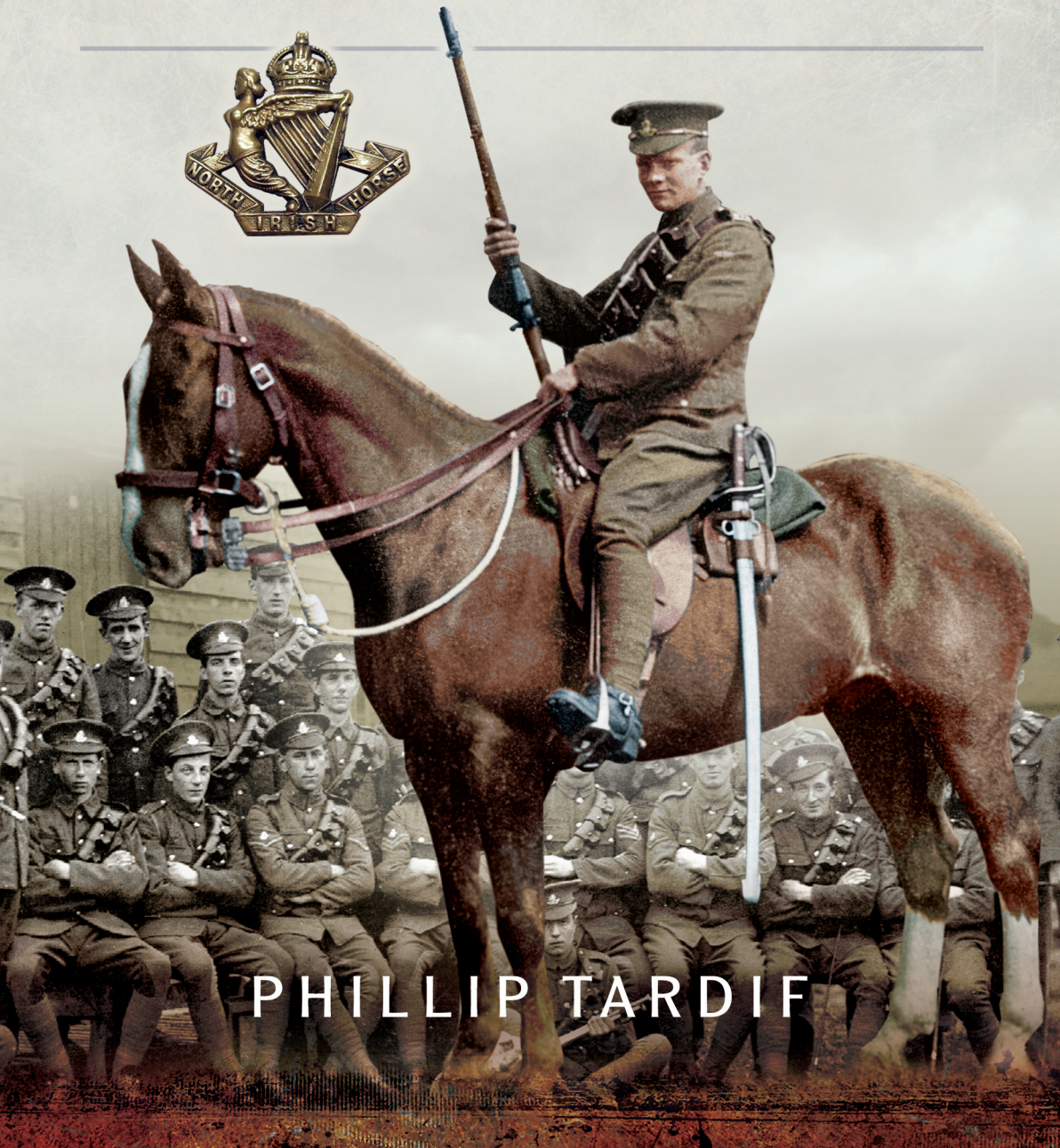
The North Irish Horse in the Great War



PHILLIP TARDIF

The North Irish Horse in the Great War

The Irishman is innately a good soldier, and,
above all things, loves a horse.

Navy & Army Illustrated, 2 August 1902, on formation of the North of Ireland Imperial Yeomanry

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Phillip Tardif

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For my parents
John and Patricia

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Acknowledgements

The North Irish Horse in the Great War began as a search for the story of my grandfather, Frank McMahon ('Cobber' to his Australian family). The more I discovered, the more my interest grew in his regiment and the men with whom he rode, marched and fought.

More people have helped me on this project than I could possibly mention here. Their generosity in sharing their research, time and ideas has been wonderful, and has helped bridge the distance between my home in Australia and the Ireland, France and Belgium of a century ago.

Gerry Chester, a North Irish Horse veteran of the Second World War, together with Doug and Hugh Vaugh, made much material available to me in the beginning, particularly the regimental diaries, which I was able to transcribe and share with others via the Internet. My particular thanks to Nigel Henderson, Nick Metcalfe, Paul Magill and Bracken Anderson, each of whom has helped me on this project and left his mark on it. Patricia Tardif – my mother and Frank McMahon's first child – has shared every step of the journey. Her quiet persistence has unearthed many of the gems that make this work much more than a compilation of official records.

It is the personal stories – the private musings of those who were there – that bring stories such as this to life, and this work would be much the poorer without two of these in particular. Major John Cole, commander of A Squadron, wrote numerous frank and revealing letters to his parents, and I am grateful to the Deputy Keeper of Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, for allowing me to publish extracts here, together with a number of other documents and photographs sourced from there. Another North Irish Horse officer, Lancelot Wise, also wrote numerous letters to his parents, revealing a young man bursting with excitement at the adventure of which he had become a part, and telling much about the day-to-day activities of the regiment. His descendants, Lance and Peter Wise, have been extremely generous in sharing this wonderful and hitherto unknown collection of letters, and allowing me to include them in this narrative.

Sarah Parkes and Stefanie Tardif, my daughters, never failed to encourage me to keep going, and Sarah spent many hours on my behalf in the National Archives at Kew when I'm sure she had much better things to do in London. I thank the staff at Kew for their polite efficiency in helping both Sarah and myself when I was able to visit the Archives. Cathy Hudson and Jeff House were generous enough to read early drafts of this work and offered much by way of helpful commentary. My thanks also to the many expert members of the Great War Forum who helped answer my random and assorted questions on the war. My editor Richard Doherty was a pleasure to work with, as was the team at Pen & Sword.

I am grateful to the many people and organisations who have allowed me to use the images that appear in this work, in particular the Kerry Stokes Foundation for the large number of wonderful images from the Louis and Antoinette Thuillier Collection.

Finally my thanks to Cobber, for surviving the war and its bitter aftermath in Ireland, and for telling his children something of what he went through. I hope there is not too much in these pages that he would have found cause to dispute, though I know there is much he could have added.

