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Cut or Thrust?

For over a hundred years, British cavalymen swung back and forth from encouraging the use of a sword's edge to its point.

DR DUNCAN NOBLE, a dressage rider and sabre fencer, adds some practical insights to the great debate.

Cut or thrust? Slash at an opponent or run him through. Which put him out of the fight on the spot and for good? The controversy raged in British cavalry thinking circles for over a hundred years from 1796 to 1914.

Before 1788, colonels of cavalry regiments selected whichever pattern of sword took their fancy. Heavy cavalry mostly carried straight bladed cut and thrust weapons, of a type which had not changed much since Marlborough's wars and the light cavalry favoured shorter curved swords with knuckle bow guards loosely based on oriental originals. Each regiment had its own distinctive pattern and trained the troopers in the way of using a sword favoured by its instructors.

In 1787, in order to produce some kind of uniformity, a Board of General Officers was set up. It selected two patterns of sword. The heavy cavalry sword chosen was that already carried by the 6th Dragoons. It had a 39 inch broad straight blade, a cylindrical grip and a guard of three flat curved iron bars on both sides of the grip. The light sword was like that currently carried by the light dragoons, with a light 36 inch curved blade and a straight knuckle bow hilt. These swords received their first tests in action in the Flanders Expedition of 1793, and they were not a success. The heavy cavalry one was heavy, badly balanced, and far too long. It tended in use to turn in the man's hand, so that the enemy was hit with the flat of the blade. The light cavalry one had a poor balance and was curved for thrusting, yet poor as a cutting weapon.

One of the officers on that campaign was Major J.G. Le Marchant, of the 2nd Dragoon Guards, a keen professional. He concluded that in a cavalry charge the actual type of sword used was irrelevant; the impetus of the man and horse decided the issue. The sword came into its own in the resulting *melee*. Then, a slashing sword, like the scimitar used by the orientals and Hungarians was the ideal weapon. Incapacitating an opponent's sword or bridle arm

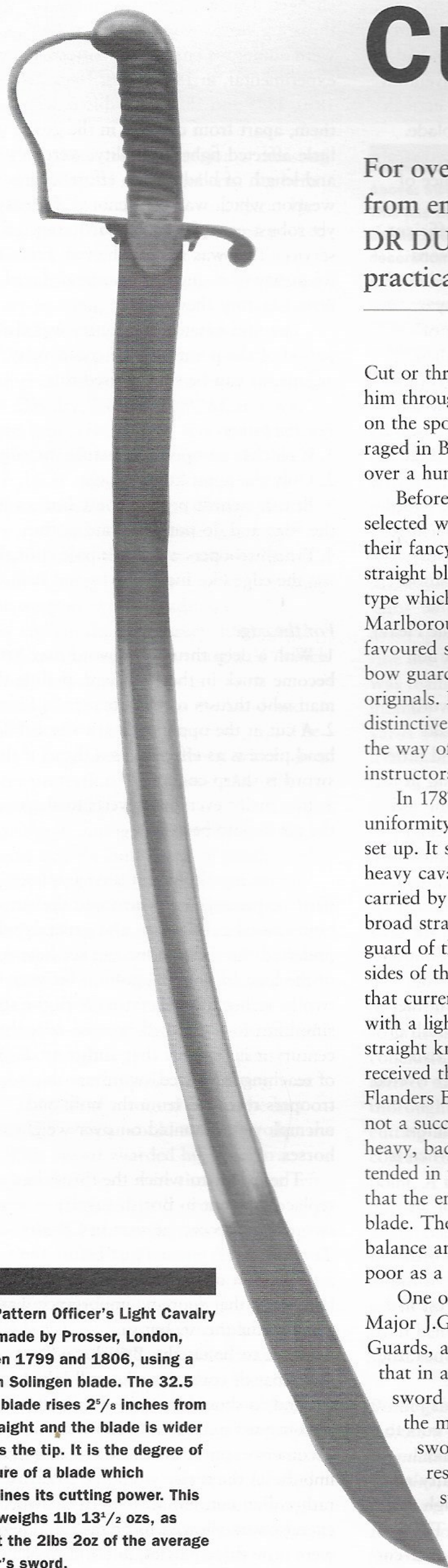
with a cut was as effective as running him through.

Back home, Le Marchant designed a cutting sword and submitted it for approval. In 1796 a Board of Cavalry General Officers approved the adoption of a light cavalry sword that was almost entirely Le Marchant's sword, with a slightly longer blade. This was now the sword, Light Cavalry, Pattern 1796, the finest cutting sword in the opinion of many, including this writer, that was ever made. It is an extremely lethal cutting weapon, although the hatchet point and curved blade would make thrusting difficult. The 1796 light cavalry sword remained in British service till 1821 and with the Prussians till 1852.

