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# Marksmanship, officer-man relations and the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield

**Abstract:** This article examines the British Army's decision to adopt the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) in 1903. Historians invariably assume that this weapon was developed in response to demands to modernise and improve the Army following the failures and poor marksmanship of British soldiers fighting in the Boer War. Understood this way the SMLE's selection appears inevitable and as a result is rarely examined in close detail. This stands in contrast to the wealth of attention dedicated to exploring how the cavalry fought to hold onto the *arme blanche* despite the apparent revolution in machinegun and artillery firepower. Upon closer examination, however, neither way of thinking about the changes occurring to the British Army after the Boer War does justice to the complexities surrounding the development and selection of the SMLE. Rather, by considering the manner in which different communities within the Army thought about battle, and in particular how engagements on the North West Frontier shaped perspectives on marksmanship, this article demonstrates how the Cavalry and the Indian Army played an important part in the adoption of the SMLE.

**Keywords:** Revolution in Military Affairs, Tactics, Military Technology, British Army, Technological Determinism

## **Marksmanship, officer-man relations and the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield**

If the triumph at Omdurman in September 1898 symbolises the apotheosis of colonial campaigning, then 'Black Week' in December 1899 must represent its nadir. Within the space of sixteen months the British Army had experienced unparalleled victory and humiliating defeat. In the Sudan 11,000 Dervishes had been killed for the loss of just 48 men.<sup>1</sup> By contrast in South Africa, Boer armies had won three significant battles at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso. This stopped Britain's commander, Sir Redvers Buller, from orchestrating the relief of the sieges at Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith but also prompted a national outcry and ultimately his replacement in January 1900.<sup>2</sup>

Omdurman had shown that the traditional approach to fire tactics, built around close order formations and fire by rank and volley, still had a place in the drill book. Less than two years later, the Boers had demonstrated how, through the employment of open order tactics, skirmishing and independent fire, a more radical vision of battle might operate.<sup>3</sup> In the process, the Boers appeared to vindicate the long held philosophies of the British Army's Rifle Regiments, philosophies that had framed the technical changes that brought about the introduction of the Lee-Metford (LEME) in 1888.<sup>4</sup>

The introduction of the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) was not, however, the result of the continued efforts of those in the Rifle Regiments. Rather, and as this essay will show, a number of new voices had emerged in the time between the adoption of the LEME and the Army's investigations into the selection of the SMLE. Taking a cue from the work by Stephen Badsey, Spencer Jones and a number of others, this paper examines how attitudes towards marksmanship, tactics and

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<sup>1</sup> E. Spiers, 'The Late Victorian Army, 1868-1914' ed. D. Chandler and I. Beckett, *The Oxford History of the British Army* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 206-209.

<sup>2</sup> Spiers, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> S. Jones, "'The Shooting of the Boers was Extraordinary': British views of Boer marksmanship in the Second Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902' ed. K. Jones, G. Macola and D. Welch, *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empires* (Farnham, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> M. Ford, 'Towards a Revolution in Firepower? Logistics, Lethality, and the Lee-Metford', *War in History*, 20 (2013), pp. 273-99.

officer-man relations changed as various military constituencies used the development of new rifle technology to frame their battles for institutional survival and organisational power.<sup>5</sup> In the process, what emerges is the way in which the battlefield assumptions that underpinned a traditional approach to rifle usage were challenged and no longer deemed relevant.

By exploring the views of three distinct groups with an interest in rifle technology – identified here as the Indians, the Cavalry and the Sceptics – this paper considers the underlying reasons behind changes to equipment and training that resulted in the SMLE. What becomes clear is that the pace of transformation, both in terms of technology and technique, had more to do with the appointment in 1900 of the former Indian Army commander, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, to the position of Commander-in-Chief. This reflected the fact that it was not in Africa that the British Army's heavy infantry first learnt that open order tactics, skirmishing and independent fire were a necessary adjunct to survival on the empty battlefield but rather on the North West Frontier. At the same time the Boer War cemented a consensus at least in relation to small-arms and fire tactics that had not previously been easy to come by in the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> In particular, and as will become clear, the Cavalry were extremely keen to support the development of the SMLE, primarily because a number of features of the new weapon would help to ensure their continued survival in the face of those who advocated firepower over the *arme blanche*.

### **The Indians**

Made up of officers who had served either within the Indian Army or as part of a British unit posted to defend India, the Indians were united by their belief in marksmanship skills, independent fire and open order formations. For a long time the Indians had been involved in politicking with Wolseley and Cambridge both in

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<sup>5</sup> S. Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry, 1880-1918* (Aldershot, 2008), Jones, *From Boer War to World War - tactical reform of the British Army 1902-1914* (Norman, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Ford, pp. 273-99.

relation to key War Office appointments and also with regards to the distribution of limited resources and arguments over the importance of India versus the rest of Empire.<sup>7</sup> However, whereas the LEME had generated a significant argument within the War Office the Indians had not been consulted at all. This reflected the fact that the Indian and British armies were separate institutions but it was also that many at the War Office were suspicious of the Sepoy army following the Mutiny of 1857.<sup>8</sup> After the initial defeats of the Boer War, this situation reversed and Field Marshal Lord Roberts, the former Indian Army Commander-in-Chief and his protégé Colonel Ian Hamilton (eventually knighted in 1900 and made full General in 1907) became instrumental in the selection of a new rifle.

Lord Roberts originally joined the Bengal Artillery in 1851, serving with distinction during the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857 when he won the VC and quickly rose to Colonel and Quarter-Master General in 1876.<sup>9</sup> Having become a full Major-General in 1878, Roberts established his military reputation beyond any doubt when he force marched 10,000 men the 312 miles from Kabul to relieve the siege of Kandahar during the Second Afghan War of 1878-1880.<sup>10</sup> In November 1881 he became Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army and was promoted to Lieutenant-General in 1883. A keen shot, Roberts backed the South India Rifle Association and organised his staff into a shooting team.<sup>11</sup> By 1885 Roberts was Commander-in-Chief of all British forces in India making full General in 1890.<sup>12</sup> In 1893 he returned to England without a posting where it seemed he might be forced to seek early retirement. With the departure of the Duke of Cambridge and the appointment of Lord Wolseley to Commander-in-Chief in 1895, Roberts was saved from this possibility and appointed Commander-in-Chief of Ireland. Following 'Black Week', Roberts replaced

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<sup>7</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), pp. 73-73; A. Preston, 'Wolseley, the Khartoum Relief Expedition and the Defence of India, 1885-1900', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 6 (1978), pp. 269-270.

