

## **King Edward's Horse – an age passes into history**

The Victorian era was coming to a close. All the industrial development and discovery that was synonymous with independent thought challenged the thinking of ordinary people. Ordinary workers sought education, often after work hours through workers' institutes privately endowed by philanthropists. Artists pursued new inspirations and methods some rediscovering the return to artisan processes of the Arts and Crafts movement. It stripped away the flummery of high Victorian decorative style and eventually gave foundation to the Art Nouveau development, concentrating on the natural basic forms. Written works reflected this change of style and women were frequently at the vanguard of the change. Suffragettes demanded change, not just in emancipation but in employment rights too. Against this scene a group of men from the Empire realised what strengths and attitudes they had, based largely on British concepts but through the eyes and experience of those raised in the Colonies and knew that they had a contribution to make in the South African Campaign and later in WW1.

The King's Overseas Dominions Regiment was initiated by Lt Col George Hamilton who had wished for such a regiment from his time in South Africa. The colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand were very supportive along with other associated countries that were pro-British through trade and industrial development e.g. railway undertakings in South America, bridge building and highway construction.

Many of the young men had met at University and formed strong bonds through study and sporting association. The idea of a special regiment was very appealing. The establishment appears to be a rather informal affair with people knowing the right folk to approach. Through membership of the Colonial Club George Hamilton made contact with Lt Col Willoughby Wallace who became the Officer Commanding the Regiment and its inception met with approval of Lord Strathcona, Sir John Cockburn, Mr Duff-Miller and Mr John Howard, Mr Reeves the New Zealand agent being the only abstention. Mr Reeves doubted that there was sufficient manpower resident in Britain to

support such an undertaking. The other men had confidence and a deputation waited on the War Office and the authorities were convinced.

The regiment became a fact.

Regiments are recognised by their badges and uniform and King Edward's Horse made a statement in the design of their uniform. The tunic and britches were olive drab in colour, (quite different from the usual military choice which was a sandy tone used by troops in the Sudan campaign.) The Headgear was worthy of theatrical production on the West End stage. The bush hat was borrowed from the designs popular in the South African conflict with the right hand side of the brim swept up. It was embellished with a scarlet plume and had a cascade of feathers almost hanging down to shoulder level. The then Prince of Wales had an eye for a good uniform and he very quickly consented to be Colonel-in-Chief of the new body. It must be said that his interest was definitely in the military aspect and not just in the uniform of this very new regiment. The new Regiment caused quite a ripple in London and the counties in which they held Annual Camps and exercises and they paraded and formed Guards of Honour accompanying their Colonel in Chief now the King.

Keeping the regiment up to the mark was difficult. It was not until 1907 that the headquarters were moved to an equestrian establishment in Hollywood Road, Kensington. This gave the opportunity to school horses as well as instruct troopers, the annual camps were held on the South Downs and were well attended. At this time there was a major re-organisation of the Army being undertaken and KEH was viewed as a territorial unit which irked all ranks. There was friction between the established regiments which formed the Standing Army, territorial units and militia which may have been founded many years earlier under individual patronage. The Army was ready for a re-organisation. Where do you place a new "jumped-up" regiment, as yet untried in battle, which enjoys Royal favour? Added to the mix is the fact that the personnel were Colonials, useful at social gatherings but with little else to recommend them. An additional problem was that the regiment had no horses. For Annual Camps and other trainings they had to borrow other groups mounts allowing no bonding or individual knowledge to develop between horse and rider.

At the outbreak of the First World War King Edward's Horse was regarded as Divisional Cavalry, an integral part of the British Expeditionary Force although their orders to mobilize were to move to the war station dismounted. All officers were recalled by telegram although most had pre-empted the recall and requested information as to where and when they should report. Those who were distant requested that their postings be kept open. The Regiment was ready and keen.

The Regiment established itself at Alexandra Palace and under Colonel Sandeman was on war footing. The enthusiasm to "join up" almost overwhelmed the recruiting officers and although the origins are hazy there was a move to promote a 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of King Edward's Horse. Kitchener in a surprising moment of clarity saw that this group would be an irritant to the already established regiment and decreed "I see they will be no use to you; they had better find a name of their own."