Phillip Tardif

Glossary and Abbreviations

Adjutant	An officer who assists the commanding officer in the details of his command
APM	Assistant Provost Marshal – responsible for enforcing military discipline
ASC	Army Service Corps
AO	Army Order
Bar	Additional award of same medal, usually displayed as a clasp on the ribbon of the first medal
Batman	An officer's servant
Bde	Brigade
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BET	*Belfast Evening Telegraph*
Blighty	A wound serious enough to have one shipped to hospital in England.
Bn	Battalion
BNL	*Belfast News-Letter*
Bomb	Hand grenade
Cadre	A small number of officers and men comprising the nucleus of a regiment
CB	Confined to barracks
Commission	Appointment as an officer
Coy	Company
CQMS	Company Quartermaster Sergeant
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
DoW	Died of wounds
Draft	A group of men sent as reinforcements
Enfilade	To direct fire along a trench from the side
Fatigue	A party detailed to work on trench digging or other labour
Flammenwerfer	Flame-thrower

GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding (of a division)
GSW	Literally 'gunshot wound', but a broad term encompassing wounds by shrapnel as well as bullets.
Inniskillings	Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers
Jack Johnson	A type of German artillery shell
IV	Irish Volunteers
KIA	Killed in action
KR/KRR	King's Rules and Regulations
LG	Lewis gun
LG	*London Gazette*
MGC	Machine Gun Corps
MIC	Medal Index Card
MMP	Military Mounted Police
NA	National Archives, Kew, London
NCO	Non-commissioned officer – the rank between private and officer (usually sergeant, lance sergeant, corporal, lance corporal)
NIH	North Irish Horse
OR	Other ranks – all men who were not officers or warrant officers
OTC	Officer Training Corps
Pillbox	A reinforced concrete defensive post
Pineapple	A German ball grenade
PoW	Prisoner of war
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
Quartermaster	An officer responsible for the provision of food, clothing and equipment
RA	Royal Artillery
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RE	Royal Engineers
Redoubt	A fortified defensive post
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RGA	Royal Garrison Artillery
RIrF	Royal Irish Fusiliers

RIR	Royal Irish Rifles
RIRegt	Royal Irish Regiment
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAA	Small arms ammunition
Salient	Ground projecting into the area held by the enemy, and therefore subject to fire from the flanks.
Salve	To salvage material left on the battlefield such as guns, wire and grenades
Scheme	A field training exercise
SSM	Squadron Sergeant Major
Sub/Subaltern	A junior officer – lieutenant or second lieutenant.
TMB	Trench Mortar Battery
Trench foot	A condition similar to frostbite, caused by prolonged exposure to cold and damp.
Trench fever	A bacterial infection transmitted by body lice.
Trooper	A cavalry rank equivalent to private. Men serving in the North Irish Horse were often referred to as 'Trooper'. However this was incorrect, as the rank did not apply to the reserve regiments such as the North Irish Horse.
Uhlan	German light cavalry lancer, a term used by British troops to describe any German cavalryman carrying a lance.
Ulster	In this work the term 'Ulster' refers to the most northern of the four Irish provinces, comprising the nine counties – Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Monaghan, Tyrone – and the city and county boroughs of Belfast and Londonderry.
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
WO	War Office
WO	Warrant Officer – a rank between commissioned officer and NCO

Introduction

In his account of the British Army's role in the first months of the Great War, Sir John French, its former Commander-in-Chief, praised 'the fine work done by the Oxfordshire Hussars and the London Scottish' as the first non-regular army units 'to enter the line of battle' in the Great War. He added, by way of a footnote, that 'The North and South Irish Horse went to France much earlier than these troops but were employed as special escort to GHQ.' In other words, these Irish units could not claim the distinction of being the first non-regulars involved in the fighting in the First World War.[1]

That would have been news to the families of North Irish Horsemen Private William Moore of Balteagh, County Londonderry, Private Henry St George Scott of Carndonagh, County Donegal, and Lieutenant Samuel Barbour Combe of Donaghcloney, County Down, whose deaths in September and October of 1914 were so far into the 'line of battle' that their bodies were never recovered. It would also have surprised Private William McLanahan of Garvagh, County Londonderry, who at this time 'accounted for three Uhlans and took two horses single-handed'.[2] The truth is that the North Irish Horse was the first non-regular unit of the British Expeditionary Force actively engaged in fighting in the First World War, their presence in France dating from 19 August, just two weeks after Britain declared war, and their involvement with the enemy dating from just five days later.

The men of the North Irish Horse saw action throughout the war and in almost every theatre, though mostly in France and Belgium. They were rearguard to the British army on the retreat from Mons and advance guard when the Germans were forced back to the Aisne in August and September 1914. They took their turn in the trenches on the la Bassée front, on the Ancre and at Ypres. They were at the Somme on 1 July 1916 as witness to the destruction of the 36th (Ulster) Division, and through that month cleared the battlefield of the massed and mangled bodies of the men who had fallen that day. At Messines and Passchendaele in 1917 they waited in vain for the order to advance through broken German lines. As infantry, they fought

with the Ulster Division in the assault on the Hindenburg Line at Cambrai. They were in the lines in front of St Quentin when the Germans threw all they had at them in the offensive of March 1918, fighting a desperate retreat to Amiens. Weeks later at Kemmel they faced another offensive. As infantry and as cyclists they joined the 'Advance to Victory', a three month offensive that broke German resistance and brought the war to an end.

By then the North Irish Horse was barely recognisable from that which had rushed to France in August 1914. When the war began they were a part-time reserve regiment, staunchly Unionist, and the regiment of choice for the wealthy landed gentry, farmers and rural tradesmen of Ireland's north. By the end of 1918 they were very different – professional, urban, more religiously diverse, and with officers and men drawn from as far afield as England, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia. Most obviously, they had been dismounted and converted to cyclists and infantry, retaining their 'cavalry' title in name only. Many whose service began in the North Irish Horse found themselves transferred elsewhere; they saw action as tank crews, airmen, military police and artillerymen in the European Theatre, the Mediterranean and further afield.

As many as one-in-ten never returned to Ireland. They lie in Belgium, France, England, Egypt and Palestine. Their names are inscribed amongst the ranks of the missing at Pozières, Tyne Cot, Thiepval, Cambrai, le Touret, Loos and Ploegsteert, and on gravestones in more than ninety cemeteries around the world; stones that speak of family grief and faith.

> The glory dies not, and the grief is past.
> He died for us.
> Having served his generation, by the will of God, he fell on sleep.
> In memory of our son who is sadly missed, by his father, mother, brothers and sisters.
> Not dead to those that loved him.
> Death is swallowed up in victory.

This work tells the story of these men, and all those who served with the North Irish Horse in the Great War.

Three issues arose in the writing of this work that are worth touching-on here. First, how to deal with the Irish political question? What emphasis should it be given? One answer would have been to ignore it and focus solely

on the military role of the regiment in the war. However, given the role played by the officers and men of the North Irish Horse in the Home Rule question in the lead up to the war and their continuing concern about events at home, it would have been absurd to pretend the issue was not there. The conflict in Ulster was very much a part of the character of the regiment that this book describes. So while its main focus is on the role of the North Irish Horse in the conflict in France and Belgium, it does not lose sight of events at home. It does reflect on (without labouring) the regiment's place in Irish sectarian politics and the attitude of officers and men to developments such as the 1916 rebellion and calls for conscription in Ireland.