<sup>8</sup> H. Kochanski, *Sir Garnet Wolseley: Victorian Hero* (London, 1999), p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> A. Wessels, *Lord Roberts and the War in South Africa, 1899-1902*, (London, 2000), p. xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Wessels, p. xiv.

<sup>11</sup> D. James, *The Life of Lord Roberts* (London, 1954), p. 191.

<sup>12</sup> Wessels, p. xv.

General Buller and took command in South Africa. By November 1900, having occupied Bloemfontein and Pretoria, the capitals of the Boer Republics, he returned to Britain to take up the position of Commander-in-Chief.

Roberts was very keen to improve the standard of rifle shooting within the Indian Army.<sup>13</sup> To this end he appointed Ian Hamilton to be Assistant Adjutant-General of Musketry at the Madras Army Headquarters in the spring of 1882.<sup>14</sup> After attending the School of Musketry at Hythe, Hamilton worked studiously to improve the skills of his regiment, the Gordon Highlanders. Training his regiment to shoot was not, however, what attracted the attention of the Lord Roberts. Rather, Hamilton first came to the notice of Roberts during the Second Afghan War where he demonstrated courage in retaking a picket after it had been abandoned by some British troops.<sup>15</sup> Known as a brave officer and to have served with distinction in India and during the First Boer War of 1881, Hamilton reinvigorated musketry drill in India.

This was achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, Hamilton set about completely re-writing the Indian Army's musketry regulations. Then having made several changes to the layout of the four rifle ranges in India he ensured that Indian Army officers and men could for the first time take advantage of the facilities to practise shooting.<sup>16</sup> Musketry training was no longer simply about striking a bull's eye at certain distances but also involved higher instruction on hitting moving objects such as the running deer or targets that sprung up from the ground. All conceived of in the first instance by Hamilton, the drill book and butts now reflected what he considered to be the most important aspects of rifle shooting: individual initiative and marksmanship.<sup>17</sup> These ideas were further expounded in his 1885 book *The Fighting of the Future* where Hamilton argued that, '...the paramount desideratum in

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<sup>13</sup> James. p. 191-192.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lee, *A Soldier's Life - General Sir Ian Hamilton, 1853-1947* (London, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> 'Musketry and Field-Firing', *Pioneer*, February 15<sup>th</sup> 1890, Hamilton Papers 17/2, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA).

<sup>17</sup> Lee, p.19.

a fighting man is, that he should shoot intelligently and well...'.<sup>18</sup> Later in life when questioned about his experiences during the Second Boer War it would become clear that Hamilton's views on marksmanship had hardly changed throughout his career.<sup>19</sup> That aside, what was apparent in the 1880s was that Hamilton had the full support of Roberts. With so much importance being attached to it by such a senior commander there could be no doubt that the Indian Army's skill at arms would have to improve. What would prove to be annoying for the likes of Wolseley and Cambridge at the War Office was that, despite initially rejecting the proposal, they were forced into adopting the Indian system of musketry training in order to ensure that British units kept up.<sup>20</sup> The real British school of musketry, one Indian paper commented, '...is at Simla and not Hythe'.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, competition between the British and Indian armies was not the main reason for Roberts' interest in musketry training. Rather his concerns were motivated by the problem of defending the difficult mountainous terrain on the North West Frontier.<sup>22</sup> Stimulated by the possibility that the Russians might use the country as a staging post for the overland invasion of India, Britain's involvement in Afghanistan was limited to preventing invasion and keeping the restive Pathan tribes from attacking the Punjab. This was not achieved simply by manning fixed fortifications but by regular patrols to gather intelligence and suppress tribal factions and by buying the support of key tribesmen through trade and bribery.<sup>23</sup> Occasionally, a major expedition had to be organised in order to assert British interests in the region and it was invariably whilst undertaking these activities that the traditional approach to drill came under close scrutiny. The fact of the matter

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<sup>18</sup> I. Hamilton, *The Fighting of the Future* (London, 1885), p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Evidence given by Lieutenant-General Ian Hamilton to the Royal Commission of the War in South Africa (RCWSA), 12<sup>th</sup> February 1903, Vol. 2 Minutes of Evidence, p. 112, RCWSA.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> 'Musketry in India', *Broad Arrow*, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1892, Hamilton Papers, 17/3/2, LHCMA.

<sup>22</sup> For further detail conditions found on the North West Frontier see T. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 1-4.

<sup>23</sup> Moreman, p. 5.

was that hill fighting required a fundamentally different set of tactical skills from those used by heavy line infantry.

Compared to colonial campaigning in other parts of the Empire, Afghans fought with a skill that was unmatched. Occasionally the Pathans would launch sword-wielding charges that could easily be repelled by volley fire. More fruitful tactics involved taking advantage of the terrain and shooting their enemies from behind cover.<sup>24</sup> In these circumstances close order formation and volley fire were a lethal combination: not for Afghans but rather for those British battalions which utilised such tactics. This was because standing in the open, shoulder to shoulder, made for an easy target for Pathan sharpshooters. Afghans could use the time between each volley to bob up from behind a rock to pick off individual soldiers. Winston Churchill noted that, 'tribesmen... dart from rock to rock... before the attention of a section could be directed to them and the rifles aimed... the target would have vanished...'.<sup>25</sup> Wearing distinctive dress, responsible for command and control and orchestrating the fire of their men, officers were particularly vulnerable to this kind of fire.<sup>26</sup> At the same time the LEME rifles available to British infantrymen were not light enough to facilitate snap shooting at moving targets that were often at higher elevations. As a result the technology had the potential to reinforce a tactical approach inappropriate for the terrain, a situation that was to come to a head during the Tirah Campaign of 1897-98 where the traditional approach of firing by line and rank in volleys was put to the test.<sup>27</sup>

Compared to other campaigns on the North West Frontier, the Tirah saw the British and Indian Armies facing an enemy armed with a high proportion of breech-loading and long range rifles.<sup>28</sup> While the Pathans had been armed with muzzle-loading

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<sup>24</sup> Moreman, pp. 12-13 and p. 63. On Pashtun tribal tactics see R. Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War - culture and pragmatism: a critical history* (London, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> W. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (London, 1899), p. 285.

<sup>26</sup> Churchill., p. 289.

<sup>27</sup> N. Evans, *From Drill to Doctrine: forging the British Army's tactics, 1897-1909*, (PhD, King's College London, London, 2007), pp. 27-71.

