FROM THE PRESIDENT

A good deal has happened in the Society since my message in the winter issue of Reconnaissance. As foreshadowed, we have now experimented with two daytime lectures in June and July and I have to report that both were very successful with above average attendances. The success rate was such that your committee will consider ways in which this part of our activity could be expanded next year. Even so, the August evening meeting was attended by a record number of members and guests. I think there were two of reasons for this. First, was the intrinsic interest in the subject and I must say that I found Rear Admiral Chris Wood’s talk of submarines enthralling. It is a special kind of person who can go to sea in a submarine. Second, the meeting was well publicised at RUSI and at least one RSL Club. This suggests that a lot of people are interested in our message – it is really a question of getting to those people.

The remainder of our meetings this year, with the exception of the Christmas party will be daytime meetings. Those will be the History Week Lecture, the Warfare in the Ancient World Seminar and the Brigadier Howard Commemorative Lecture. Needless to say, members are encouraged to attend all three lectures. Details of the lectures are shown elsewhere in this publication.

I am especially concerned about the Ancient Warfare Seminar because it is a venture into new areas of history for the Society and the financial risk represented in using a commercial venue. We would like to see 100 plus members and their guests attend. I can assure members that the Ryde-Eastwood Leagues Club is an excellent venue and that the staff manages these functions with great professionalism. Free parking is available underneath the club. The other factor is that there is a resurgence of interest in ancient warfare amongst senior high school students and at the universities. This seems an excellent opportunity to make known our activities to a younger generation and if successful there will be other fields of study we could investigate including the Medieval Wars and the Crusades. I hope to be meeting you at some of the functions I have spoken about and the Christmas Party.

John Twyford.
NOTICES

Program of Events

Thursday, 9 September, 11.00 AM The History Week Lecture held in conjunction with the History Council of New South Wales

The Auditorium, History House, 133 Macquarie Street, Sydney.

“The war in Vietnam created bitter divisions in Australian society and together with a selective form of national service that sent many young conscripts to fight in Vietnam, dominated Australian politics for a decade. Many Vietnam veterans felt that they rather than the government, had been blamed for the war.”

Note, Space is limited, bookings are essential, to vashtif@bigpond.net.au or philipcarey@unwired.com.au or to (02) 9331 1202 or 9523 2486

Saturday, 2 October, 9. 00 AM to 4.45 PM Seminar – Warfare in the Ancient World.

A panel of scholars will present their work on elements of war-making in the ancient world, including:
• Associate Professor Boyo Ockinga – Macquarie University, Egypt,
• Mr Ben Churcher- Archaeologist and Expedition Leader, Persia,
• Dr Christopher Matthew – Australian Catholic University, Greece,
• Dr Jane Bellemore – University of Newcastle, Rome.

Note: A detailed program for the Seminar is printed on Page 8 of this Newsletter

Location: The Ryedale Room, Ryde-Eastwood Leagues Club, 117 Ryedale Road, West Ryde.

Morning and Afternoon Tea will be provided. Luncheon facilities are available at the Club.

An entry fee of $20 will be charged.

Bookings are essential to john.twyford@uts.edu.au or jcrumlin1@optusnet.com.au
Or to (02) 9660 7225 or (02) 9997 2817

Saturday, 20 November, 2.00 PM The Brigadier E J H (John) Howard CBE, Commemorative Lecture for 2010

‘The Montevideo Maru – Australia’s Worst Maritime Disaster’

The Lecturer will be Mr Rod Miller, Historian and author of ‘The Montevideo Maru’ and ‘The Women of Rabaul’.

‘Following the loss of over a thousand men from Rabaul, New Britain, in 1942, many of them early pioneers of New Guinea, the post-war governments of Australia and Japan had difficulty explaining why it occurred. Rod Miller will explore the various theories of why so little is known about Australia’s greatest single loss of World War II.’
Location: the Mitchell Theatre, Sydney Mechanics School of Arts, 280 Pitt Street, Sydney.

Afternoon Tea will be available after the Lecture. An entry fee of $10 will be charged.