The second issue arises from the emphasis on personal stories in this work. Inevitably the documents, both private and official, sometimes shine a light on events and behaviours which are less than praiseworthy. Should this information be included? The decision has not always been easy. To excise information too readily may smack of censorship or prurience. However, while none of the men in this book are alive, their children and grandchildren often are, and hold their memory dear. When faced with a record that shows a North Irish Horseman in a light that may be painful to his family, I posed the question 'Does it add to the narrative?' If not, I have left it out. If, however, there is some value in including the information, I have done so without using the man's name. While it may be worth reporting, for example, that an officer was forced to resign his commission due to alcoholism, there is nothing to be gained by naming him. I hope in this way to have not sanitised the story but also shown respect to the families of the men who served. There may still be instances where the story I have told does not match a family's memory. For any hurt this causes I extend my apologies.

The third issue was one of classification. Who exactly was a North Irish Horseman? The answer is not as simple as it might seem. Clearly the men serving in the five squadrons of the regiment sent to France are included, as are those in the three reserve squadrons at Antrim. The men in the two North Irish Horse regiments formed in France in mid-1916 are also included, though here it gets more complicated, for one squadron of the 2nd North Irish Horse Regiment was the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons (Service Squadron), and they maintained a separate identity while part of the regiment. I have decided to include these men, provided they were with their squadron when it was part of the 2nd North Irish Horse Regiment.

The 1st North Irish Horse Regiment was dismounted and converted to a cyclist regiment in March 1918. As it retained its North Irish Horse title and

continued to draw its reinforcements from the regimental reserve at Antrim, it clearly falls within the scope of this work. More problematic was the status of the 9th (North Irish Horse) Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers. Technically this was not a North Irish Horse regiment. Originally called the 9th (Service) Battalion, Princess Victoria's (Royal Irish Fusiliers), in September 1917 it absorbed the disbanded 2nd North Irish Horse Regiment, but apart from the change of name it remained part of the same infantry structure and had no links to the North Irish Horse reserve at Antrim. However, because of the large number of North Irish Horsemen who transferred to the battalion (more than 500), I have included it in the narrative. It would have been pointless and artificial to end the story of the men of 2nd North Irish Horse when their regiment was disbanded in 1917, given that so many continued to serve together in a unit that retained the 'North Irish Horse' title. However, in telling the story of this battalion, I have focused on the story of its North Irish Horsemen, rather than the other infantrymen of the battalion who had no prior service with the North Irish Horse as a mounted unit.

During the war many officers and men left the North Irish Horse to serve in other units, either as individuals or in larger groups. For example, at the end of 1916 a hundred North Irish Horsemen transferred to the 1st Royal Irish Rifles, and in the latter years of the war many 'other ranks' of the regiment were commissioned as officers and posted elsewhere. To the extent possible, this work follows their progress with these other regiments.

A note on the structure and organisation of the British Expeditionary Force

For those not familiar with the structure of the British Army, the multitude of terms used in this work such as brigade, squadron, corps and division can be confusing and make the narrative difficult to follow. Nor is it helped by the changes that occurred as the war progressed, and by the use of terms such as 'regiment' both as a generic descriptor for a military unit and as a quite specific type of unit. Set out below is a basic outline of the structure of the British Army in France between 1914 and 1918. Bruce Gudmundsson's *The British Army on the Western Front 1916* is recommended for those who wish to gain a more detailed understanding.

Working from the top, the British Expeditionary Force comprised several *armies*, each commanded by a general. Each army comprised a number of *corps*, commanded by a lieutenant general. Within each corps was a number

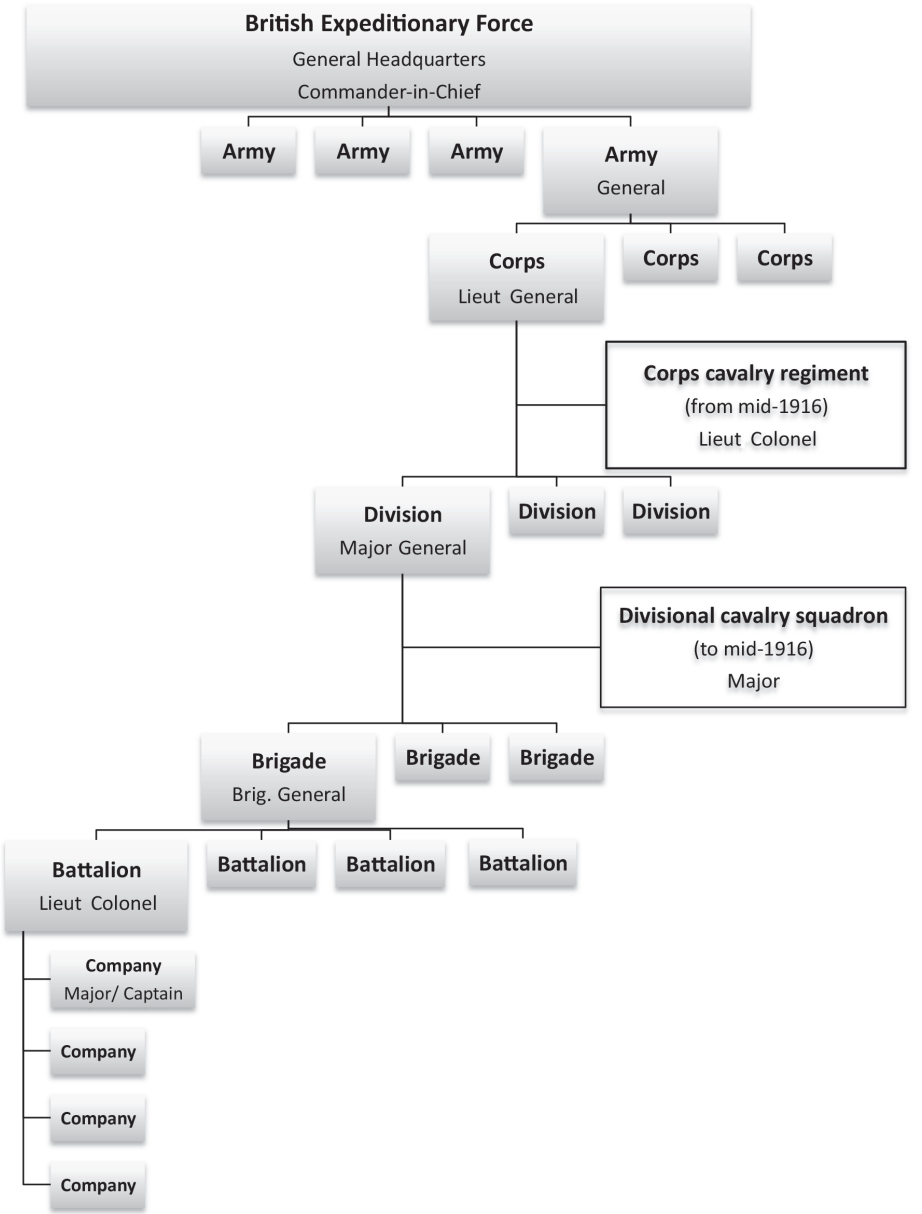


Figure 1: Outline structure of British Expeditionary Force.

of *divisions*, usually three, commanded by a major general. Divisions comprised three infantry *brigades* (commanded by a brigadier general), within which were four *battalions* (three from February 1918), commanded by a lieutenant colonel. The battalion was the key fighting unit in this structure. It was the battalion that the ordinary soldier saw as the unit to which he belonged, and it was the battalion's badge that he wore on his cap. A battalion comprised just over 1,000 men at full-strength. Battalions were divided into four *companies*, which in turn were divided into four *platoons*, each comprising four *sections*.