<sup>28</sup> Evans, pp. 34-35.



muskets and home-made rifles the level of threat could be countered without restricting speed of manoeuvre. However, as the tribesmen acquired rifled weapons with modern ammunition British commanders were compelled to throw out pickets on hilltops along the line of advance.<sup>29</sup> This helped to protect the main column but restricted movement. Given the large distances the Army needed to traverse in order to suppress revolt this could severely limit operations.

Bearing in mind the reforms put in place by Roberts and Hamilton, Indian Army units, especially when recruited from mountainous regions, were in a better position to face the onslaught. British battalions, by contrast, suffered, partly because of the way in which some were wedded to the drill book and unwilling to learn from their more experienced Indian counterparts.<sup>30</sup> With close order volley fire likely to result in unnecessary casualties, the tactics most appropriate for mountain warfare included skirmishing skills such as the use of open order formation, independent fire, stalking and field craft.<sup>31</sup> As these tactics could not be controlled by word of battalion commanders, officers and men had to be more self-reliant and willing to use their initiative when confronting unplanned situations. Despite their best efforts, however, the Native Army was often let down by the standard of their equipment. Armed with the Martini-Henry, a weapon which still utilised black powder ammunition, tactical achievements could be undone and positions given away when troops fired their first shot.<sup>32</sup> But technology aside, the Indian Army was in many ways better prepared for warfare in the hills compared with their counterparts in the British Army.

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<sup>29</sup> See the T. Moreman, 'The Army in India & Frontier Warfare 1914-1939', found at <http://www.king-emperor.com/Frontier%20Warfare%201914-1939.html>, site visited on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014. This also prompted British Imperial authorities to work harder at controlling the supply of weapons to the Afghan tribes. See S. Ball, 'The Battle of Dubai: firearms on Britain's Arabian frontier, 1906-1915' ed. K. Jones, G. Macola and D. Welch, *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empires* (Farnham, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>31</sup> Moreman, pp. 13-24.

<sup>32</sup> Evans, p. 46.

Given the casualties that occurred in the first year of the campaign, the Tirah expedition caused a considerable shock within the British and Indian military establishment.<sup>33</sup> The response of the Indian Army was to cement an already familiar approach to low level initiative and small unit tactics by issuing a new manual in 1900 called *Mountain Warfare*. The reaction from the War Office was to appoint Ian Hamilton to become Commandant of the School of Musketry at Hythe. Accidental injury had prevented Hamilton from serving with any distinction in the Tirah.<sup>34</sup> However, his enthusiasm for musketry made him a natural choice for General Sir Evelyn Wood, the British Army's Adjutant-General.<sup>35</sup> Having taken this new post, Hamilton was in a position to do for the British Army what he had tried to achieve for the Indian Army. At the same time, in terms of the SMLE story, the appointment was crucial for it ensured that an Indian was well placed to express their views on matters relating to small-arms. This was to prove important in 1898 when a small-arms committee was established by Field Marshal Wolseley to look at whether the LEME ought to be replaced.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of changing the infantry's rifle for a shorter weapon had first surfaced in December 1895 when Lieutenant Colonel N. Lockyer, the Chief Inspector of Small-arms (CISA), had suggested that the entire Army should use carbines.<sup>37</sup> Carbines had short barrels and were usually issued to cavalry and artillery units that needed personal firearms but whose main role did not involve the use of small-arms fire. This could put these units at a disadvantage if they were forced to take on infantry in unfavourable circumstances. This was because the carbine's shorter barrel allowed the combustion energies created in the firing chamber to dissipate before they had been fully utilised to propel the bullet. Consequently, a typical carbine was effective out to a shorter range when compared to a rifle. On the other hand the LEME carbine which had been adopted in 1894 was 9½ inches shorter and weighed 1lb

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<sup>33</sup> Evans, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Lee, pp. 40-42.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>37</sup> Letter entitled 'Carbine in Lieu of the Rifle' from CISA to IGO, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1895, SUPP 6-651, National Archive (TNA).

13oz less than the conventional weapon and was as a result considerably handier to use.<sup>38</sup> It was therefore easier to pick up and aim: an important consideration when taking snap shots at moving targets.

Nevertheless, while the carbine fired black powder ammunition it would be at a range disadvantage when compared to a rifle. However, during the early 1890s this situation began to change as a safe manufacturing process for cordite - the British design of smokeless propellant - was perfected. All other things being equal, the energy created by cordite was greater than that produced by black powder.<sup>39</sup> As a result muzzle velocities could be increased and bullets propelled with a flatter trajectory. Smokeless powders consequently had a number of tactical advantages.<sup>40</sup> Flatter trajectories meant that soldiers had to make fewer compensatory adjustments to their aim, thereby making it easier to hit a target. This reduced ammunition wastage. At the same time, this new ammunition ensured the shooter's position was not revealed when he fired. This would not be such an important consideration when fighting against poorly armed foes like the Dervish, but when up against men armed with equivalent technology the empty battlefield phenomenon would be exacerbated.

As Colonel Lockyer had observed these were not the only possible advantages to come from a change to cordite. Faster muzzle velocities also meant that weapons with shorter barrels such as the LEME carbine could achieve similar range and accuracy as LEME rifles.<sup>41</sup> Although cordite propellant was subsequently adopted even for the LEME, Lord Wolseley was not in favour of adopting a carbine for the Army.<sup>42</sup> Almost certainly this was because, he associated long barrelled rifles with increased range, which was more important to him than weapon handiness. Despite

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<sup>38</sup> Letter entitled 'Carbine in Lieu of the Rifle' from CISA to IGO, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1895, SUPP 6-651, National Archive (TNA), *Textbook of Small Arms* (London, 1929), p. 7; see List of Changes, LC. 7751, RAA.

<sup>39</sup> E.G.B. Reynolds, *The Lee-Enfield Rifle* (London, 1960), p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Reynolds, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Evolution of Small-arms', *The Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1898.

