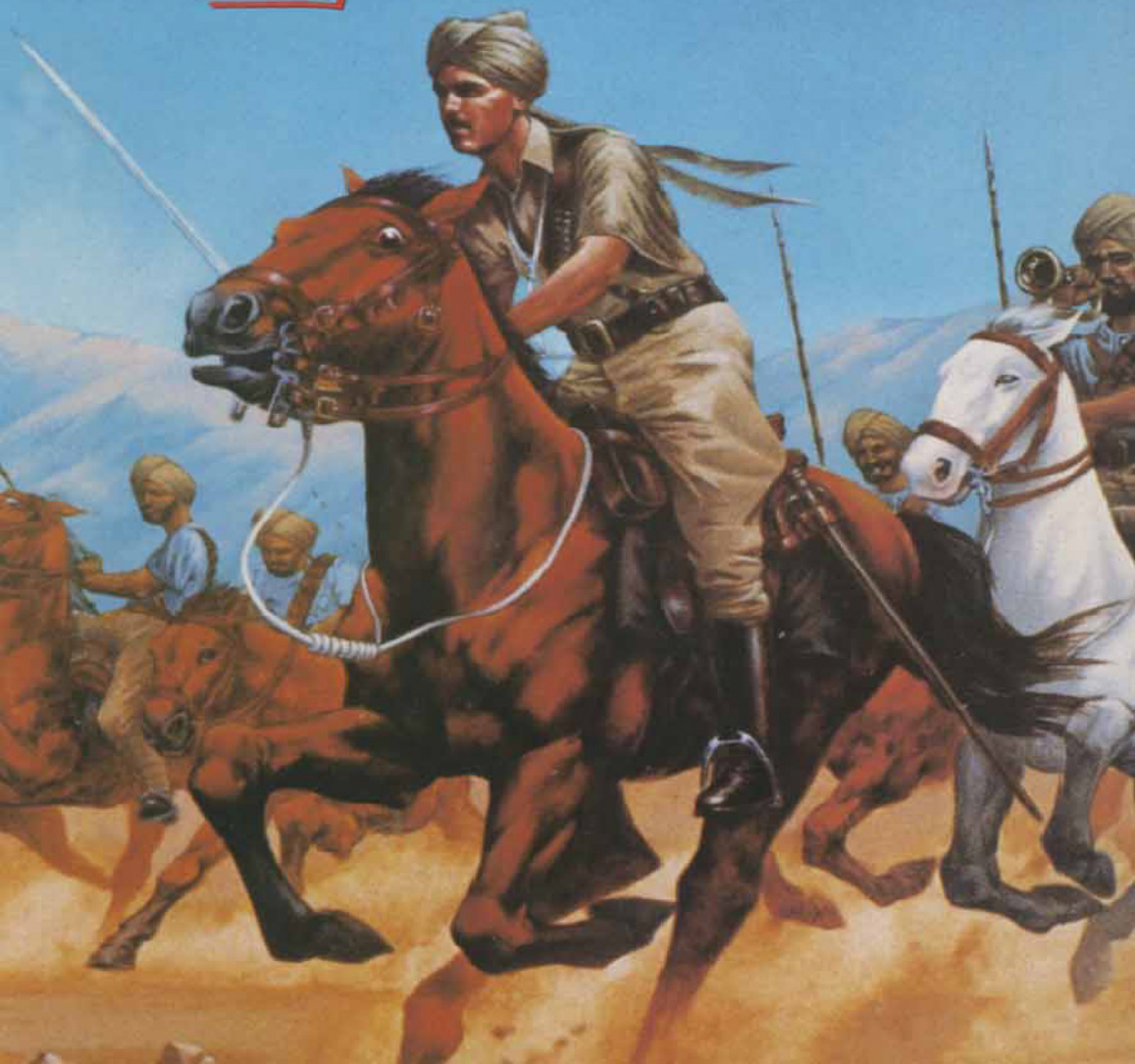
THE LAST OF THE BENGAL LANCERS

FRANCIS INGALL



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Francis Ingall

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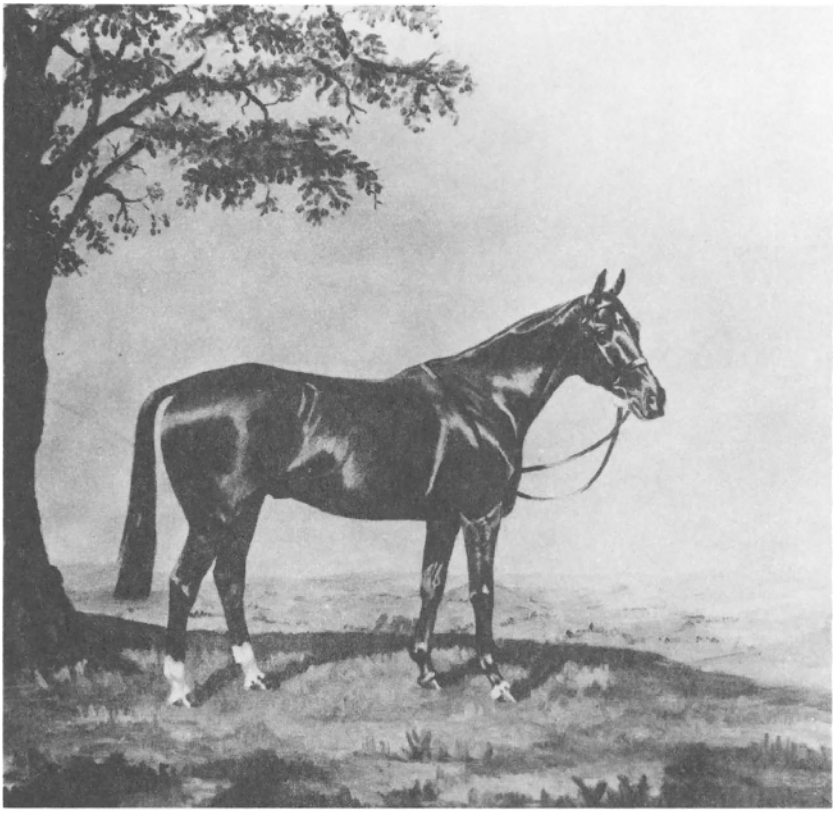
To my charger Eagerhart



and all the brave cavalry horses

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Foreword

The images of the Raj evoked in Brigadier Ingall's memoirs will delight not only many of an earlier generation who served in British India, but also a younger audience enamoured by the grandeur and idiosyncracies of a bygone era. The author's formidable knowledge and deep understanding of the people and their traditions enable him to write with the grace and ease borne of familiarity. In a web of tales encompassing interesting events and charming encounters, Ingall brings to life this fascinating period in the history of the sub-continent.

Ingall's rich and varied experiences span the pre-independence era to the formative phase of Pakistan's development when he was called upon by Jinnah to establish the Pakistan Military Academy in 1947 – an achievement for which he was awarded an OBE by King George VI. The latter part of the book focuses on the establishment of the Pakistan Military Academy which is today recognized as one of the finest institutions of its kind in the developing world.

It was while Brigadier Ingall was Commandant at the PMA (1947–1951) that I had the good fortune to have been a cadet. He inspired us with his love of independence and spirit of adventure which is so candidly reflected in his book. The Pakistan Army will always remain greatly indebted to him. *The Last of the Bengal Lancers* is a fine specimen of its genre and will no doubt be appreciated by all those interested in the Raj and its immediate aftermath.

(Ejaz Azim)
Ambassador of Pakistan
to the United States

9 September, 1986

Reveille

Cavalry trumpets with their flat blare have always appealed to me more than the bugle's shrill demand.

I was sleeping peacefully in my camp cot when I was awakened by reveille sounded by the massed trumpeters of the 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Bengal Lancers. As I turned over, my orderly presented me with a mug of steaming tea and some shaving water. Outside I could hear the stamping and snorting of six hundred horses, heaving themselves to their feet as their riders prepared them for the day's action.