In 1915 the Regiment was still kicking its heels in Britain. In April it moved to Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire, the horses were in purpose built stables and it was ready to be mobilized overseas. Orders came for the Regiment to stand fast at Canterbury and that Lt Col Sandeman was re-appointed to command. This was met with great pleasure by the men who held Sandeman in great respect and affection.

On moving to Alexandra Palace the Regiment was dismounted and housed in the vast expanse of the glass building. Being close to the north London manufacturing area, the arrival of these well looking young troopers was cause of much excitement among the young women of the factories. The catering facilities at the Alexandra Palace were well able to feed the health appetites of the Troopers. Given the unusual billet and adoring women discipline wavered but thanks to the Quarter Master and the Billeting Officer order was restored, besides the innate self-discipline and self-respect of these remarkable colonials discouraged fraternisation. The unit did not yet have its own Veterinary Officer and was able to move back to Bishop's Stortford until an appointment was made. The Regiment was now part of the 12<sup>th</sup> Division now ready to embark for France and at Brighton in front of the Royal Pavilion the King, Queen and Lord Stamfordham inspected the troops. His Majesty wished them "God's Speed". Crossing the channel in three ships overnight the

Regiment arrived at Le Havre. They were now Divisional Cavalry at war. The first days of May saw Troopers under fire and engaged in farming duties. Placed in Fontinelle Farm with its enormous and stinking dung heap, the like of which would never be tolerated in the antipodes, the troopers moved, cleaned and disinfected the farmyard. This caused much amusement amongst the locals.

Acting as escorts for prisoners and largely behind the lines the regiment was experiencing its first taste of active service at Festubert and later at Loos.

The role of cavalry was an uncertain position in World War1. The introduction of Artillery and the stalled nature of the front lines meant that cavalry were useful for reconnoitre and spotting but cavalry charges of the previous century were no longer appropriate. The one advantage that the regiment had was that they could move quickly over open ground and not have to stick to roads that were frequently choked with marching units and motor vehicles. King Edward's Horse lived up to its origins when having to bivouac. The men, relying on their previous homeland experiences, built splendid 'bivvys' from the natural materials around them and also undertook basic engineering of water management .

Again showing their prowess KEH won several prizes at the Divisional sports held on August 25<sup>th</sup>. On September 9<sup>th</sup> the Regiment moved into billets at Haillicourt, the first time it had been under a roof since May. It speaks well of their resourcefulness and innate ability to improvise.

In May 1916 the regiment spent some weeks in valuable training. Around 29<sup>th</sup> April the regiment suffered its first fatalities. They had been repairing, constructing and strengthening strong points close to the front line. Most of this work was done at night and required stealth and skill. Later the regiment became expert in the techniques of forward observation. Artillery observation revolved around specific targets and enemy gun emplacements but forward observation was of a broader scope and deductive intelligence elements were in play. As cavalrymen they were required to read and interpret maps synonymously. Sir Douglas Haig inspected the regiment and he appeared to be impressed given the messages he relayed back.

In May 1916 B Squadron re-joined the Regiment. They had endured several weeks of labour disdained by Infantry units and merely providing muscle doing the basic and unpleasant tasks that the Infantry avoided. The travel to join their regiment was a pleasant journey through small villages. They were to join 1st Corps whose Commander enjoyed playing Polo and he was very put out to have been lumbered by a Special Reserve Cavalry Regiment when he really sought a Yeomanry unit. Perhaps he thought there would be better Polo players in a Yeomanry unit. Again King Edward's Horse were seen as inferior by those who had no understanding of who they were or their background.

"A" squadron found themselves in the trenches after some interesting days. They arrived at Steenwerck to clean themselves at the baths and delousing station. The method of delousing ruined their breeches after it was found that the steam did not treat the leather straps well. They were bombarded by German shells for two nights and suffered some casualties. This experience sharpened the men's resolve and their kit and tack were kept in exemplary order. After this blooding they enjoyed a period of rest, their time spent in the valuable checking of the maps and location of essential watering places for the horses.

There was little for the KEH to do. They undertook border security duties to prevent spies infiltrating and after the Battle of Loos performed mop-up support. The supplies for these 'down' times were sketchy and saw the ingenuity of the Troopers challenged again when it was found that there were no nosebags with which to feed their mounts. Undeterred the men fashioned nosebags from spent ammunition boxes and KEH horses enjoyed their rations from an unusual source.