<sup>42</sup> Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

having a more favourable view on open order formations than the Duke of Cambridge, it is likely that Wolseley still believed long range volley fire by rank and file had some battlefield utility when a beaten zone was needed to destroy a large body of advancing enemy in close order formation.<sup>43</sup>

Wolseley's rejection of Lockyer's suggestions presented some technical and financial challenges. Cordite's increased heat encouraged wear and tear especially at the breech end of the LEME's barrel.<sup>44</sup> If costs were to be minimised and weapon efficiency maintained then a technical solution to the problem had to be found. The RSAF's answer was to develop Enfield rifling for the LEME.<sup>45</sup> This prolonged the life of the barrel and led to the introduction of the long Lee-Enfield rifle and its carbine equivalents in 1896 and 1898 respectively.<sup>46</sup> The decision to adopt the Lee-Enfield was therefore most probably a by-product of Wolseley's views on the importance of long range fire. But Lockyer's memo also raised the possibility of a lighter rifle. If such a thing was possible without sacrificing Wolseley's range requirements then the Army might abandon both the LEME and the Lee-Enfield sooner than later. Accordingly in 1898 Wolseley, whilst Commander-in-Chief, directed that further investigations be undertaken into a new rifle for the Army.<sup>47</sup>

At this point that Ian Hamilton entered the picture. With his arrival at Hythe, Hamilton was in the perfect place to influence the design of small-arms based on his experience of fighting on the North West Frontier.<sup>48</sup> Hamilton was chairman of a new Small-arms Committee made up of three men, one of whom included the CISA, Colonel Lockyer. Charged with investigating whether a new lighter rifle should be introduced the committee drew up a short list of weapons for consideration and further examination. By April 1899, having examined four possible firearms including

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<sup>43</sup> Wolseley's views on this can be found in C.C. Brackenbury, 'The Latest Development of the Tactics of the Three Arms', *JRUSI*, 27 (1884), p. 482.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> i.e. a change in the pattern of grooves within the barrel of the rifle from Metford to Enfield design., Reynolds. p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> See List of Changes, LC. 8196 and LC. 8390, RAA.

<sup>47</sup> Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>48</sup> Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

Lockyer's carbine and a number of modified shortened Lee-Enfield rifles, the committee made its recommendations.<sup>49</sup> Lighter weapons were preferred because they would make it easier for the soldier to take a snap shot at a moving target. Achieving this without reducing the length of the rifle would be too difficult. Accordingly, the decision was taken to lighten the rifle by shortening its barrel, take advantage of cordite ammunition but avoid compromising on weapon range. In this respect Lockyer's carbine suggestion was rejected because its barrel was too short but one of the other modified Lee-Enfields appeared to provide a relatively simple solution to the weight problem and for this reason it was put forward by the committee.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately for the Indians, before the matter could be investigated further the Boer War had started. By the time the issue was considered again Wolseley had been replaced by Roberts and the Wolseley ring had collapsed.<sup>51</sup> If Wolseley had been left in office long enough, there might have been more argument within the War Office over what would replace the LEME. As it was, events not only made it possible for the Indians to influence the design of small-arms in the first place but also ensured there would be little resistance to their views from other protagonists. This made the decision to abandon the LEME and Lee-Enfield easier to orchestrate. With several important modifications, the weapon that Hamilton's committee recommended in 1899 would eventually become the SMLE in 1903. Before that ambition could be realised, however, circumstances would also have an impact on the Indians and their views on what should replace the LEME.

### **The Boer War 1899-1902**

The Boer War proved to be extremely controversial for the British Army. Half a million British and colonial soldiers fought around 78,000 Boers over two and a half

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<sup>49</sup> 'The New Rifle – Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War and Replies by Sir Henry Brackenbury, Director General of Ordnance,' 29<sup>th</sup> April 1903, Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>50</sup> 'The New Rifle – Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War and Replies by Sir Henry Brackenbury, Director General of Ordnance,' 29<sup>th</sup> April 1903, Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>51</sup> Kochanski, p. 272.

years.<sup>52</sup> The war progressed in several phases. In the first, the Boers staged a limited offensive that resulted in the sieges of Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith. In the second, Buller's counter-offensive was repelled leading to his replacement by Field Marshal Roberts. In the third, Roberts would launch successful attacks towards Bloemfontein and, before the end of 1900, occupy the capitals of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. In the final phase, Roberts would return home to become Commander-in-Chief and Lord Kitchener would take the fight to the Boers who were waging a guerrilla campaign. In terms of the SMLE story, Buller's defeat heralded the collapse of the Wolseley ring and ensured that the small-arms debate would change in favour of the Indians. However, the war also influenced the Indian view of tactics and small-arms technology and helped raise to prominence the second important interest group known here as the Cavalry School. This section is therefore concerned with how the Boer War affected technical decisions in relation to the SMLE.

It is not easy to make generalisations about the British Army's performance during the war without being overly simplistic. Some units fought well, demonstrated an appreciation of the battlefield problems that they faced and used appropriate tactics to achieve victory. Others did not. At Elandslaagt in 1899, for example, Ian Hamilton organised a successful attack on Boer positions that involved infantry in open order formation, a flanking manoeuvre and cavalry.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand Major-General Hart at Colenso demonstrated the error of traditional Aldershot tactics when he marched the Irish Brigade in close order up to the Boer lines only to get severely mauled by a hidden enemy firing smokeless .276" Mauser ammunition.<sup>54</sup>

Veterans of the North West Frontier recognised the similarities between the way the Boers and Afghans fought. On the defensive the Boers could easily hide themselves along a geographical feature, firing on the British as targets revealed themselves,

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<sup>52</sup> Wessels, p. xiii.

<sup>53</sup> Evans, 'Boer War Tactics Re-Examined', *JRUSI*, 145 (2000), p. 71.

<sup>54</sup> Pakenham, pp. 225-228; for an excellent account of the variety of weapons used by the Boer Armies see Bester, *Boer Rifles and Carbines of the Anglo Boer War* (Bloemfontein, 1994).

knowing that their smokeless ammunition would not give them away.<sup>55</sup> Excellent at marksmanship, their prowess with the rifle left an enduring impression on British troops.<sup>56</sup> But when on the attack they could be reckless, especially when facing inexperienced or poor quality troops with poor marksmanship skills. As Hamilton observed, in these circumstances the Boers would be more than happy to ride their ponies close to British lines and shoot from horseback before riding away.<sup>57</sup>

Within a month of arriving at Cape Town, Roberts issued several memoranda to all commanders providing explicit guidance on what tactics ought to be utilised in fighting in South Africa.<sup>58</sup> This drew on his experience of war on the North West Frontier. This made it clear that open order was to be the norm and, given the Boers' tactics, banished the use of volley fire as standard battlefield practice. Roberts recognised that open order formations might cause command problems for battalion and company commanders unused to light infantry tactics and suggested the use of whistle commands as a stop-gap.<sup>59</sup> The solution was hardly ideal but given the general level of the Army's skirmishing skills there were few alternatives available.