A number of cavalry divisions also served in the British Expeditionary Force and, like the infantry, each division comprised three brigades. Each brigade comprised three *regiments*, with three *squadrons* to a regiment and four *troops* to a squadron. (Thus the cavalry regiment was roughly equivalent to an infantry battalion, the squadron equivalent to a company, and the troop equivalent to a platoon.) Not all cavalry squadrons formed part of a cavalry division. From the beginning of the war, each infantry division had attached to it a squadron of cavalry to act as its eyes and ears and to assist with communication. This was the role assigned to each squadron of the North Irish Horse. However, in mid-1916 the system of divisional cavalry squadrons was abandoned. Instead, regiments were formed by bringing together three divisional cavalry squadrons. These were assigned to army corps as their corps cavalry regiment. Thus, for example, A, D and E Squadrons of the North Irish Horse left their divisions, combined to form the 1st North Irish Horse Regiment and were attached to VII Corps.

The figure opposite is a simplified representation of the British army structure, showing where the North Irish Horse squadrons and regiments fitted-in to the picture.

Notes

1. French, *1914,* p.294.
2. MacDonagh, *The Irish at the Front,* p.36.


Ulster and the north of Ireland
1914-19
Portrush
Portstewart
Muff
Coleraine
Ballymoney
Limavady
Londonderry
Manorcunningham
Letterkenny
LONDONDERRY
ANTRIM
Ballymena
Larne
DONEGAL
Strabane
Magherafelt
Antrim
Bangor
Castlederg
Donegal
TYRONE
Omagh
Belfast
Newtonards
Lisburn
Dungannon
Bundoran
Fintona
Lurgan
Dromore
Lisbellaw
Armagh
Enniskillen
Sligo
FERMANAGH
Monaghan
DOWN
Dundrum
Keady
Banbridge
ARMAGH
Ballybay
Camlough
Newry
SLIGO
MONAGHAN
Kilkeel
Cootehill
LEITRIM
Cavan
Dundalk
CAVAN
LOUTH
MAYO
ROSCOMMON
MEATH
LONGFORD

Chapter One

1908–1914: Farmers and Farmers' Sons

The vast majority … of the men of the regiment are farmers or farmers' sons owning their own horses, and it is this type of true yeoman that is required to fill the ranks of our Yeomanry and similar corps.[1]

The North Irish Horse was formed on 7 July 1908 at Newbridge near the Curragh in County Kildare. Its immediate ancestry dated from the Boer War, when twelve squadrons of Imperial Yeomanry were raised in Ireland. Between 1900 to 1902 they sailed for South Africa, winning no lasting glory in a war that did the British army little credit.

Following the war's end, the British government decided to form sixteen new yeomanry regiments, including two in Ireland. There was some nervousness about the Irish proposal, yeomanry or volunteer forces not having been maintained there for a long time, 'owing to the unfortunate extent to which political feeling is so often carried in that country'.[2] However such objections were overruled and the two regiments, the North of Ireland Imperial Yeomanry and South of Ireland Imperial Yeomanry, came into being.

These yeomen were very much part-timers. They attended drill parades on one afternoon a week in the spring, followed by three days of rifle practice on an open range, and a two and a half week camp for the regiment every summer. The first camp was held at Blackrock, Dundalk, County Louth. In 1904 they trained at Finner Camp, Bundoran, County Donegal, the following year at the Curragh, County Kildare, then at Ballykinlar Camp, Dundrum, County Down and in 1907 again at the Curragh, where they joined the manoeuvres of the regular army.

In 1908 significant reforms were made to the structure and organisation of Britain's auxiliary forces, the object being to strengthen the ability of the Army to fight a prolonged war. All Britain's yeomanry and volunteer units were converted into a new county-based Territorial Force, comprising infantry battalions and yeomanry (i.e. mounted) regiments. The militias were disbanded and reconstituted as a new Special Reserve of the Regular Army.

This would have meant conversion of the Irish Imperial Yeomanry into Territorial yeomanry units, except that a decision had also been taken that there would be no Territorial units in Ireland. Instead they were disbanded, but replaced with two mounted regiments of the Special Reserve – thus becoming the only mounted reservists.[3] With the new structure came new names – the North Irish Horse and South Irish Horse.

The change came into effect after the annual camp at the Curragh in July 1908. The old regiments were disbanded, photographs were taken to mark the occasion, speeches were made by senior officers praising the men's discipline, and prizes distributed to the winners of various competitions. Volunteers had already been called to join the new regiment, but only about 190 came forward, the shortfall attributed to a greater commitment of time required for training. To balance this, the pay was much improved. Each man would receive £5 a year, plus 1s 2d per day for each of the twenty-four days of annual camp, at which he also received allowances for messing and forage for his horse. His uniform, saddlery and equipment were provided, though he had to bring his own boots.

The North Irish Horse comprised four squadrons, based at Belfast (A Squadron), Londonderry (B Squadron), Enniskillen (C Squadron) and Dundalk (D Squadron). Headquarters was at Skegoneill Avenue, Belfast. Each squadron maintained a peacetime establishment of six officers and 112 men. In the event of war the regiment was required, at forty-eight hours' notice, to provide one squadron for deployment with the British Expeditionary Force, formed as a composite of the four squadrons, plus the necessary specialists (signallers, saddlers, farriers). The men were selected on a rotational basis, so that each had his year 'on call'.

The squadron thus formed would be assigned as mounted troops to an infantry division. This was a more restricted role than that assigned to the regular cavalry, which could operate independently and undertake large-scale offensive operations. Field service regulations detailed the role expected of divisional cavalry squadrons like the North Irish Horse. When the enemy was at a distance they would gather information about their movements and location, and the 'tactical features, resources, and roads of the country' in front of them. They would also fight off enemy attacks and prevent them from gathering information. When the enemy was close, their duty was to 'clear up the tactical situation' through 'offensive action'. When their division was advancing the mounted squadron would form an advance guard to scout ahead of the main body, locate and drive in the enemy scouts,

discover the enemy's dispositions, and secure any tactical points. In retreat the mounted troops would form a rear guard, the object being to check or slow the enemy's advance and thus relieve pressure on the main body. They would also be employed on outpost duty – forming 'picquets', 'cossack posts' and 'vedettes' – to give early warning of the approach of an enemy force.[4]

The Horsemen's dress uniform was distinctive, and largely unchanged from that adopted by the North of Ireland Imperial Yeomanry in 1903:

> a bottle green tunic, double-breasted, with white cuffs and collar patches and white piping along the seams, the skirt being outlined in white piping and buttons. Shoulder straps were of chain over white patches. The girdle was of white and green bands. Trousers … were dark blue with a broad white stripe down the outer seam, fitted very tightly and strapping under the half-wellington boots, which were decorated with swan-neck spurs.[5]

To complete the picture they wore white wrist gloves and a black bowler-style hat, similar to the Italian Bersaglieri, with a broad thick brim and a large plume of green feathers on the left side (earning the sobriquet 'them of the cock's plumes' from their South Irish counterparts). The regiment's badge, an Irish harp surmounted by an Imperial crown above a scroll inscribed 'North Irish Horse' was worn on the collars, with a larger and more ornate version worn at the front of the hat. The service uniform was the standard British Army khaki service-dress tunic, riding breeches and cap, with a simpler version of the North Irish Horse badge worn on the cap, and brass NIH titles on the shoulders.