Bookings are essential to (02) 9331 1202 or (02) 9523 2486, but preferably by e mail to: vashtif@bigpond.net.au or philipcarey@unwired.com.au

Friday, 10 December, 7.00 PM, Christmas Meeting, Members’ Quiz Night and Book Sale

Tuesday, 11 January, 2011, 7.00 PM. Members’ Night.
Members are invited to bring items of memorabilia, or speak to a subject of their choosing for not more the 10 minutes

Tuesday, 8 February, 2011 7.00 PM Annual General Meeting

THE NATIONAL BOER WAR MEMORIAL PROJECT

We have been advertising the National Boer War Memorial Project in Reconnaisance for some time now. In the last Edition we recorded that on Sunday 30 May the NSW Committee of the Association held its first Remembrance Ceremony at the ANZAC Memorial in Hyde Park, Sydney, to honour those who served in the Boer War (1899-1902).

The South African War, 12 October 1899 to 31 May 1902, is sometimes in Australia, called the Boer War. It was in truth, the second war between the British Empire and the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the first phase of the conflict, which lasted until the end of January 1900, the mounted infantry forces of the Boer commandos rode into British territories and inflicted a series of humiliating defeats on the poorly led British forces, ending in the multiple British disasters in ‘Black Week’ in December 1899. Those set-backs roused British ire and galvanised their war efforts under the more dynamic, though ruthless leadership of Generals Roberts and Kitchener to the extent that, by August 1900, the tide of war had turned irrevocably against the Boers. The Boers then turned to mobile guerrilla warfare in which small bands of mounted infantry attacked British positions and then quickly retreated.

One of our Life Members, Colonel John Haines is President of the New South Wales branch of the Association. In the course of his speech opening the ceremony he expressed the surprise of some of us at how often people seem to think the Boer War was just a guerrilla war consisting of a few skirmishes with recalcitrant Boer settlers. In fact, the first half was a savage conventional war.

John Haines’ uncle, Malcolm Stewart served with the 6th Imperial Bushmen. Reproduced below is an extract from one of the young man’s letters home in 1900. It was certainly no picnic!

“LEFT ZEERUST AT DAY BREAK, WENT ABOUT 3 MILES WHEN THE SCOUTS WERE FIRED ON, WE WERE ORDERED TO TAKE A KOPJE.

WE GALLOPED UP WITHIN 2,000 YARDS DISMUNTED IN THE OPEN AND ADVANCED ON FOOT – WOULD DO A COUPLE OF HUNDRED YARDS, LAY DOWN AND VOLLEY AT THE RIDGE, WE HAD TO SHIFT ABOUT 400 BOERS WHO FOUGHT WITH DESPATATE COURAGE.

THEY HAD SHRAPNEL POMPOMS AND US ADVANCING, VOLLEYING EVERY TIME WE LAY DOWN, IT WAS A SPLENDID EXPERIENCE.

WHILE WE WERE LYING DOWN THE GUN WOULD HICUP AND FIRE. AS SOON AS WE WOULD GET THE ORDER TO ADVANCE THEY WOULD OPEN WITH REDOUBLLED VIGOUR.

3
The air seemed full of howling, shrieking shells and when they would strike the ground would shake again.

It’s alright to lay down and fire away but they will have volleys. It’s not very sweet laying listening to marten bullets whistling, but just as long as a fellow is banging away he doesn’t notice it.

I was waiting once and a bullet tore the ground up about a foot from my head. I cringed away and another tore past my left elbow – I wondered what on earth I ever came here for.

But still the Boers held the Kopje and did not retreat until we charged it with bayonets.

We got onto the kopje, greta rocks as big as a house – all we thought about was looking for dead Boers. I found one with his head and shoulders blown off. I got a beautiful bandolier off him – not damaged much but covered with blood.

Our fellows were like crows round dead horse – one at his food, another at his pockets, another chap, Frank Tuft and I got five bandoliers. When I pulled one of mine away his head rolled off.

We only found eight dead, one cut in two. The Boers carry their dead and wounded away in bags between two horses when they can."

You can still donate to the memorial fund at its office – Building 96, Victoria Barracks, Paddington. Donations over $2 are, of course, tax deductible.

QUOTATIONS

The easiest and quickest path into the esteem of the traditional military authorities is by the appeal to the eye rather than the mind. The “polish and pipeclay” school is not yet extinct, and it is easier for the mediocre intelligence to become an authority on buttons than on tactics.  