At the same time Roberts appreciated that one way of increasing shooting prowess was to change the rifle in such a way as to make it more convenient, given battlefield conditions: to take away any technical encumbrances that might inhibit its use. Thus from the technology perspective, by November 1900 Roberts was telling the

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<sup>55</sup> Undated anonymous note, Hamilton Papers, 2/3/34, LHCMA; Letter from Lord Roberts to Sir Henry Fletcher Bart, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1901, WO 108/411, TNA.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, "'The Shooting of the Boers was Extraordinary': British views of Boer marksmanship in the Second Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902'.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Sir Ian Hamilton to his wife, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1901, Hamilton Papers, 2/2/7, LHCMA. In evidence provided to the Royal Commission for the War in South Africa, Lord Roberts stated that British troops were better at shooting at, "'long distances" than they were at short distances, but they were nothing like as good as "the Boers at the short distances"'. See Vol. 1, p. 48, RCWSA.

<sup>58</sup> 'Notes for Guidance in South African Warfare', issued 5<sup>th</sup> February 1900, Vol. 1, Appendix 2, pp. 531-532, RCWSA.

<sup>59</sup> 'Notes for Guidance in South African Warfare', issued 5<sup>th</sup> February 1900, Vol. 1, Appendix 2, pp. 531-532, RCWSA.

Secretary of State for War, Lord Lansdowne, that he believed a new weapon along the lines recommended by Hamilton in 1899 ought to be further developed and adopted by the British Army as a whole.<sup>60</sup> He even stated that it might be appropriate to look at smaller calibres than the .303" round: the .276" Mauser had clearly made an impact with all those who were on the receiving end of its fire.

Roberts' view on changing calibre was eventually abandoned for financial reasons.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that he was considering it provides some insight on his views of the battlefield. For, depending on the precise design, changing to a smaller calibre might also relieve some of the logistical constraints that affected the British Army. By decreasing the size of the round it would be possible to carry more ammunition in the supply chain without increasing the overall volume or weight of baggage transported. This was an attractive proposition because, as Lord Kitchener had observed, the men were invariably reluctant to fire independently without direction from officers.<sup>62</sup> In Kitchener's mind the problem was not over-expenditure of ammunition caused by unsanctioned use of the magazine but rather encouraging the initiative of the soldier to open fire when presented with a viable target.<sup>63</sup> It seemed that so much effort had been expended on drumming home the fact that the British Army fought at the end of a lengthy supply chain that it had been forgotten that one of the objectives of battle was to kill the enemy.

One of the driving ambitions behind the Indians' decision to adopt the SMLE in 1903 was, therefore, the need to encourage soldiers to make more independent use of their rifles to engage with targets of opportunity.<sup>64</sup> This was not a new idea. On the basis of his experience in India, Hamilton had suggested as much in 1899. The Boer

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<sup>60</sup> Telegram No. 1369 to Secretary of State for War from Lord Roberts, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1900, WO 108/411, TNA.

<sup>61</sup> Arnold-Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>62</sup> 'Notes for Guidance in South African Warfare', issued 5<sup>th</sup> February 1900, Vol. 1, Appendix 2, p.46., RCWSA.

<sup>63</sup> 'Notes for Guidance in South African Warfare', issued 5<sup>th</sup> February 1900, Vol. 1, Appendix 2, p.46., RCWSA.

<sup>64</sup> 'Memorandum by Secretary of State for War and Replies by Sir Henry Brackenbury, DGO, 1903', Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.



War drove home the need for technical change in order to tighten up the relationship between the design of the rifle and the way it was to be used. Reducing its length and weight whilst removing the magazine cut-off was seen as a means by which a soldier might be encouraged to use his rifle when appropriate.<sup>65</sup> Although the cut-off was eventually retained, mainly because of concerns expressed by native army commanders who valued the discipline of single-shot fire, the fact was that the Indians were keen to remove it.<sup>66</sup> They saw the need to make it easier for the men to use their weapon as dictated by the needs of the battle.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, the number of rounds held in the magazine was increased from eight in the LEME to ten in the SMLE.<sup>68</sup> This apparently minor change meant that troops could generate 25% more fire before having to reload. But it was the decision to provide a magazine charger that really made it possible to increase the rifle's rate of fire.<sup>69</sup> Previously it had been necessary for the LEME to be reloaded one round at a time. This new device held five rounds and made it possible to quickly recharge the magazine. The cumulative effect of all these changes was to give soldiers more flexibility in the use of their weapon, allowing them to engage with targets at a speed appropriate for the engagement. Clearly the logistical concerns advanced by those with experience of Imperial campaigning like Wolseley were not so important to the Indians. Nor, it would seem, did they distrust the soldier in quite the same way as traditionalists like Cambridge.

The enemy, both in India and South Africa, had adopted tactics of concealment based on their superior knowledge of the terrain and their mobility. This was compounded by the way in which smokeless powders made it considerably harder to identify their location. As far as the Indians were concerned a weapon that was

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<sup>65</sup> Major R. J. Makur, 'New Short Rifle - Summary of Leading Facts', Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>66</sup> Reynolds, pp. 90-91.

<sup>67</sup> 'Memorandum by Secretary of State for War and Replies by Sir Henry Brackenbury, DGO, 1903', Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>68</sup> Reynolds, p. 83.

<sup>69</sup> Reynolds, p. 81.

easy to reload, did not hinder movement and made it easier to bring up to the eye to aim by being both lighter and shorter only served to encourage its use against elusive targets. And in this respect the SMLE was a rifle that, for the first time, reflected the problems associated with the empty battlefield. In conjunction with ammunition that utilised cordite propellant, the weapon was designed to allow the soldier to engage the enemy quickly whilst remaining concealed.

What the new technology would represent, however, was a changed set of social relations between an officer and his man. Soldiers would need to be trained to use their weapon independently and officers would have to rely on them to carry out their allotted tasks in accordance with the demands of commanders. This, in turn, implied that the right sort of man would need to be recruited to become a soldier before being given appropriate marksmanship training. This suggested a greater degree of professionalisation and a greater degree of emphasis on recruiting from the 'right' social backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> No doubt these considerations partly explain Hamilton's emphasis on the benefits of recruiting from outside major urban centres and Roberts' great interest in cultivating organisations like the Society of Working Men's Rifle Clubs that could promote and socialise appropriate citizen behaviours even before someone might choose to join the Army.