For weaponry, the horsemen were issued the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) rifle. By 1914 they carried their rounds in nine-pocket leather bandoliers, with the rifle carried in a leather rifle bucket secured to the right side of the mount. Swords were not issued to the men until 1914, when they received the old pattern curved-blade cavalry sword.

From the beginning, members of the North Irish Horse held a position of prestige in the rural communities of Ulster. Despite the initial shortfall in enlistment the numbers were quickly made up, another 200 joining in the first twelve months. The recruitment process was rigorous and selective. 'Before a recruit is finally approved of', wrote regimental Adjutant Edward Mungo Dorman, 'he has to pass a riding test under the supervision of one of the squadron officers or the adjutant. The vast majority, about 90 per cent,

of the men of the regiment are farmers or farmers' sons owning their own horses, and it is this type of true yeoman that is required to fill the ranks of our Yeomanry and similar corps … The recruits are men of some substance … Here, then, we have splendid material to work on.'

Despite the regiment's popularity, each year saw the departure of large numbers of men. Enlistment was for four years, after which a man could renew for twelve months each year. Those wishing to leave could do so either by purchasing their discharge or by not renewing the contract when their four years was up. Many others simply failed to turn up – often they had emigrated. Every year saw 100 or more new recruits join the regiment, suggesting an annual turnover of 20–25 per cent.

The main difficulty for the regiment was how to build a cohesive, efficient force from men spread far and wide across Ireland's north, and therefore unable to practise any but the simplest of mounted drills at the regiment's thirty-two drill stations. The annual camp was therefore crucial, as well as being the highlight of the year for the men of the North Irish Horse, who 'regard it as a holiday among their friends, and one which does not cost them anything, and, indeed, puts a little money in their pockets. There is a considerable amount of Scottish blood in the North Irishman.'[6]

From 1909 to 1914 the North Irish Horse held its camps at Ballykinlar Camp, Dundrum Bay, County Down (1909); Magilligan Camp, Bellarena, County Londonderry (1910); Newbridge, the Curragh, County Kildare (1911); Ballykinlar Camp (1912); Finner Camp, Bundoran, County Donegal (1913); and once again at Ballykinlar Camp in 1914. The men brought their own horses, mainly half-breeds and hunters, and a month before camp received their saddlery, which had to be polished to perfection. According to Dorman:

> The annual training … takes place in the early summer, as it is found that at that time the men can most easily get away, and their horses are not then required on the farms …
>
> The discipline is very good. There is a little difficulty in getting the men to show due respect to their troop sergeants or section leaders, whom they probably call 'Bill' or 'Jim' in private life, but with whom they work wonderfully well at camp. There are very few cases indeed of offences which have to be brought before the commanding officer; in fact, the average is about two per training … There is one offence – *viz.*, drunkenness – for which the only suitable punishment is instant

> dismissal from the corps, a punishment which is felt much more by the man than any award of detention, for he has to undergo not only the ridicule of his comrades but also that of his friends when he gets home. Certain minor offences have to be dealt with rather leniently from a Regular soldier's point of view; but, on the whole, there is very little difficulty as regards discipline.[7]

Horsemen Willie Acheson and Charles Trimble described a typical day at camp:

> After reveille every morning long slacks were donned and an hour was spent grooming the horse … an officer inspected the job afterwards – rubbing the hair the wrong way for instance, in search of dandruff … As well as brush and curry-comb the men had towels, to wash out the sleep from the horses' eyes! Your name and number were taken if your grooming was considered unsatisfactory.
>
> It was remarkable how quickly the horses came to know the long trumpet note – 'Feeed' – which marked the end of stables. Immediately there was neighing and stamping of feet until they were able to plunge their noses into the nosebags, so that each troop sergeant could report to his officer – 'All fed and feeding, Sir'.
>
> Breakfast, of the bacon and eggs type with unlimited bread and butter, was quickly over and all ranks got back to the lines for a final polish-up of buttons and badges before saddling-up and filing out for parade at 8 a.m., followed by the ride out to the exercise ground or beach for cavalry drill.
>
> Back to camp for about 12 noon, when horses were watered and then well groomed until, before 1 p.m. once again the long 'Feeed' rang out from the trumpet and again noses dived into nosebags.
>
> Dinner consisted chiefly of one main course, generally of roasts one day and stews the next … There were always lashings of potatoes and vegetables.
>
> After dinner, generally nothing to do until 3 p.m. or later and so the general custom was for an hour's lie down.
>
> Afternoon parades were for lectures on general subjects – horse-management and care, map-reading, care of the rifle with aiming and loading practice and so on, specialists like the signallers and scouts having their own separate spheres of interest.

> Then, after about an hour, there would be a break until evening 'stables', when again the horses were watered, rubbed down and finally rugged up for the night with the remainder of their day's ration of hay to keep them quietly munching during the evening hours.
>
> There was usually something hot for tea, and then everyone was free until 'Lights Out' at 10.15 p.m. Some rested, others dressed up and paid a visit to the nearest town or village, while some remained in camp. There was always the canteen (nothing stronger than Guinness or Bass) and there were impromptu competitions. Perhaps a little boxing, tent-pegging for the ambitious and so on.[8]

The men also learned how to mount and ride their horses cavalry-fashion.

> In those days infantry moved in columns of four and mounted troops in columns of two or four. They formed up in line, numbered '1,2,3,4,1,2,3,4' and got into column by wheeling in twos or fours, right or left. A similar wheel brought them back into line.
>
> A very few hours taught the rudiments of this, and then the separate troops formed into their squadrons and learned to do the same all over again on a larger scale, moving in column of troops, thirty or more abreast, and getting into line, a hundred and twenty or more horses and men abreast, riding six inches from knee to knee, keeping line …
>
> They were taught reconnaissance work, advance, rear and flank guard work, one part of the squadron operating against another. Going into action three men of each section running up to occupy a position while the No. 3 of the Section took all four horses to cover until they were needed for advance or retreat …
>
> Then towards the last week, the four squadrons manoeuvred as a regiment in attack and retreat schemes, banging off much blank cartridge and enjoying it all.[9]

For the officers, the annual camp was as much a part of country life as riding to hounds. These officers were without exception wealthy landowners. A number, such as Robert (Bobby) Jocelyn, Algernon Skeffington and Arthur Maxwell were peers of the realm.[10] Membership of the leading hunts in the north of Ireland was almost a prerequisite. At least six members of the County Down Staghounds were with the North Irish Horse, or would serve with it during the war – Barrie Combe, Holt Waring, Forster Green

Uprichard, Warren Murland, Thomas Hughes and Robert Noel Anderson. Most lived locally, and those who had seen military service were cavalrymen. Habits of command came naturally to them, and their 'intimate association with the country', and consequent 'close touch with the men' won them easy acceptance as leaders from the farmers and farmers' sons who made up the other ranks of the North Irish Horse.[11]