The regiment was encamped at Bara Fort, ten miles from Peshawar, at the edge of the Kajauri Plain. The month was October, 1930, and already the promise of the cold weather was apparent. Mist was rising from the river and there was a nip in the air. The rising sun, already tinting the swaying tops of the sugar cane, illuminated the stark tribal-occupied mountains to the west.

I shaved and washed, donned my breeches and boots and repaired outside my tent to have my khaki *pagri* (turban) tied around my head by my orderly.

As soon as the horses were groomed, watered and fed, the men and officers gathered for a quick meal before moving out of camp. Everyone was aware of the overall plan as the CO had briefed us all the previous evening. The officers in turn had explained our job to the *sowars* (troopers) and we had settled down for the night.

Such was the routine beginning of the day when first I went into battle, riding forth on my charger, sword in hand, much as my predecessors had done at the battle of Tel-el-Kebir in 1882.

1

The Bengal Lancers

What is a Bengal Lancer? To explain fully, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the Indian Army, to the days when it was a private army, owned and paid for by the East India Company. After the Mutiny this private army became an Imperial force comprising three administrative armies in India: the Bengal Army, the Madras Army and the Bombay Army. There were also a few lesser contingents such as the Hyderabad Contingent, the Central India Horse and the Frontier Force in the Punjab.

Of the cavalry, the majority of regiments in the Bengal Army were lancers; hence they became known as 'Bengal Lancers'. These units did not necessarily serve only in the Presidency of Bengal; they were stationed all over India. In the course of time they served all over the world.

My regiment was formed in 1857; or more correctly, the two regiments that were the ancestral units of my regiments were formed in 1857–8. These were the 13th and 16th Bengal Lancers. They changed their names and their titles several times throughout their existence. At one time the 16th was known as the 16th Bengal Cavalry; at another it was known simply as the 16th Cavalry. The 13th Bengal Lancers, on the other hand, retained that basic title throughout its history.

There is a humorous story concerning the title of the 13th. In 1882 the Regiment joined the British forces in Egypt. At the battle of Tel-el-Kebir the Egyptian Army was soundly trounced by the British. The 13th Bengal Lancers took part in a highly successful charge on that day and this action was observed by His Royal Highness the Duke of Connaught, the youngest son of Queen Victoria, who was then commanding the 1st Guards Brigade

with the Expeditionary Forces. When the battle was over, he said to the Lieutenant-Colonel commanding the Regiment, 'Colonel, I congratulate you. I am going to ask Her Majesty that I be appointed Colonel-in-Chief of your Regiment. In future, you will be known as the 13th Duke of Connaught's Own Bengal Lancers.' Well, the Colonel didn't go for fancy titles at all and he thought that '13th Bengal Lancers' was sufficiently distinguished for him or anybody else. He had the temerity, so history relates, to say that he didn't wish to have his Regiment known as the Duke of Connaught's anything!

But Her Majesty at Windsor decided otherwise; the Duke was duly appointed. On his return to India the Colonel complained to Army HQ and argued that, while he would of course accept HRH as the Colonel-in-Chief, there was no need to encumber the Regiment with a fancy title. He must have had some influence. In subsequent army lists the 13th appeared as 'The Duke of Connaught's', the possessive 'Own' being omitted.

If the student of the history of the Indian Army is confused by royal titles it is understandable. Another regiment, the 31st Bombay Lancers, was also awarded the title of 'Duke of Connaught's Own' for their part in another action at a later date, 1890. They were known as the *Duke of Connaught's Own* while the 13th continued to be known as the 13th *Duke of Connaught's* Bengal Lancers.

This is even more confusing to people looking through the Army List because in 1921, when the size of the British and Indian Armies was reduced, many regiments were amalgamated – including the 13th and 16th Bengal Lancers, which were thereafter known as the 6th Duke of Connaught's *Own* Lancers. At the same time, the 31st and 32nd Bombay Lancers were merged to form the *new* 13th Duke of Connaught's *Own* Lancers.