### **The Cavalry**

The Cavalry's battlefield problems arose as a result of the increased availability of sophisticated munitions technology that complicated the tactical picture. Smokeless propellants made it difficult to identify where the enemy was located.<sup>71</sup> In Lord Roberts' opinion these technological developments compromised the military utility of the *arme blanche*. He noted that during the Boer War the cavalry had neither mounted an effective charge nor dismounted regularly enough to make use of their carbines.<sup>72</sup> At Poplar Grove in March 1900, for instance, the Cavalry Division under

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<sup>70</sup> Evans, *From Drill to Doctrine: forging the British Army's tactics, 1897-1909*.

<sup>71</sup> For a fuller description of the small-arms available to the Boers see Bester.

<sup>72</sup> Sir John French admitted as much whilst still in South Africa in November 1900, see 'Report on the Organisation and Equipment of Cavalry' by General Officer

Major General John French failed to cut off a retreating Boer army. As far as Lord Roberts was concerned, then, the cavalry struggled to deliver the battle winning results some of its more vocal supporters suggested of it.

That is not to say, however, that Cavalry enthusiasts like Sir John French or his chief of staff, Douglas Haig didn't recognise the value of engaging the enemy with fire. On the contrary, and as Stephen Badsey has recently alluded, both officers understood the benefits of firepower, arguing even while they were in South Africa that the cavalry should have a comparable rifle to the infantry.<sup>73</sup> What was important to them, however, was increasing the tactical utility of the cavalry without being re-designated as Mounted Infantry.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, as a number of firepower advocates like Hamilton started to make the case for more Mounted Infantry, French and Haig started to harden their position on the role of the rifle as they sought to defend their position as a separate branch of the Army. In this context it was important to emphasise the cavalry's distinctness by retaining a weapon that French and Haig believed summed up the cavalry philosophy, a philosophy that emphasised *élan*, daring and a willingness to take risks.<sup>75</sup>

Unfortunately for the likes of French and Haig who were still in South Africa, when Roberts returned home he was able to use his position to influence how the cavalry would be equipped in the future without facing significant opposition. Subsequently, and in contrast to the preferences of French and Haig, the Commander-in-Chief decided that the *arme blanche* should be secondary to the rifle. Even though the Cavalry enthusiasts were already talking about switching the mix of weaponry so as

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Commanding Cavalry Division, WO 108/250, TNA, p. 12; for the views of Roberts see, James, p. 451.

<sup>73</sup> S. Badsey, 'The Boer War (1899-1902) and British Cavalry Doctrine: A Re-Evaluation', *Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), pp. 75-97, Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry, 1880-1918*, pp.149-150.

<sup>74</sup> The evolution of the Mounted Infantry is complex and explored in detail in an excellent PhD by Andrew Winrow. See A. Winrow, *The British Regular Mounted Infantry, 1880-1913 - Cavalry of Poverty or Victorian Paradigm?*, (Buckingham, University of Buckingham, 2014) PhD.

<sup>75</sup> M. Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry: 1816-1919, Volume 4* (London, 1986), p. 408.

to place more emphasis on the utility of the rifle, Roberts had moved to amend the armament of the cavalry. In the face of increasing friction with French and Haig, Lord Roberts would eventually harden his position in the 1904 service manual '*Cavalry Training*'. Here he wrote an inflammatory preface which stated his views clearly on the role and usefulness of the cavalry and asked that, in the future, training reflect the nature of the firepower dominated battlefield.<sup>76</sup> As far as he was concerned the cavalry ought to have first-rate rifles, not carbines, and emphasise the use of fire tactics in their training over the *arme blanche*.<sup>77</sup> The lance was abolished except for ceremonial and policing duties whilst the sword would be retained but only as an adjunct to the rifle.<sup>78</sup> In the future the rifle would be kept strapped to the man (rather than in a bucket on the horse) in case the man was separated from his mount.<sup>79</sup> The trooper would as a result be ever ready for dismounted combat.<sup>80</sup> At the same time he would be sufficiently well-trained to use the sword should an unusual situation on the battlefield make such tactics appropriate.

Needless to say the cavalry officers disagreed with Roberts' decisions. They understood the necessity to train the cavalry in the use of a rifle but they firmly believed in the virtue of the *arme blanche*.<sup>81</sup> In their opinion the problem was not with their role or training but was the result of being equipped with a carbine.<sup>82</sup> Several cavalymen claimed that having a weapon with a shorter barrel than the

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<sup>76</sup> See Anglesey, pp. 396-397.

<sup>77</sup> E. Spiers, 'The British Cavalry, 1902-1914', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, LVI (1979), pp. 73-74.

<sup>78</sup> Anglesey., pp. 391-392; B. Bond, 'Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry, 1870-1914' ed. M. Howard, *The Theory and Practice of War* (London, 1965), pp. 111-112.

<sup>79</sup> Anglesey, p. 397.

<sup>80</sup> Spiers, pp. 71-9., pp. 71-72. During the Second Afghan War, Roberts observed how the cavalry could be rendered completely ineffectual if the troopers had been thrown from their horses whilst their carbines were in bucket on the saddle.

<sup>81</sup> 'Report on the Organisation and Equipment of Cavalry', 8<sup>th</sup> November 1901, WO 32/6781, TNA.

<sup>82</sup> 'Report on the Organisation and Equipment of Cavalry', 8<sup>th</sup> November 1901, WO 32/6781, TNA.

ordinary rifle was iniquitous when confronting the Boer Mauser.<sup>83</sup> Such a suggestion may have been a ploy by the Cavalry School to throw attention away from the man behind the weapon and onto the rifle itself. But in either case the complaint about the carbine threw doubt on Roberts' argument that the cavalry had not dismounted often enough to make effective use of their secondary weapons.<sup>84</sup> The fault was not with the cavalry itself but the poor choice of small arms that they had been forced to accept.

When contextualised this way, it becomes apparent that the main reason why the Cavalry School were keen supporters of the SMLE was because they believed it would put them on an equal footing with the infantry should they be forced to dismount.<sup>85</sup> The encumbrance of having a longer weapon than the carbine could be balanced against the advantage of having the same firepower capability as the infantry.<sup>86</sup> With a wooden hand guard that covered the entire barrel, the new design of rifle not only protected the trooper from a hot barrel whilst he was firing but it also made it more comfortable when it was strapped to his back in the manner determined by Lord Roberts.<sup>87</sup> Adopting the SMLE demonstrated that the cavalry were more than willing to embrace fire action in addition to their preferred modes of engaging with the enemy.