(March 1925)

- Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart, Thoughts on War, 1944

Operations Orders do not win battles without the valour and endurance of the soldiers who carry them out.

- Field Marshal the Earl Wavell, Soldiers and Soldiering, 1953

FEATURE

THE ANGELS OF MONS – 1914

‘Angels are optional’, declared William Temple a former Archbishop of Canterbury – a surprising statement seeing that several of them play important roles in the Scriptures (angels I mean, not archbishops).

By ‘optional’ did that head of the Anglican Church mean ‘take them or leave them, ‘regard them as legends’, or forget you ever knew them’? I guess that’s what happened to the Angels of Mons ninety-five years ago. They certainly did not receive any acknowledgement, praise or gratitude for saving the lives of many British soldiers.

It was August 1914, when powerful German hordes invaded neutral Belgium, bringing death and destruction to a peaceful population. ‘Destroy everything and spare none!’ was the order given by megalomaniac Kaiser Wilhelm II, to his large army – and so we read of the cold-blooded murder of harmless old men, women and children in several Belgian towns.
By the middle of August, Britain’s Expeditionary Force hand landed in France with the words of King George V still ringing in their ears: ‘You are leaving home to fight for the safety and honour of my Empire. Belgium, whose country we are pledged to defend, has been attacked, and France is about to be invaded by the same powerful foe.’ No wonder French people greeted our soldiers with enthusiasm, even learning the words of that popular British war song ‘It’s a long, long way to Tipperary’.

However, by 20 August that great Prussian war-machine had already crushed Antwerp, Lille and Charleroi and reached the capital city of Brussels. It was here that the Belgians (and the rest of the world) saw the ‘goose step’ for the first time in history when that mighty, conquering army marched through their streets.

Although our British forces had quickly travelled north to join up with their French and Belgian allies, unfortunately the Germans had a great advantage in numbers and by 24 August our soldiers fell back after suffering tremendous losses. The Germans were south towards Paris with a strength of about 300,000 men, whilst the British were holding a line of about 25 miles with less than 100,000. One can imagine the eagerness with which the Germans advanced towards the next town of Mons to wipe out the hated British.

In the words of Kaiser Wilhelm II to his army, ‘Devote your attention to the treacherous English and walk over General French’s contemptible little army.’

However at this point the hard-pressed British forces were ordered to retire to avoid further losses, and it was during this retreat from Mons that an amazing incident was observed by many soldiers and their officers, who spoke of the descent from on high of an angelic army which came to their aid.

Naturally not every eye-witness describes this Heavenly intervention in the same way – some thought they saw St. George on a white horse leading the angelic host, whilst others spoke of a blinding light descending between the two opposing forces, which scattered the advancing German cavalry and stopped the oncoming infantry.

Interestingly, another version was given by German prisoners-of-war who described more than just a single event, saying that several times they saw in front of the English forces, phantom bowmen led by a towering figure on a shining white horse.

Another story by British soldiers describes three angelic beings hovering in the air over the German lines and thus providing protection and an inspiration to them.

Of course, in hindsight we have to wonder why none of these eyewitnesses came forward and the end of the war to have their names and experiences recorded in official documents. However, it is a sad fact that few of the soldiers who fought at Mons survived the war because they were killed later in Flanders or on the Somme.

My father and many others who fought in that terrible war believed in the angels of Mons – maybe because the British firmly believed in the justice of their cause and were not surprised that angels gave them support against such a brutal and wicked enemy.

There is no doubt that the British Third Division was in great danger of being cut to pieces in the retreat from Mons because the German cavalry was rapidly advancing on them.

Was it just the ordinary soldier who saw this miracle? What about the officers who were there? Well, there was one (unnamed) general who did state when questioned that he had been at Mons during the retreat. He described how when the German cavalry was advancing upon our very much-outnumbered forces, suddenly he saw a bright cloud descending.

It placed itself between the German and British forces. In the cloud, he saw bright objects moving about, but could not say they were angels. (Maybe the general was short-sighted?) He did say however, that the moment the cloud appeared the Germans stopped and their horses began rearing and plunging about out of control.