The 1796 heavy cavalry troopers' sword is well known to all watchers of Sharpe's adventures on TV. A close copy of the Austrian 1775 heavy cavalry sword, it had a straight hatchet pointed 35 inch blade and the troopers' version had a disc guard with a Knuckle bow. It was a dreadful weapon. Incapable of delivering a thrust before the points were ground to a spear shape in 1815, it was clumsy and unbalanced, a cleaver rather than a sword.

With Le Marchant's Sword there appeared *Rules and Regulations for the Sword Exercise of the Cavalry*, the first standard system for the whole army. This was the work of Harry Angelo, the celebrated *maitre d'armes*. This new revolutionary system was based on single stick play. It gave instructions for six horizontal and diagonal cuts, three points and eight guards. He warned that if the point was given against cavalry and parried, your opponent's weapon would be inside your guard and a cavalry sword was too heavy for a quick counter. Therefore the point should never be given in the attack, but should be principally confined to the pursuit.

Angelo made slight changes to his system in 1819, with the *Regulations and Instructions for the Cavalry Sword Exercise* of that year. The 1796 eight guards were reduced to seven and altered, being more like



1796 Pattern Officer's Light Cavalry Sabre made by Prosser, London, between 1799 and 1806, using a German Solingen blade. The 32.5 inches blade rises 2⁵/₈ inches from the straight and the blade is wider towards the tip. It is the degree of curvature of a blade which determines its cutting power. This sword weighs 1lb 13¹/₂ ozs, as against the 2lbs 2oz of the average trooper's sword.

Sword, Cavalry, Pattern, 1900.

This particular weapon was issued in 1893 to the West Somerset Yeomanry, which provided men for the 25th Company, Imperial Yeomanry, in the Boer War. This sword, with its home-made khaki paint, was there. It was carried in Lord Roberts' famous flank march on Pretoria and later in operations in the eastern Transvaal. It weighs 2lbs 9ozs and the 34¹/₄ inch blade curves only 1/2 inch out of the straight. The leather frog for attachment to the saddle is a yeomanry pattern. Note the worn smooth round leather grip, which turns easily in the hand. In his mounted trials, the author found that this pattern handles like a butcher's cleaver rather than a fighting sword and is too heavy for thrusting and too straight for cutting.



those used by a duellist with a small sword, the principle weapon which Angelo taught in his *salle d'armes* at 13 Bond Street, London. To the six cuts, a seventh was added, vertically downwards. This must have been very hazardous, for miss your opponent and you have a fair chance of amputating your leg - and this did on occasion happen. A significant change was that the thrust was now accepted as part of training and was practised along with cuts, although cuts still predominated. We know that Angelo made much of the thrust in teaching fencing and it is probably his influence that led to its increased importance. It cannot have been easy with the highly curved sword. Surgeon's reports during the Napoleonic War were that the cutting injuries inflicted by British swords were often minor, but that thrusts with the straighter French swords were often fatal. These were to have a decisive influence on British swords and sword training for the next hundred years.

In 1821, new compromise cut and thrust swords were adopted for heavy and light cavalry troopers. They had almost identical

slightly curved blades with spear points and differed only in the heavy cavalry blade being an inch longer, at 36¹/₂", than the light cavalry one. The heavy cavalry sword had a bowl hilt which gave good protection to the hand and the light cavalry one had a three bar hilt. The officers' 1821 swords had piped backed blades, a French invention going back to 1805, designed to give enough stiffness for a thrust with a narrow blade. The heavy cavalry sword had a pierced steel honeysuckle guard, the first appearance of this much discussed feature.

These swords were much more efficient for thrusting, but the 1819 cutting sword exercise regulations were not superseded till 1833, in regulations written by Harry Angelo's son Henry, Superintendent of Sword Exercise to the Army. Even then, these were almost word for word a copy of the 1819 regulations, except that now the thrust was given much more importance. In the formal exercises, each series of three or four cuts was followed by a thrust. This, with amendments in 1840, was the sword fighting manual of the army that went to the Crimea. Unfortunately the art of sword sharpening was not understood and the steel scabbards blunted the swords so that in the charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaklava they would not penetrate Russian shakos and greatcoats. The light cavalry sword proved flimsy and liable to break.

Successive modifications did little to improve the 1821 swords and in 1853 a common sword for light and heavy cavalry, the sword, Cavalry Pattern 1853, was put into service. The blade was heavier and stiffer than the earlier swords, although there was little difference in its actual outline, which was almost straight. The most significant change was that the tang of the blade was now the full width of the hilt and the grip was two slabs of chequered leather riveted to the tang. This made it extremely strong, but the grip was almost circular in section and, particularly when it was worn, easily turned in the hand. Thereafter, this was a shortcoming of all British troopers' swords before the introduction of the 1908 thrusting sword. Robson thinks up to half the cavalry in the Crimea had the new sword and the rest had the 1821 pattern.

The sword exercise after the Crimea, the 1858 Instructions, saw the end of the Angelos' methods. Sword fighting was simplified. There were now just four cuts to each side, great sweeps backwards and forwards, high and low, against cavalry and infantry. The points likewise were high and low, to front and rear, on each side. The point was to be given preference over the cut where possible. There were just four guards

to each side, with the point of the sword downwards. The over the head guard was discontinued.