The North Irish Horse and Home Rule

Given the make-up of the North Irish Horse – officered by the landed gentry, manned by Ulster's rural middle-class, and Protestant to the core – it is hardly surprising that they played an active role in the Home Rule crisis of 1912 to 1914. The crisis had been brought on by the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons. The intent of the Bill, to grant self-government to Ireland, was passionately opposed by Ulster's Protestant majority. Its political leaders vowed to oppose any form of Home Rule, by force if necessary. In a well-organised show of strength on 28 September 1912 more than 470,000 men and women across Ulster and elsewhere signed a 'Covenant' (for men) and associated 'Declaration' (for women), pledging 'to stand by one another in defending for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland.'[12]

In January 1913 the Ulster Unionist Council approved the creation of a paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) from the disparate volunteer units then springing up from Orange lodges across Ulster. The following year, in what would be known as the 'Curragh Incident', the British government was forced into a humiliating backdown when it became clear that most army officers in Ireland would resign or face dismissal rather than carry out orders to enforce Home Rule. And in April the UVF armed itself with tens of thousands of rifles and tons of ammunition in an audacious and impressively organised smuggling operation – the most prominent being the Larne gun-running.

Off duty, the men of the North Irish Horse participated in much of this activity. Perhaps the most overt manifestation of the blurred lines between the North Irish Horse and paramilitary Unionism was the formation in 1912 of the Enniskillen Horse. Privately raised by outspoken newspaper editor William Copeland Trimble, the Enniskillen Horse soon became a full unit of the UVF.

They held regular parades with their assorted lances and carbines, in defiance or with the connivance of the authorities, and often supported by regular army officers. A Royal Irish Constabulary report in 1914 claimed that 'with the exception of half a dozen, most are members of the North Irish Horse'.[13] Across Ulster, other UVF mounted units were raised in imitation of the Enniskillen Horse, with off-duty North Irish Horsemen helping fill their ranks.

Many of the North Irish Horse's officers also served as officers in the UVF. Viscount Massereene and Ferrard, for example, commanded the UVF's 3rd Battalion South Antrim Regiment, Lord Farnham led the County Cavan Regiment and Captain Emerson Crawford Herdman the 1st North Tyrone Battalion. Others included Viscount Jocelyn, Captain Holt Waring, and Lieutenants Robert Livsey Yates, Samuel Barbour (Barrie) Combe, John Grant and Ronald Deane Ross. Another UVF officer, Neil Graham Stewart-Richardson, a retired regular Army officer, would join the North Irish Horse on the outbreak of war. A number of these officers were active in landing and spiriting-away the smuggled rifles from the ship *Mountjoy II* at Larne and Bangor. In 1914 Barrie Combe was presented with a gift to which was attached a silver plaque inscribed with the red hand of Ulster, a ship's anchor and crossed rifles, and the text:

A SOUVENIR OF
APRIL 24–25TH
1914
To
S.B.COMBE ESQ.
FROM
DONACLONEY.

S.S."FANNY". S.S."MOUNTJOY".

God helps those who help themselves

When North Irish Horse Captain Holt Waring and his new bride returned to Lurgan from their honeymoon, they were greeted not only by the Waringstown troop of A Squadron of the North Irish Horse, but the men of F Company of the 2nd Battalion West Down Regiment UVF. Waring was commanding officer of both. Addressing the UVF contingent, Waring praised the work of the men who had carried out their duties in the recent arms smuggling episode.

Certainly those opposing home rule were preparing for every contingency, including paramilitary action, and the officers and men of the North Irish Horse played their part in the preparations.

Last peacetime camp

Despite the risk of civil war, or perhaps because of it, the mood at the last peacetime camp for the North Irish Horse in June and July of 1914 was one of excited optimism. The Curragh Incident and the smuggling of arms under the noses of the authorities had, many felt, demonstrated 'that the people of Ulster were a force to be reckoned with … and that they would have something to say if it came to any attempt being made to place them under the heel of a Home Rule Parliament'.[14]

Prominent Ulster industrialists Warren and Howard Murland, driving home after delivering a cargo of ammunition to the UVF companies in County Antrim, made a social call on the officers at the North Irish Horse camp:

> went out on the sand hills and watched the North Irish Horse. Saw Masserene, Farnham, young Maude, Bobby Jocelyn and had a great chat with Holt Waring and Barrie Combe.[15]

A shooting competition, the Enniskillen Cup, was won by Sergeant William Lockhart of Jerrettspass, near Newry, scoring six bull's eyes out of eight shots. Squadron Sergeant Major John Whiteside, a veteran of the Boer War with the Irish Yeomanry, was presented by Colonel Maude with a long service medal and praised as 'a credit to the regiment'.[16] And Lieutenant Barrie Combe wrote a letter from camp full of domestic concerns to his 'Dearest Old Girl':

> I got home safe and sound but found that I was Orderly Officer again this morning, which was rather a bore … I am rather lonely in Camp today as there is no one about, and I miss you all very much, after the nice day we had yesterday.
>
> Love to you all, my own darling, and thousands of kisses to the children and your dear old self,
>
> Ever your old, Barrie[17]

Within six weeks the officers and men of the North Irish Horse would be putting their training to the test.

Notes

1. Dorman, 'The North Irish Horse', in *The Army Review*, Vol.III, 192, October 1912, p.540.
2. *Navy & Army Illustrated*, 2 August 1902.
3. A third mounted regiment of the Special Reserve, King Edward's Horse, was formed in 1913.
4. War Office, *Field Service Regulations: Part I, Operations,* pp.88–107.
5. Trimble, *Memories of the North Irish Horse.*
6. Dorman, op. cit., pp.540–1.
7. Ibid, pp.541–2.
8. First paragraph and part of the third paragraph, Acheson in Mac Fhionnghaile, *Donegal, Ireland and the First World War*, p.88. The remainder in Trimble, op. cit.
9. Trimble, op. cit.
10. Jocelyn was the 8th Earl of Roden, Skeffington the 12th Viscount Massereene, and Maxwell the 11th Baron Farnham. (Murland, *Departed Warriors,* pp.125–6.)
11. Dorman, op. cit., pp.543–4.
12. Covenant, in *BNL*, 30 Sep1912.
13. Dougan, Quincey, 'When the UVF took to horse power', in *News Letter,* 2 May 2012 (www.newsletter.co.uk).
14. Holt Waring quoted in *Lurgan Mail,* 9 May 1914.
15. Murland, op. cit., p.126.
16. *BNL,* 16 June 1915.
17. Letter dated 29 June 1914, from Combe/Waring collection.