Another officer, Brigadier-General John Charteris, was also with the British expeditionary Force in France and an observer as the men retreated from Mons. In a letter home, dated September 5th 1914, he wrote: -

“There is a story of the Angels of Mons going strong through the 2nd Corps, of how the angel of the Lord on the traditional white horse and clad all in white with a flaming sword, faced the advancing Germans at Mons and prevented their further progress. I realize that men’s nerves
may play weird pranks on their imagination at such times, but all the same this angel of Mons interests me – and I want to know more about it.”

These days we realize that shell shock can affect the state of mind of soldiers in battle, but why did so many soldiers who were eye-witnesses (both British and German) talk about seeing angles and ghostly bowmen? Could they all have suffered from delusions?

Today we live in an age where science and technology rule our lives, so maybe that strange luminous cloud that descended between the two armies was a natural phenomenon caused by swampy ground along the Mons canal which was a coal-mining area with many water-filled ditches and drains. Could these physical features cause some kind of luminous cloud and bright lights?

What you believe really depends on whether you agree with William Temple’s theology “Angels are Optional”.

-Florence Breed

Editor’s Note:
Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (Sixteenth Edition, 1999) records that the 3rd and 4th Divisions of II Corps under General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien were hard pressed in the retreat after their magnificent delaying action at Mons – 26-27 September 1914. A story by Arthur Machen was first published in the London Evening News crediting their preservation to St GEORGE and the angels, who, clad in white, held back the might of the German First Army by wielding longbows and raining arrows on the enemy. For some, imagination became a reality and the Legend of the Angels of Mons was born.

BOOK REVIEWS

REDCOAT DREAMING
By Craig Wilcox, Cambridge University Press, 180pp, $39.95 incl. GST.
ISBN 978-0-521-19360-3 hardback

Today, unless one is standing inside the walls of Victoria Barracks, it is difficult to realize that Sydney was once a garrison town. A glance at the number of Wellington and Waterloo streets listed in a Sydney street directory however serves as a reminder. It was these reminders that Sydney was home to British regiments for over a century that has inspired the author of this work.

Throughout the book, it is clear that Dr Wilcox is passionate about his subject. He is very much aware of the colourful relationship between the town and its visiting regiments and he uses various artefacts as metaphors for the stages in that relationship. The chapters in the book are constructed around those metaphors. By way of illustration, I refer to a few. An early chapter recalls the story of the aboriginal leader King Bungaree depicted in Augustus Earle’s painting. It seems Bungaree, in his red soldier’s jacket and cocked hat, was invested with some authority among his own people by these garments. The next chapter is based on the life and times of a young officer named Spicer Cookworthy whose portrait is now in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Here is a very youthful face surrounded by gold braid and scarlet cloth. The chapter entitled Daughters of the Regiment catalogues the romantic attachment between the daughters of Sydney society and the young officers of the regiment. This is told from pages from Miss Blanche Mitchell’s diary written in 1858. The Victoria Cross awarded to Frederick Whirlpool during the Indian Mutiny forms the basis of another chapter. Whirlpool ended his days as a school teacher in Windsor NSW very much ravaged by his liking for strong drink. Alphonse de Neuville’s painting of The Defence of Rorke’s Drift forms the basis of a chapter entitled Cadmium and Canvass. This perennially popular work is now in the Art Gallery of NSW.
The book includes vivid descriptions of how the regiments added to the social life of Sydney with band music, balls, public parades and drills. Each of the chapters in the book is clearly well researched with extensive footnotes and a detailed index. It is a scholarly work as well as being an exciting reading experience. The artefacts referred to are reproduced on beautifully executed colour plates.

John Twyford.

LIGHT HORSE A History of Australia’s Mounted Arm
By Jean Bou, Cambridge University Press, 361pp, $59.95 incl. GST.
ISBN 978-0-521-19708-3 hardback

This book started life as a postgraduate thesis with the benefit of extensive references to original material and being the subject of peer review. In his introduction, the author makes the point that the mounted soldier is one of the most evocative symbols in Australian military history. These mounted soldiers fought on the veld of South Africa, the trenches of Gallipoli, the sands of Sinai and the rock hills of Palestine. The author in his scholarly approach distinguishes between the glamour and military achievements of the light horse. The book traces the amalgamation of the various state pre-federation mounted soldiers to the formation of the light horse in 1901 after federation. The officer responsible for this was Major-General Sir Edward Hutton, a British officer, who in establishing the light horse had regard to the needs of the Empire. The work notes the differences between the three categories of mounted troops namely: cavalry, mounted rifles and mounted infantry. During the history of the light horse each of these formations was utilised.