It was to the 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers that I was gazetted in 1930. Strictly speaking, from 1921 onwards there were no longer any regiments with the name 'Bengal' in their title, but those lancer regiments who traced their origin to the old Bengal Army were often referred to as 'Bengal Lancers'.

When my Regiment went to the Middle East and Europe during the Second World War, the press always referred to us as 'a famous regiment of Bengal Lancers'. I suppose they thought they were doing the right thing as far as security was concerned, but I'm quite sure the Germans knew our full title anyway.

To return to the question: what is a Bengal Lancer? In my view, although there were many fellows who joined my own Regiment from civilian life during the Second World War, and served with distinction, they were not Bengal Lancers in the true sense of the term. In other words, when I joined

my Regiment in 1930, the Regiment was horses, the *sowars* (troopers, enlisted men) carried lances, and the officers carried sabres and pistols. The Regiment had the same sort of organization and was doing the same sort of job as the 13th Bengal Lancers were doing when first raised in 1857. Later, of course, that changed. In 1940 the 6th Lancers was mechanized and became a light armoured regiment, reorganized and re-equipped to play a distinguished part in the Second World War.

With the passing of the horse, an era ended. The Bengal Lancer officer, mounted on his charger with sword in hand, had become an anachronism. As an officer who served in the 'horse days' and took part in mounted action, I can claim to be one of the last of the Bengal Lancers in the traditional sense.

How does a lancer regiment differ from other cavalry regiments? Strictly speaking, there are few differences. In a general way, all mounted units can be called cavalry and the horsed regiments of the Indian Army were referred to overall as the Indian Cavalry. This was true despite some variation in the regiments; some carried sabres while others were equipped with lances.

When I joined in 1930, there were twenty-one Indian cavalry regiments, all with different titles. There was the 1st Duke of York's Own Lancers (Skinner's Horse – so named for James Skinner who raised the Regiment). For a similar reason, the 2nd Royal Lancers was called Gardner's Horse; and my own Regiment, the 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers, also had a secondary title, Watson's Horse, the 13th Bengal Lancers having been raised in 1858 by General John Watson VC.

Technically all Indian cavalry regiments were light cavalry. In the nineteenth century there were two types, light and heavy. The light cavalry were all lancers and hussars. They had lighter horses, lighter equipment, smaller men and carried a lesser load. They were the eyes of the army, performing duties that were later performed by reconnaissance units or armoured car regiments. Their primary job was not shock action, although the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava is a famous exception. Other regiments were heavy cavalry: dragoons, dragoon guards and life guards. They had bigger horses and bigger men who were armed with a heavy sabre. They were the shock troops of horsed cavalry days. All were armed with a cutting sabre in the days of Balaclava and Waterloo, but in 1910 our cavalry regiments were issued with what is known as the pointing sabre – a sword with a very sharp point at the end of a blunt blade. The idea was that you skewered your opponent as opposed to cutting his head off!

Despite – or perhaps because of – our Regiment's lengthy title, for general purposes we were referred to as '6th Lancers'. On our shoulders we wore simply '6L'. All the enlisted men were Indian and all the officers were

British. This was not necessarily the case in other cavalry regiments, some of which had a proportion of Indian officers while others were wholly Indian (I refer to Indian officers holding the King's commission, as opposed to the Viceroy's commission; the latter were known as warrant officers). In my day the entire complement of officers in the 6th Lancers was British. Our complement was twelve officers, but all regiments had more than that figure, because a number of officers officially borne on the strength of the regiment were absent on extra-regimental duty.