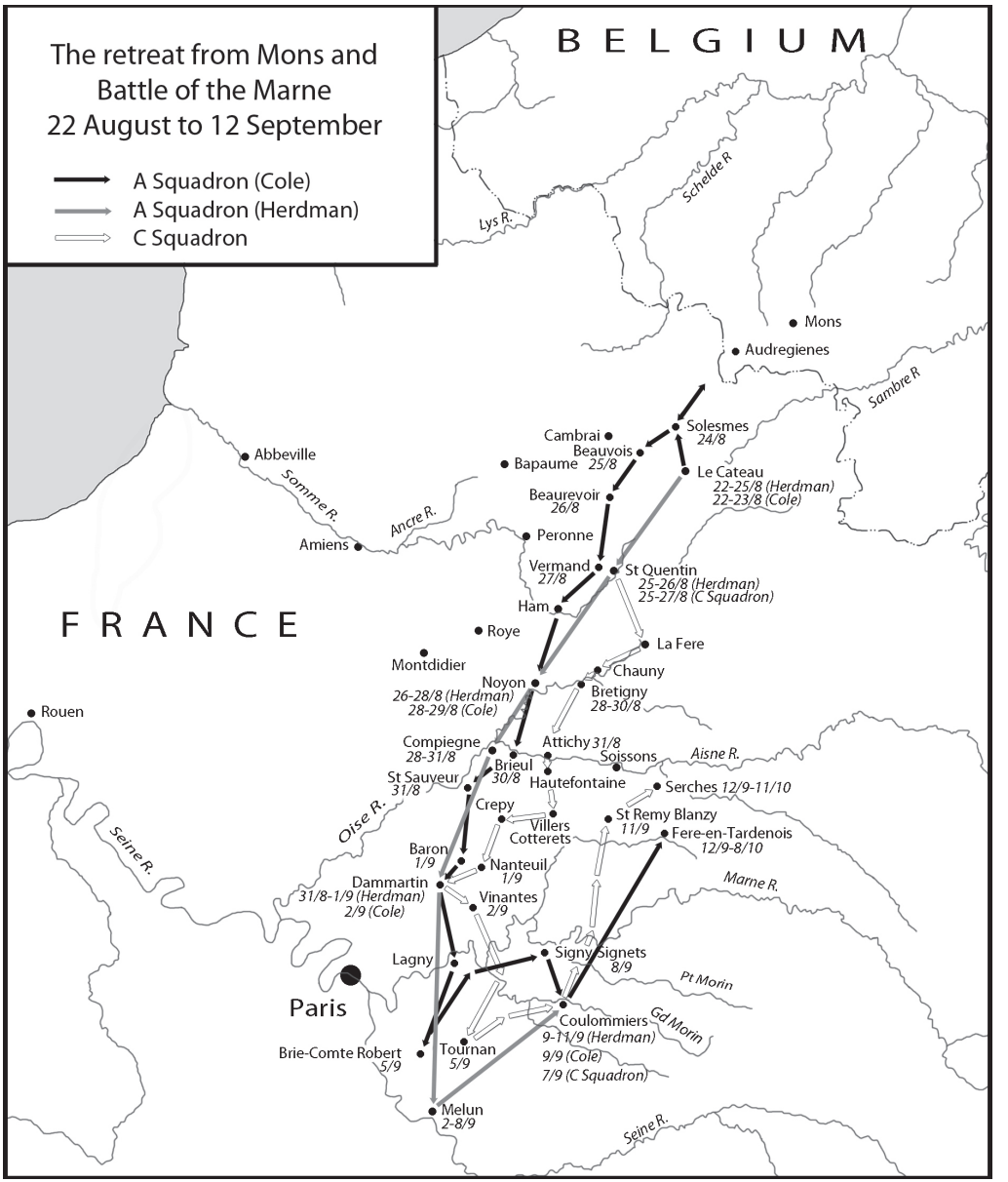
Chapter Two

1914: The Gay Careless Fox-hunters of the North

In the little room on the ground floor of the Ulster Club … big, muscular horsy men sit and sip and smoke, in the uniform of the North Irish Horse … Some talk sense, some nonsense, others say nothing at all. But they all appear to think that those who get through will eat their Christmas dinners in Berlin! … They talk of a picnic … The gay careless fox-hunters of the north finish their drinks with a clink of glasses and rise to depart to their horses and ships.[1]

On 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. In England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and in every corner of the Empire, the British military machine swung into action with great efficiency. At least twenty infantry battalions were based in Ireland, and all mobilised and converged on the port cities of Dublin, Belfast and Cork.

At North Irish Horse regimental headquarters in Belfast, mobilisation telegrams were despatched to each officer and man, ordering him to report to his nearest squadron headquarters. The regiment was required to provide one squadron for the Expeditionary Force, comprising six officers and 152 men: a major, a captain, four subalterns, a sergeant major, a quartermaster sergeant, eight sergeants, a farrier sergeant, four shoeing smiths, a saddler, two trumpeters, eight corporals, three signallers, 104 privates, seven drivers and twelve batmen. On paper, the North Irish Horse had four squadrons, fully up to the required peacetime strength of 476. It was therefore decided that they would furnish not one but two squadrons, with more to be raised later if needed. The first, A Squadron, was commanded by Major John Henry Michael Cole. The second, C Squadron, was commanded by Major Algernon William John Clotworthy Skeffington, Viscount Massereene and Ferrard. Cole, 38, was the eldest son of the Earl of Enniskillen, of Florence Court, County Fermanagh. Educated at Eton, he began his military career in the 3rd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers before joining the 7th (Queen's Own)


The retreat from Mons and
Battle of the Marne
22 August to 12 September
A Squadron (Cole)
A Squadron (Herdman)
C Squadron
BELGIUM
FRANCE
Lys R.
Scheldt R
Mons
Audregienes
Sambre R
Solesmes
24/8
Cambrai
Beauvois
Bapaume 25/8
Le Cateau
22-25/8 (Herdman)
22-23/8 (Cole)
Beaurevoir
26/8
Abbeville
Somme R.
Ancre R.
Amiens
Peronne
Vermand
27/8
St Quentin
25-26/8 (Herdman)
25-27/8 (C Squadron)
Ham
Roye
La Fere
Montdidier
Chauny
Noyon
26-28/8 (Herdman)
28-29/8 (Cole)
Bretigny
28-30/8
Rouen
Compiegne
28-31/8
Attichy 31/8
Soissons
Aisne R.
Brieul
30/8
St Sauveur
31/8
Hautefontaine
Serches 12/9-11/10
Crepy
Villers
Cotterets
St Remy Blanzy
11/9
Fere-en-Tardenois
12/9-8/10
Oise R.
Seine R.
Baron
1/9
Nanteuil
1/9
Dammartin
31/8-1/9 (Herdman)
2/9 (Cole)
Vinantes
2/9
Marne R.
Lagny
Signy Signets
8/9
Pt Morin
Paris
Coulommiers
9-11/9 (Herdman)
9/9 (Cole)
7/9 (C Squadron)
Gd Morin
Brie-Comte Robert
5/9
Tournan
5/9
Melun
2-8/9
Seine R.

Hussars. He had served with the Hussars in the Boer War. Massereene, 40, was the eldest son of Clotworthy John Skeffington, 11th Viscount Massereene. He too had served in the Boer War, with the 17th Lancers. Wounded at Dewetsdorp, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and twice Mentioned in Despatches.

The men of the North Irish Horse said their farewells to friends and families and reported for duty. One, Private Hugh Bennett, was not so lucky. Bennett, a section leader of the Dungannon battalion of the UVF, had been in Castlecaulfield paying farewell visits before joining his regiment. While cycling home an unidentified man fired on him with a revolver, wounding him twice. He would later recover and rejoin the regiment but, due to a re-emergence of childhood epileptic seizures, was discharged as medically unfit.