Equally, however, it was important that the Mounted Infantry did not subsume the cavalry. In this respect, cavalry officers had to emphasise the tactical flexibility of the *arme blanche* as embodied by the ethos of the cavalry. The cavalry were uniquely able to undertake shock action, reconnaissance and flank protection. At the same

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<sup>83</sup> See '1899-1901 Reports on Equipment in South Africa', p. 1, RAA. On the accuracy of the Carbine see also: 'Extracts from Reports 1899-1901: Rifles, Carbines, Ammunition and Sword Bayonet', pp. 145-150, WO 108/272, TNA.

<sup>84</sup> James, p. 451.

<sup>85</sup> R. Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal - A Life of Sir John French* (London, 2005), p. 155.

<sup>86</sup> Report on the Organisation and Equipment of Cavalry, p. 12, WO 108/250, TNA.

<sup>87</sup> Correspondence from Secretary of State for War, Hugh Arnold-Forster to Master General of Ordnance, General James Wolfe-Murray, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1905, Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

time they could also claim that a combination of their mobility and spirit enabled them to seize the moment and play a crucial role, either in the vanguard of a meeting engagement, or as an emergency stop-gap in defence.<sup>88</sup> Embracing the SMLE was, therefore, a shrewd move in deflecting those critics who argued that the cavalry ought to be replaced by the Mounted Infantry or who claimed that firepower had made the place of the horse on the contemporary battlefield redundant.

### **The SMLE sceptics**

Whereas the views of the Indians and Cavalry School were grounded in their experience of battle, what distinguishes this final group from the other factions was their sceptical views of the SMLE combined with their lack of battlefield experience. Made up of members of the NRA and doubting politicians such as Hugh Arnold Forster, the Secretary of State for War from 1903 until 1905, these actors questioned the need for a shorter-barrelled rifle and were concerned by the Army's decision to abandon the LEME. As a non-governmental organisation closely connected to the military-political establishment, members of the NRA could use their contacts to help make a case for an alternative firearm. In combination with support from the Secretary of State for War this might have paid dividends. Surprisingly enough, however, not even the active intervention of Hugh Arnold Forster could upset a plan already set in motion by Lord Roberts. It seemed that the consensus that had formed between the Indians and the Cavalry School was too strong for this last group to challenge the decision to adopt the SMLE. This section explores the difficulties that these actors experienced whilst they went about trying to challenge military opinion.

The NRA had been established in November 1859. Formed by members of the Volunteer Force, the ambition of the new association was to improve not only the shooting skills of the Volunteers but also of rifle shooters generally.<sup>89</sup> By holding regular competitions the hope was to make shooting as popular as other British

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<sup>88</sup> Spiers, pp. 71-9., p. 75.

<sup>89</sup> S. Cornfield, *The Queen's Prize - The Story of the National Rifle Association* (London, 1987), p. 17.

sporting events. With the Prince Consort as Patron and the Duke of Cambridge offering an annual prize, the NRA had very close links with Royalty and the British military establishment from its inception. Even today the Queen's Prize, originally established by Queen Victoria, is still a major event during the Imperial Meeting at the NRA's home at Bisley.

With the appointment of Lord Roberts to the position of Vice-President of the Association in 1901 and the eventual death of the Duke of Cambridge in 1904, the NRA was extremely unlikely to make an official criticism of the decision to adopt the SMLE. Despite its official position the membership tended to have very particular views about rifles, views which surfaced in a number of newspapers and journals.<sup>90</sup> Wedded to hitting conventional bull's eye targets at set distances, the association encouraged a view of marksmanship that was invariably at odds with the changing needs of the military.<sup>91</sup> As far as the NRA's membership was concerned the service rifle ought to be capable of accurately striking static targets out to long-range distances. Accordingly, members took a dim view of the SMLE because it did not fit with their ideas on marksmanship and rifle design. In particular they were not happy with the shortness of the rifle, the lack of a wind gauge for the rear sight and the suitability of cordite ammunition for target shooting.

Similar views were being expressed by the Secretary of State for War who was unsure of the shorter rifle's merits and said as much to the Prime Minister.<sup>92</sup> For example, Arnold Forster asked the Director General of Ordnance (DGO), Sir Henry Brackenbury, for further information about the SMLE.<sup>93</sup> Specifically he had questions in five key areas. The first was whether the decision to adopt the SMLE was subject to trial by an independent judge. The second related to whether other nations made

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<sup>90</sup> For criticism of the SMLE see, 'Paper Cuttings, 1896-1905 – Small-arms and Ammunition', RAA.

<sup>91</sup> 'The New Service Rifle', *The Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1903.

<sup>92</sup> Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>93</sup> 'The New Rifle – Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War and Replies by Sir Henry Brackenbury, Director General of Ordnance,' 29<sup>th</sup> April 1903, Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

use of the same weapon for both their cavalry and infantry. The third was concerned with finding positive evidence that the SMLE was better than the rifles of other nations. The fourth centred on how shortening the rifle by four inches affected the range of the SMLE when compared to the long LEME and the firearms of other nations. In his final question Arnold Forster asked whether longer ranges were no longer deemed necessary by the Army.

Given that the Secretary of State would have to defend the Army's decision in the House of Commons it might not appear that Arnold Forster was doing anything other than trying to make sure that he was sufficiently briefed. However, even after he had received an official response from the DGO outlining the main arguments in favour of the SMLE, the Secretary of State did not appear to be happy with the situation.<sup>94</sup> In 1905, for instance, after Brackenbury had been replaced by General Wolfe Murray, who at that time was Master General of Ordnance, Arnold Forster asked similar questions again. This time, however, the responses he elicited were not just the views of the MGO but also those of the Superintendent of the RSAF who re-emphasised the points being made by Wolfe Murray.

Clearly the Army was singularly unimpressed by the critics and was not prepared to compromise on the SMLE. In a review of the arguments being made by the Bisley set, Major Markur re-stated for the benefit of the Secretary of State the facts of the battlefield as understood by the Army.<sup>95</sup> Fighting on the North West Frontier and in South Africa had demonstrated the need for a light, handy rifle that would be more than sufficient for the average infantryman. There was no need for a match rifle, '...for the use of experts contesting across the green expanses of Bisley... [but instead a weapon]... for use by comparatively clumsy practitioners, whose operations

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<sup>94</sup> The New Rifle – Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War and Replies by Sir Henry Brackenbury, Director General of Ordnance,' 29<sup>th</sup> April 1903, Arnold Forster Papers, 50315, BL.