When I joined, the 6th Lancers had twenty officers on the Regimental List. One of those in extra-regimental employ was Mo Mayne who became a famous general in the Second World War – he took the surrender of the Duke of Aosta in Abyssinia, was later promoted full general and knighted. Mo, when I joined the Regiment, was a brevet lieutenant-colonel, but was shown in the Army List as squadron commander; he wasn't even second-in-command of the Regiment, being too junior in length of service. He was away on a staff job. The authorized twelve comprised the Officer Commanding (referred to as 'the Colonel'), the Second-in-Command, the Adjutant, the Quartermaster, and the various squadron commanders and squadron officers. Most young officers had to take a turn as Quartermaster, while the Adjutant, nominated by the CO, was considered a key appointment.

There were three Lancer Squadrons and one Headquarters Squadron. We were a 'class composition' Regiment – and that needs explaining.

Prior to 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny, the soldiers of most regiments were all of one class: all Muslims or all Hindus. To incite the sepoys (Indian Soldiers) to revolt, troublemakers began to plant rumours that government-issued rifle bullets were smeared with either pig's fat or cow's fat. To prepare the cartridge for firing, a sepoy had to break one end of it with his teeth. Thus, a Muslim regiment was fed the story that it was pig's fat – and the pig, of course, is anathema to any Muslim since he considered it unclean; if he eats of the pig, when he dies he goes straight to Gehenna (hell) and suffers the torment of the damned. Hindu regiments, on the other hand, were told that the cartridge was smeared with cow's fat – and Hindus venerate the cow. The story spread rapidly through the ranks because everybody was of the same religious persuasion.

After the Mutiny, following the principle of 'divide and rule', the British started what they called 'class composition' regiments, mixing two or more different races or religions in each unit. The theory was that any unrest within one particular faction would become known to another (presumably unsympathetic) group, which would then spill the beans.

The 6th Lancers was one such composite Regiment. When I joined, one Lancer Squadron consisted of Muslims, one of Hindus and one of Sikhs;

Headquarters Squadron was a conglomeration of all three. The Lancer Squadrons each had four troops of approximately thirty-five men each. Each troop was commanded by what in those days we called an 'Indian officer' (IO as opposed to BO), who later became known as a 'Viceroy's Commissioned Officer' – a warrant officer, in fact. He did not have the powers of a British officer, and never sat on courts martial for instance, but he did have considerable powers within the Regiment. He had risen from the ranks, having started as an enlisted trooper or *sowar*, then become an NCO and later, if he were an outstanding man, become what we termed an 'Indian officer'.

There were two grades of 'Indian officer' in the cavalry: the junior was the *jemadar*, with one star on his shoulder; the other was the *risaldar*, who rated two stars. Over and above all of the Indian ranks was the *risaldar*-major who was a sort of super, super sergeant-major, as one might say in British terms. He wore a crown on his shoulder similar to a major's. Their badges of rank were slightly different to those worn by BOs and later, when they were renamed 'Viceroy's Commissioned Officers', they wore a little braid underneath their badges of rank. These were the men who commanded the 'troops', or platoons in infantry parlance.

As I have said, there were four troops in each Lancer Squadron with three sections in each troops. Sections were commanded by an NCO, either a two-striper or three-striper. These NCOs had special titles also: they were not called corporals, lance-corporals or sergeants as in the British Army. In the cavalry, a one-striper was called acting lance-*duffadar*, the two-striper lance-*duffadar* and the three-striper was a *duffadar*. He was the senior chap in the troop. Each squadron had a *duffadar*-major, the equivalent of a sergeant-major, and also a quartermaster-*duffadar*, like a quartermaster-sergeant in British terms. The overall pattern was much the same as the British Army.

When I joined the 6th Lancers we had no light automatic weapons at all, but in addition to the lance the men were armed with the .303 Lee-Enfield rifle which was carried in a 'bucket' at the back of the saddle, a sort of large leather scabbard which looked rather like an umbrella stand. The lance, of course, was carried by the man in his right hand. On the edge of the stirrup iron in which his foot rested was another 'bucket', a small leather egg-cup which supported the butt of the lance when the man was at rest or at attention. If he wanted to use the lance offensively, he pulled it out of the bucket, holding it in his right hand. He was able to use either the butt or the point, depending on the situation.