The book is iconoclastic in many ways contradicting some of the popular images of the light horse. One theory subscribed to by Major-General Hutton was that country lads who were good shots and capable horsemen would make natural troopers and the mounted rifle formation was settled on. This view was derived from observation of the Boers. Although the light horse had some success in South Africa, it was found that the Australian troopers lacked military skills and the ability to properly care for their horses. A consequence of this was the high death rate of large Australian horses that could not adapt to South African feed.

Needless to say, a book on the Australian light horse needs to deal with the campaign in Palestine. The treatment is detailed identifying the units in particular engagements. After Beersheba, as mounted rifles, some units were converted back to cavalry because the sword was a more effective weapon to deal with the fleeing enemy.

The post World War I history of the light horse is one of change. The thinking prevailed that these units should be country based militia formations with small permanent staffs of officers and NCO’s. Most were under establishment as it was difficult to recruit troopers. The troopers needed to be members of the middle classes as ownership of a horse was essential. In the 1930’s lack of good mounts led to the substantial mechanisation of the light horse; their mounts being replaced by trucks and the formations constituted as machine gun regiments. Some mounted infantry remained operating in areas inaccessible to motor vehicles. In World War II light horse troops were mounted for limited purposes in Syria, New Guinea and Australia. In 1944, the remaining light horse regiments were mechanised.

The work concludes with a discussion of the much-disputed photograph of the charge at Beersheba. It is well illustrated with maps and photographs mostly from the Australian War Memorial collection. The author is an historian at the Memorial. The book is highly recommended as a serious work for both students and general readers.

John Twyford.

From the Publisher

For twelve months now we have been talking about resuming publication of our long serving journal DESPATCH. It has been difficult to arrange to resume publication because too few
people and resources have been available to accomplish the task. Now planning has begun in earnest to resume publication in the first half of next year. I will be editor and publisher assisted by an editorial committee comprising Mr Joe Crumlin, Vice President, and Ms Vashti Farrer and Mr George Franki, both of whom are councillors and published authors in their own right.

Some members have guaranteed to provide material for the new DESPATCH, but we will be looking for more so that we can justify publishing two editions next year. We will be grateful if you can help.

Philip Carey

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**SEMINAR 2 October 2010**

*Program: Warfare in the Ancient World*

9.00am – 9.30am Registration

9.30 – 9.45am, Welcome by President of the Society Dr John Twyford

9.45am – 10.45am, speaker introduced by Dr Twyford
Associate Professor Boyo Ockinga, MA, DPhil. Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University
Title of Lecture: *The Battle of Kadesh.*

10.45am - 11.15am, Morning Tea

11.15am – 12.15pm, speaker introduced by Ms Vashti Farrar
Mr Ben Churcher BA (Hons), Dip. Ed., Archaeologist, Tour Leader and producer of educational videos
Title of Lecture: *The Persians in War*

12.15pm – 1.15pm Lunch

1.15pm – 2.15pm, speaker introduced by Mr Paul Waterhouse
Dr Christopher Matthew, BA (Hons), PhD. Macquarie University
Title of Lecture: *When Push comes to Shove: What was the Othismos of Hoplite Combat?*

2.15pm – 2.30pm Comfort Break

2.30pm – 3.30pm, speaker introduced by Brigadier Philip Carey
Dr Jane Bellemore, BA (Hons), MA, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Classics, School of Humanities and Social Science, University of Newcastle
Title of Lecture: *Caesar and Massacre.*

3.30pm – 4.00pm, Afternoon tea

Note: it is expected that each talk will take approximately 45 minutes thus allowing 15 minutes at the end of each talk for questions.

4.00pm – 4.45pm, Plenary Session with all speakers making comment.