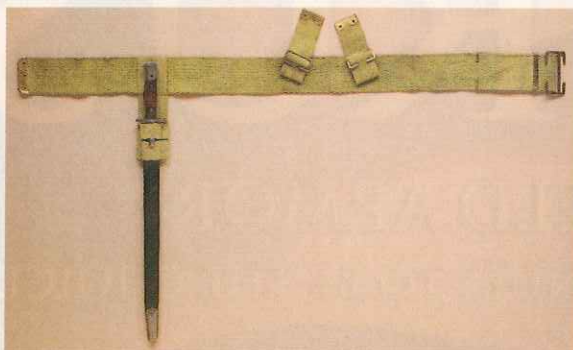
The Pattern 1903 bandolier equipment was issued service wide to both infantry and cavalry units at its initial introduction. It consisted of a leather bandolier worn over the shoulder that contained 9 cartridge pouches, five in the front and four across the back. Each pouch held two stripper clips of 5 rounds each making for a total of 90 rounds worn in this manner. Four additional pouches worn on the belt added another 50 rounds with two 15 round and two 10 round pouches, worn forward equally on each side of the belt buckle. The bayonet frog and water bottle carrier were also made from leather, with the water bottle having an extra long sling to enable the soldier to hook his arm through the sling loop and secure the sling to his button down epilate, making access much easier.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the work of Lt. Colonel R. L. V. french Blake's *The 17th/21st Lancers* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1968) as well as CPO Lauren Blakley, USN and Dennis McGurin's assistance in preparing this article.

## 1908 SWORD

A specially designed mess tin replaced the century old kidney shaped design that had been in use since well before Waterloo. The mess kit designed specifically for mounted troops was oval and shallow and closely resembled the style that the United States used during the war. It attached to the canteen or saddle with a leather strap and is often seen in photographs affixed in this manner.



*Though many troopers of the 17th wore leather waist-belts with simple frame buckles to carry their bayonet when dismounted, some opted for the Pattern 1908 Mills web belt and bayonet frog.*

## SUMMARY

The great breakthrough that Haig had so hoped to exploit with his cavalry never materialized during the remainder of the war. Most nations who had observed the war on the western front for any duration of time, were still reluctant to disband this now nearly useless branch of the service. Lances were now no match for tanks and machine guns. Had it not been for the advent of the motorized vehicle, it is all together likely that troops of mounted soldier would still be finding ways to support the objectives of battle with the point of their lances while mounted.

The death knell for the mounted infantryman was finally sounded during the inter war period. The 17th was forced to consolidate with the 21st Lancers in 1922 .



*By mid-1916 the Mark I Brodie helmet had replaced the stiff cap for front line wear. Many soldiers covered their helmets with burlap as a form of protection and camouflage.*



*The British Mark VII .303 round was an effective, powerful cartridge. Unlike many of the rounds used during WWI, it employed a rimmed case. Bullet had a cupro-nickel jacket. Propellant was cordite.*