About three or four years later, each troop had a light machine gun carried on a packhorse. Rejoicing in the name of the Vickers-Berthier, or VB for short, this type of LMG was a forerunner of the Bren gun and

somewhat similar to it. Cavalry never had the Lewis gun with which the British infantry had been armed in the First World War and still was when I joined the Army in 1930. A horrendous gun, I seem to remember it had 330 working parts and 340 stoppages! The VB was simplicity itself. The first VB gun course, at the Machine Gun School, Ahmednagar, in the south of India, was attended by a representative officer from each cavalry regiment in India and I was the 6th Lancers' representative. We did not take the course very seriously, not being enthusiastic about the advent of a light machine gun for cavalry. Most of us felt that our job in wartime was reconnaissance and that the introduction of more sophisticated weapons, needing packhorses, etc., would reduce our mobility. But we had a lot of fun, not only in Ahmednagar but also in nearby Poona and Bombay, and the bridge in the mess was excellent.

The Headquarters Squadron was the administrative unit of the Regiment. In addition to the quartermaster's empire, there was a signal troop and a medium machine-gun troop, the farrier major and a mobile forge. The main basis of the Regiment's firepower was the MG (machine-gun) troop, which had four Vickers guns. These medium machine guns had been used by the British Army with a great deal of success since the Boer War. The Vickers was a marvellous gun. I think it had ten working parts and had practically no stoppages at all; it would just go on firing for ever. With a water-cooled jacket and a belt which carried the ammunition out of a box, it was one of the most reliable automatic MGs ever invented. In the MG troop they were carried on packhorses; one horse carried the gun and the tripod, and another the ammunition and accessories, including a Barr & Stroud range-finder.

The Vickers itself was similar to the US Army's Browning machine gun, but was not so precise. The Vickers had a particularly large effective beaten zone (EBZ). When the gun was fired, the muzzle oscillated up and down so that the 'fall of shot' was spread over a wide area. It was not designed to be a precise weapon at all and produced a sort of 'scatter-gun' effect. It was quite accurate laterally; it didn't wander right and left of a given target. You could set it to automatic traverse and it would spray bullets back and forth over the whole target area. It was a fine gun and really was our only artillery, since we had no mortars or anything of that nature.

In the signal troop the men had a flag with which they transmitted the Morse code, a more comprehensive method than semaphore. They also had a heliograph, which had been in use about a hundred years. This was a very intricate and attractive piece of equipment: a mirror which picked up rays of the sun and projected them towards your friends receiving the message. It had a key for sending the Morse code in flashes that could be seen over great distances. In addition to the heliograph, the signallers had lamps which

operated with a key on the same principle. Inside the lamp was an aiming device and a bulb. It was powered by a separate battery, which was rather a bulky thing to cart around, but the signaller was able to buzz the key up and down in the same way a telegraphist once did in a railway station. The light went on and off and the person at the other end could see this from quite some distance away. The heliograph was probably more distinct over greater distances. Such was the communication equipment we used to pass messages.

In addition, of course, written or verbal messages could be sent by galloper – a method not much changed since Captain Nolan attempted to contact Lord Cardigan at Balaclava, nearly eighty years before. While on the subject of the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava (1854), even in my day all young cavalry officers were imbued with what was commonly known as 'the cavalry spirit'; in other words: *If in doubt – charge!* That may sound somewhat crude, but some of the greatest military disasters have been caused by a commander sitting inert on his backside while events overwhelmed him and his troops. History also relates that quick action by a forceful character can turn defeat into victory, even in the face of great odds.

The total strength of the Regiment was about 600 men and horses. Incidentally, in the British and Indian Armies, cavalry was always referred to as a 'regiment' as opposed to a 'battalion'. An infantry regiment might have had five or six battalions, which were part of the regiment as a whole, quite a different organization to the cavalry regiment. Artillery also used different terms; for instance, there were generally three batteries of artillery in an artillery brigade. Later, the term 'regiment' was substituted for 'brigade', but only as far as artillery was concerned. It can be very confusing, even for those of us who had the privilege to serve in the Army in those days – whether we belonged to a regiment, battalion or brigade.