<sup>95</sup> Major R. J. Makur, 'New Short Rifle – Summary of Leading Facts', Arnold Forster Papers, 50215, BL.



extends from Canada to the Cape, and from the Afghan frontier to Singapore...'.<sup>96</sup> Evidently the military members of the War Office, having returned from the war in South Africa, were not prepared to take lessons in rifle design from people who had not experienced the contemporary battlefield.

On the face of it these issues do not appear to say much about why the SMLE took the form that it did. However, it could also be argued that the SMLE sceptics' failure to make any changes to the way in which both battlefield problems and its technical solutions were perceived says much about the relative power of the Army compared to politicians, the press and other non-governmental actors at that time. Certain members of the NRA had a particular view of the battlefield skewed by their interest in target shooting. This resulted in a reasonable amount of press coverage, stimulating parliamentary questions and some consternation with the Secretary of State for War.<sup>97</sup> However, in the aftermath of the Boer War it was difficult for the critics to get their voice heard or to challenge the decision already made by the Infantry and Cavalry School. Consequently, the views of this final group could be marginalised by the strength of opinion within the Army, committed as it was to a handier, lighter weapon with increased rates of fire. What is more surprising is how the Secretary of State was unable to challenge the Army's decision with regards to the SMLE even though he had support from outside the War Office. Reliant as he was on the advice given him by the Army itself, it was extremely hard for a politician to dispute the choices of the Army.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance the SMLE looks like it is simply concerned with improving the initial design of the LEME. According to this line of reasoning, the SMLE represents the onward march of technical progress towards ever more destructive types of weaponry where fire action would dominate the future battlefield. Where this

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<sup>96</sup> Major R. J. Makur, 'New Short Rifle – Summary of Leading Facts', Arnold Forster Papers, 50215, BL.

<sup>97</sup> House of Lords debate, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1905, Parliamentary Debates 4<sup>th</sup> Series, Vol. 141, columns 1019-1071.

interpretation falls down, however, is in relation to the contingent nature of events that shaped the SMLE's development. Without the collapse of the Wolseley ring, for example, it is considerably more likely that the suggestions made by Hamilton's rifle committee would have been rejected by a sceptical Commander-in-Chief. As it was, the ideas proposed by the committee received a warm reception from Lord Roberts, a man who was well-disposed to Hamilton and held similar views with regards to firepower and tactics.

The SMLE was, therefore, a weapon that reflected the views of this newly dominant group of former Indian Army officers. Shaped as they were by their experiences on the North West Frontier, as far as Hamilton and Roberts were concerned it was important to adopt firearms with increased rates of fire and to find ways to encourage soldiers to use their rifles according to the demands of battle. The way in which this view manifested itself in the design of the SMLE related to removing those technical contrivances that hindered rapid fire. This meant designing a lighter and shorter rifle, making it easier to bring it to the shoulder for snap firing at moving targets. At the same time, if the enemy were unwilling to reveal their positions or were moving quickly, then faster reload times would make up for the increased chance of missing the target. Consequently, the SMLE gave troops the ability to generate fire more quickly and at a pace appropriate for a particular engagement.

The collapse of the Wolseley ring did not, however, guarantee the cooperation of either the Cavalry School or the SMLE sceptics. Given the deteriorating post-Boer War relationship between the Indians and the Cavalry School, for example, the possibility that consensus would emerge with regards to what ought to replace the LEME was not guaranteed. After all, there was every possibility that a growing mutual distrust could prevent agreement from being reached on the SMLE. What becomes clear, however, is that the two groups could find common cause in the rifle question precisely because it underpinned the institutional survival of the cavalry and did not compel one side to accept the battlefield tactics of its rival. Thus the Indians might have been interested in increasing the rate of fire a soldier could generate but the cavalry were more concerned with demonstrating their continuing

relevance to warfare. Echoing the findings of Gervase Phillips and a number of other scholars, the cavalry were keen to find technologies that would enhance their utility on the battlefield in the light of inconclusive evidence about the effectiveness of firepower.<sup>98</sup> In this respect the decision by the cavalry to accept a weapon used by the infantry was a way of maintaining their unique role on the battlefield. For both groups then, the SMLE was acceptable because it left open the tactical possibilities.

Finally, the NRA and the sceptical politicians are an interesting aside to this story primarily because of their inability to affect the procurement process. Outside of government the SMLE's critics could only manage to voice their opinions through the press. This might have helped a Secretary of State who had concerns about the replacement for the LEME. Inside the War Office, however, the ability of the Secretary of State for War, was equally circumscribed. Dependent on information provided by his military advisors it was not possible, despite some concerns about the appropriateness of the SMLE, for the government to challenge the Army on its decision to replace the LEME. No doubt what buttressed the Army's endeavours in this regard was the knowledge that sooner or later a new minister would come to power and their interests in the new rifle would not necessarily be the same as those of Arnold Forster. At the same time, the language used by the Army to define the tactical problem they faced could not easily be redefined by non-experts. As a result, the sceptics were increasingly locked into a form of debate that made it hard to escape the views of the Indians and the cavalry. When it came to technical matters the Army was the dominant actor while politicians were insufficiently powerful to affect design choices.

If the SMLE had simply been the product of inevitable technological progress in engineering then the suggestions made by Colonel Lockyer would have been

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<sup>98</sup> G. Phillips, 'The Obsolescence of the Arme Blanche and Technological Determinism in British Military History', *War in History*, 9 (2002), pp. 39-59, G. Phillips, 'Scapegoat Arm: Twentieth-Century Cavalry in Anglophone Historiography', *Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), pp. 37-74, J. Bou, 'Cavalry, Firepower, and Swords: The Australian Light Horse and the Tactical Lessons of Cavalry Operations in Palestine, 1916-1918', *Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), pp. 99-125.

accepted immediately. That Lockyer's suggestions were rejected in 1896 points to the fact that a number of contingent events shaped the selection of the weapon. Whereas the LEME was born out of a debate between those who held on to the idea of firing in volleys by rank and file and those who were more concerned about logistics and officer-man relations, the SMLE was the technological representation of change in the social attitudes of the Army. The weapon was designed to encourage the soldier to use his weapon independently of his officer. As such it relied on the good judgement of the man behind the rifle. However, this could only be acceptable if the right sort of man could be recruited or trained to use his weapon appropriately, a notion reflected in some of the more controversial perspectives of Ian Hamilton and his later flirtation with right-wing politics. Nonetheless, the British Army spent much of the decade before the First World War professionalising their marksmanship and weapon handling, a possibility that had been further encouraged with the selection of the SMLE, a rifle inspired by the fighting on the North West Frontier.

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