Others found an easier path to mobilisation. Willie Acheson, for example,

> had just got back from the 1914 camp and still had his harness at home when war-alert was announced. All went to the barracks in Enniskillen … Apart from an odd parade and routine duties they hadn't much to do; after five o'clock tea he could cycle home and be in the barracks again by 10 p.m. After about ten days of this Lord Enniskillen addressed them: 'Good news men. I have been in communication with the War Office and we've been ordered to entrain tomorrow at 7 a.m. for France. All ranks are confined to barracks'.[2]

Willie Acheson was attached to A Squadron, which had begun entraining at Belfast for the Curragh on Thursday 6 August. Here the men drew their equipment, resumed training, and tried to contain their excitement. Meanwhile in Belfast the officers and senior NCOs at regimental headquarters, now located in a vacant furniture repository in Great George's Street, worked hard to bring together the numbers for the second squadron. It didn't take long. The Horsemen continued to answer their mobilisation notices, and the books were opened for new recruits on Saturday 8 August. Some of the recruits were far from typical. Many of Ulster's well-to-do were so keen to be 'in it' that they volunteered to serve as privates rather than wait for a commission. They included James Kenneth MacGregor Greer, the son of a prominent Ballymoney solicitor, who was studying law at Dublin's Trinity College, and 27-year-old 'gentleman' Leslie Ernest McNeill of Stranocum, County Antrim. Richard Annesley West, a member

of an old County Fermanagh family and a veteran of the Boer War, knew that his appointment as an officer would come through soon, but, it seemed, not soon enough for him to sail with C Squadron. According to Squadron Sergeant Major Trimble:

> as the time for the departure of the squadron came near, [Mr West] wired the War Office asking that his commission be confirmed. There was not any reply to that nor to a further telegram, so he sent yet one more wire, this time 'reply paid'. The answer came, that he must wait his turn.
>
> Mr West would not wait. Late one night, a day or two before the Squadron left Belfast, he came into the makeshift orderly room in Great George's Street and awakened the author of this article, who was sleeping on a stretcher on the floor.
>
> 'Fill in an attestation form for me,' he directed and added forcibly that he was not going to wait for the War Office gazetting but would go to France as a trooper. The Form was filled in and Mr West took it away and shortly afterwards brought it back, duly signed by Lord Massereene.

'Private' West was immediately given command of a troop, allowed to wear an officer's uniform (though without any badges of rank), and lived in the Officers' Mess. His commission came through in September.

As A and C Squadrons awaited orders, the regular Army regiments that had been based in Ireland sailed for France. Joining them was one North Irish Horseman, Sergeant Walter James McCartney, who would thus become the first man of the regiment to land in France.

> Mac … was quartered in the furniture store in Great George's Street in Belfast at the time a part of the Expeditionary Force was embarking there, when a message was received asking if the NIH had anyone who understood wireless – then quite in its infancy. The Horse rose to the occasion: they had McCartney, who had learned something about wireless with the Ulster Volunteer Force. It did not matter where he learned it. What did matter was that here was a man who could replace a sick operator on a transport due to leave that night for France. And so off Mac went, to return a week or two later full of stories of the landing of the BEF.[3]

On 16 August A Squadron received its much awaited embarkation orders. It had been a frustrating wait, watching the regulars go on ahead of them, but at last the squadron rode to the docks, to an enthusiastic send-off from the citizens of Dublin.

Embarking the men on the SS *Architect* was a simple task, but the job of loading the horses was one for experts. These were a mixed lot, but generally of good quality. Not surprisingly the officers had brought their own, and usually more than one. For the most part the men were given their horses from the remount depot. Government agents were then scouring the country for horses to buy for the various arms of the service. At least some of the men, however, were able to bring their own.

On 17 August the *Architect* sailed from Dublin's North Wall quay. It was just thirteen days since war had been declared, and eight since the British Expeditionary Force had begun landing at le Havre and Boulogne in France. On board were the six officers commanding A Squadron – Major Cole, Captain Emerson Crawford Herdman, Lieutenants Robert Soame Jocelyn, David Alfred William Ker and Ronald Deane Ross, and Second Lieutenant Thomas William Gillilan Johnson Hughes – and 166 other ranks, plus a small number of Army Service Corps men. Also on board was B Squadron of the South Irish Horse. The journey to France was uneventful, the men kept busy with the trials of 'looking after a strange horse which had become extremely nervous in his floating stable'. And while Arthur McMahon and Willie Acheson would later speak disparagingly of the comforts of the 'tramp steamer' or 'coal-boat', most were too excited by the thrill of adventure to notice.[4] The *Architect* docked at le Havre on 19 August.

C Squadron wasn't far behind. On 20 August 159 men of the squadron sailed from Belfast, followed the next day by another nineteen.[5] One who missed the boat was 23-year-old William Martin from Castleblayney, County Monaghan. Martin was discovered absent on 18 August. Two months later he turned himself in and was court martialled for desertion and losing his kit. He escaped with the relatively mild sentence of thirty-five days detention and loss of pay.

For the officers, this was the beginning of a grand adventure. A fellow officer, Frank Crozier, later described an encounter on the eve of C Squadron's departure:

> In the little room on the ground floor of the Ulster Club – that holy of holies – big, muscular, horsy men sit and sip and smoke, in the uniform

> of the North Irish Horse. Their blood is up and they are proud. Why not? Are they not to accompany the British Expeditionary Force to France? They are not regular soldiers – though many of them have been – yet they are chosen, on account of merit, to accompany the greatest, hardest, best trained, most gentlemanly little army the world has ever seen, on the greatest adventure the world has ever known. Truly they have reason to be proud! Some talk sense, some nonsense, others say nothing at all. But they all appear to think that those who get through will eat their Christmas dinners in Berlin! A few have had experience of war, though none of them knows anything of modern combat. They talk of a picnic …
>
> The gay careless fox-hunters of the north finish their drinks with a clink of glasses and rise to depart to their horses and ships, and as they do so a waiter hands me a letter on a salver … All eyes are on me, for the cover is oblong in shape and official in character. There is silence. I read, put the letter in my pocket, and lean back in my chair.
>
> 'Coming with us?' asks one sportsman.
>
> 'No,' I reply, 'not yet. I am to join the Royal Irish Fusiliers in Dublin, and raise a company.'
>
> This announcement is received with a roar of laughter by the departing horse soldiers as they leave the room.
>
> 'Hope your company will be well trained, Cro,' says one, Stuart by name, 'by the time we get back! You'll have to hurry up!'[6]

Among the exclusive band of nineteen who sailed on 21 August were C Squadron's six officers: Major Viscount Massereene and Ferrard, Captain Eustace King-King, and Lieutenants Neil Graham Stewart-Richardson, John Vanner Gilligan, John Grant and Samuel Barbour (Barrie) Combe. (Ironically, Barrie Combe's brother-in-law Ruric Waring had only just written to Combe's wife 'What are Barry & Holt doing. I hope they have not been fools enough to go to Belgium.'[7] 'Belgium' was exactly where Combe was headed, and Ruric's brother Holt would follow within months.) The others included four last-minute 'gentlemen recruits' destined for rapid promotion – Privates West, Greer and McNeill (mentioned earlier), and Lance Sergeant Worship Booker. One of these, presumably Greer or McNeill, had so little military experience that he 'had to be shown how to load a rifle while on the troop ship'.[8]