2

Early Days and Sandhurst

The man who first told me about life in India and whetted my appetite to become a Bengal Lancer was Colonel C. O. Harvey of the Central India Horse. 'C. O.', as he was known, was Military Secretary to the Viceroy of India for many years and at the beginning of the Second World War he was the first divisional commander of the division in which I served, the 8th Indian Division. It was sheer chance that I happened to meet C. O. through a cousin in the Royal Navy, at a time when I was considering which cavalry regiment to approach. But this chance meeting was to seal my fate.

I was born on 24 October, 1908, at my father's house, Invermark, on the fringe of Limpsfield Common in the county of Surrey, England. My father was a member of the London Stock Exchange, being the senior partner in F. D. Ingall & Co. We can trace our direct descent back to the middle of the sixteenth century; accurate names and dates do not exist prior to that time, but there is strong evidence to suggest that our antecedents were sea rovers from Uppsala in Sweden, who founded a settlement at Fortingall in what is now Perthshire round about the year AD 960. Part of the clan moved south and settled at Ingleton in Yorkshire for some hundreds of years; then, sometime in the sixteenth century, one branch of the family moved further afield, to Skirbeck in Lincolnshire. It was this branch that provided some of the early settlers in America: two brothers, Edmund and Francis Ingall, are believed to have founded the town of Lynn, Massachusetts. At about this time the American branch added an 's' to their patronymic.

I sometimes wonder whether I inherited my love for the Army from my great-grandfather, Tankerville Chamberlain Drew, who was commissioned

into HM 45th Foot in 1810 and fought under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular Campaign. A miniature portrait shows a distinct resemblance between this ancestor and myself. During the next hundred years a number of the family distinguished themselves as soldiers, the most notable being Frederick Lenox, who served in HM 15th Regiment of Foot and retired as a general. But of my immediate family none were professional army officers, although during the First World War my eldest brother, Bruce Barclay, served in the 1st Battalion The Gordon Highlanders and in the Second World War my second brother, Ivor Barclay, in the Royal Air Force. Alas, both have now departed.

When my parents at last got the message that I was determined to make the Army my career, my mother – who was Scottish – wanted me to follow my brother into the Gordons. I would have been proud to have entered this very distinguished regiment, but the great love of my life was horses; I would only go into the cavalry. So there was a lot of talk about cavalry regiments and which one should be approached. This was when I had the good fortune of meeting Colonel Harvey and decided that my future lay with the Bengal Lancers. He recommended that I should request a posting to the 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers.

The year was 1926. My housemaster at Hurstpierpoint was told to enter my name for the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. Unfortunately I had an accident, got septic pleurisy and damn near died. While I was in hospital and still feeling pretty groggy, my housemaster came to visit me. He was a priest and evidently knew that it was touch-and-go with me, for he launched into a pompous talk about life and death, at the end of which he said: 'My boy, if you go, I know you will go like a sportsman and gentleman.'

Since that time I have seen my share of death and in no way would I describe it as either sporting or gentle. Even then, feeling as ill as I did, I laughed out loud. From that moment on I started to mend and was able to pass the Sandhurst medical the next year with flying colours.

My accident did have one advantage, however. Being away from school for some months had affected my academic studies, so the school arranged for me to receive a nomination to the Royal Military College. I had never been a very brilliant scholar, and this arrangement came as a welcome surprise; although I still had to sit the entrance examination, I knew that whatever my results I would be accepted anyway.

With my name being put forward for nomination I had to have two sponsors. My father asked two old friends of the family to vouch for me, Sir Edward Clarke and Sir Maurice (later Lord) Hankey. Sir Maurice had been Secretary to the Cabinet for many years and had considerable influence in various circles; he also knew certain members of the Royal Family. This was to prove invaluable as the Duke of Connaught was, of course, Colonel-in-