During the spring training was arranged for the cavalry units but it appears to have been half-hearted as little was learned and map reading was said to have been abysmal. The command group of the instructors managed to get lost. On 1<sup>st</sup> June the regiment finally arrived at Valhuon and was at last reassembled.

The War was becoming more mechanised and weapons were developing at a fast rate. Machine guns were the favoured method of despatching the enemy above ground and tunnelling underground. The trenches were strengthened with machine gun units in them to increase the rate of fire and to deter

advance. More troops were required on a regular basis and so King Edwards Horse was detached and posted as a dismounted unit in the needy trenches.

Tanks were first seen on the battlefield at Cambrai and although cumbersome and unreliable indicated that the age of mounted cavalry was ending. The age of intelligent, innovative soldiers however was not ending and King Edwards Horse demonstrated that they had the ability to perform reconnaissance, spot for artillery and travel unhindered over open ground when mounted. The men themselves possessed a wide range of skills, largely due to their backgrounds. (When faced with a destroyed bridge, the KEH searched around for material, and finding a ruined factory, took the beams and larger timbers and repaired the bridge, without waiting for a team of Sappers to arrive and do the job.)

It would be interesting to find a similarly equipped and capable unit within a modern army.

From periods of high activity and front line support KEH also found themselves withdrawn to rest and train in beautiful quiet areas of France that seemed totally removed from War. The mid-late summer saw the KEH encamped around a Chateau. Some of the troops were billeted in the village and others under canvas in an orchard. Others had constructed personal bivouacs near the horselines. All was peaceful, although at night the firing around Lens and la Bassee could be seen. Machine guns were uplifted from the cavalry troops and the Hotchkiss guns transferred to the trenches.

Winter quarters were at Division and the contrast to autumn quarters could not have been greater. The countryside was bleak and packed with war materiel: heavy artillery and tanks all set in deep mud. The requirements of frontline service were not overlooked. The regiment saw short stints of time close to the front trenches and further back spotting for artillery.

The War that was meant to be finished by Christmas 1914 was dragging on and there was no clear side with an upper hand. There were pushes and retreats that gained a few yards and cost many lives on both Allied and German fronts. Behind the trenches farmland was pulverised by the shells and farmers who had refused to leave their farms were reduced to living in ruined buildings with a few chickens. The land was desolate; trees were reduced to skeleton stumps and few birds managed to survive the blast from the heavy artillery. Into this

landscape men had to carry out the orders as directed when just surviving seemed impossible. Given that cavalry regiments had animals to care for, feed, water and exercise, the stress was compounded. King Edwards Horse moved north to Watou, linking with 13<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse, a sister regiment. The Somme truly was a wasteland but hopes were high for a breakthrough via a 'push' in the summer of 1917. This push was the assault on Pilkelm Ridge and KEH were on two hours' notice to move into no man's land and push forward with the advance to Essen Farm. They came under fire having been spotted by a German reconnaissance plane, but took evasive action and watched as heavy shells were wasted in the mud.

Passchendaele became a stalemate and the officers of King Edwards Horse had survived many skirmishes and injuries to their horses. The back line duties of prisoner escort, repairing shell holes, traffic control and some KEH men were drafted into the infantry to make up the numerical deficiencies. The weather continued to be dreadful, heavy rain did not help the harvest and British troops assisted with the hop-picking. The Germans experimented with night bombing on moonlight nights but little damage was achieved.

Later the regiment acquitted itself with skill and determination in the defence of Vieille Chapelle, Huits Maisons and Fosse bridgeheads and received acknowledgement of this from General Sir Henry Horne. The Germans were determined to fight on despite the worsening state of their homeland and the diminishing ability to supply materiel. The Uhlans continued their harassing patrols and in conjunction with aerial reconnaissance caused some light losses to the regiment. Command, both local and at Corps level were aware of the actions. "No regiment in the British Army has a finer achievement to its credit than yours; everywhere you have done well. I saw Sir Douglas Haig yesterday and told him what you had done, he said, "King Edward's Horse have always done well, and will always do well."

The King, closely associated with the regiment at its inception noted that they had displayed the very best of the finest traditions of the British Army.

The Great War eventually came to an end and not too surprisingly KEH were advised some forty-five minutes after the official ceasefire, they still standing on patrol.

The regiment officially ceased in 1924, as people tried to forget the dreadful experiences of the war years. The pendulum of austerity and service swung to fun and indulgence before the reality of financial consequences were manifest. Regimental silver and effects were deposited at Haileybury College and still rest there in a cupboard.

What of the men? As miraculously as they appeared and prepared to fight for king and country, they disbanded, some to their countries of origins and others to stay in the United Kingdom.

The appendix gives details of three members of King Edward's Horse, of NZ origin, who added to this proud regiment.

### **William Bell 1884 – 1917**

Born on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1884, "Hal" Bell was the son of Sir Francis Bell and Caroline, Lady Bell residents of Wellington. Educated in New Zealand he went to Cambridge in UK to read law at University. He was admitted to the bar at the Inner Temple in 1908 having married Gladys the earlier year. Through his time in the UK he held a temporary commission in KEH and returned to New Zealand with a partnership in Bell Gully Bell and Myers. Success at the Bar and as Consul General for Denmark, Bell's star shone.

Politically he felt it was the duty of young men to serve their country and he served in Parliament from 1911 until the declaration of War in August 1914. He was part of the invasion force of German Samoa and held the rank of an orderly officer to the Commander Colonel Robert Logan. The focus of the War shifted to Europe and William Bell embarked for England along with his horse, a gift from the partners of his former Law firm. His Commission in KEH was revived and for another three years he was involved in the regiment's campaigns. He was Mentioned in Despatches and was raised to the substantive rank of Captain. He was killed in action on 31 July 1917 during the Third Battle of Ypres.

Captain Bell has no known grave and his name is on the Menin Gate as a consequence.



The reaction in New Zealand was marked. Flags were lowered to half-staff at Parliament and government buildings, a special sitting of the House was held and also at the Supreme Court in Wellington.

New Zealand lost a son with enormous potential in private and public life.

### **Arthur Kelly**

Arthur Kelly was a colourful character with abilities and attitude that endeared him in two countries; a short chap who played rugby union at scrum half or centre for Wellington and his Petone club. He was an apprentice with New Zealand Railways and had quite a belief in his own abilities. At a time when he was in Nelson Arthur got involved in a betting situation which was at odds with the rugby union rules. He was involved in a bet over the number of tackles he would make in a match and the rugby union regarded this as professionalism. The charge was not proven but to continue playing rugby, he adopted another name under which to play. Obviously there was mistrust on Arthur's side having been banned for three years and suspicion from the rugby hierarchy.

Rugby League provided an opportunity and this earned him a lifetime ban from Rugby Union. He toured the United Kingdom, scoring a try against Wales and he found acceptance among the people of northern England. He joined the St. Helens Club and played as player-coach leading them to a victory in the Lancashire Shield for the 1913-1914 season.

Arthur joined the King Edward's Horse (Corps of Colonials) at the outbreak of war and served all through until 1918. He later lived in Oldham until 1965 when he passed away.

### **Gordon Baxter**

Gordon Baxter was typical of many men who volunteered for King Edward's Horse. Although born in England of British parents his army record would suggest that they all made the emigrants move to New Zealand settling in the Hokianga Northland New Zealand. We know very little of his actual war service other than he also served with the Devonshire Regiment towards the end of hostilities. Many soldiers and officers were 'poached' from King Edward's Horse during the war. Over 500 men became commissioned officers in the wider army and it must be due to some training, background or esprit de corps

that was unique to this regiment. The soldiers were there because they wanted to be not because they had to be there. It is the same rationale as for the regulars in the standing army. All units who received personnel from KEH were delighted by the attitude and abilities of the men, nothing was too difficult for them and that belief stemmed from their backgrounds.

Gordon Baxter served all through the war and was part of the action at the River Scheldt where he lost his life. He is buried at Pas de Calais in St Nicholas British Cemetery.

### **Epilogue**

'From the uttermost ends of the earth', from diverse cultures and experience, from high education and humble self-tuition, all had one desire: to serve the Empire and the King, bringing all their skills and energy.

A unique regiment whose history now lies locked away in a cupboard.

**Janet Anderson 2018**