Thereafter British cavalry swords changed little as fighting weapons till a purely thrusting sword was adopted in 1908. There were numerous changes in pattern, some experimental, in 1864, 1880, 1881, 1882, 1885, 1890, 1895 and 1899. The differences between them, apart from changes in the guard which little affected fighting quality, were in weight and length of blade, in an effort to produce a weapon which was light enough for easy use yet robust enough for the hard usage of active service. This was never achieved. From the frequency of changes, it can be deduced how unsatisfactory they were.

The mid-nineteenth century was the high period of the point or edge controversy. The arguments can be summarised thus:

For the point

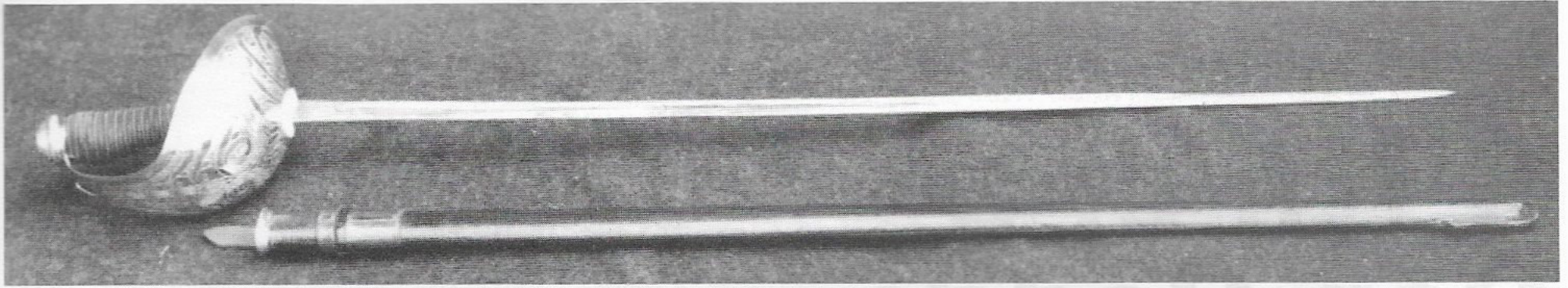
1. It reaches an opponent before the edge
2. Only the point kills outright
3. British swords produce only bruises with the edge and do not penetrate clothes
4. British troopers are not supple enough to use the edge like Indian Sikhs and Baluchis do

For the edge

1. With a deep thrust the sword may break or become stuck in the opponent, pulling the man who thrusts off his horse
2. A cut at the opponent's arms or bridle head piece is as effective as a thrust if the sword is sharp enough
3. In a *melée* everyone reverts to slashing, so the cut should be taught

It was mostly Indian service officers with battle experience who favoured the cut and home based cavalymen and generals who preferred the thrust. One can see here some of the long lasting antagonism between the two branches of the service. With the steady simplification of sword exercise over the century it is possible that authority despaired of teaching advanced swordmanship to troopers recruited from the unfit and unemployed, mounted on over-weighted horses.

The extent to which the thrust had replaced the cut in British cavalry swordmanship can be seen in *Cavalry Training 1907*, written just before the introduction of the purely thrusting sword. It laid down that supreme importance was to be given to the thrust, but that the cut should continue to be taught. British cavalry might meet that of countries who still relied on the cut and so should be trained in it. But the recruit must not be allowed to cut till he had become so accustomed to the thrust that his impulse in the *melée* would be to thrust rather than cut. No set pattern of sword exercise was allowed to be taught. There were now three parries, left and right high and low, and overhead.



In 1908, after great discussion a thrusting sword was adopted. Lord Roberts, the hero of the Boer War, was the moving spirit. He wanted a purely thrusting sword and packed the selection committee with enough of his supporters, like Douglas Haig, to get his way. Contrary opinion, like that of Captain Alfred Hutton, the leading sword authority and fencer, was disregarded. After several experimental versions had received trials, the sword, Cavalry, Pattern 1908, Mark I was accepted into service. This was described at the time, by officers who were hardly likely to go publicly against higher authority's decision, as the finest sword the British cavalry ever had. That opinion has been accepted so often that it has achieved the status of an accepted truth. Certainly it is an elegant weapon, with a blade like a 17th century civilian duelling rapier. It weighs 2 lbs 15³/₄ ozs and has a thin straight 35¹/₄ inch blade only 1 inch wide. The grip is of chequered plastic, shaped to the hand and designed to allow only a thrusting grip. The guard is a large sheet metal bowl which gives excellent protection to the hand. An officers' version appeared in 1912.

Cavalry Training 1912 emphasised that the thrust was the only form of attack, with the object being to ride at the opponent at such speed that he was killed before he could kill the British cavalryman with his sword. What interval of time was expected to elapse at a closing speed of 40-50 mph between the British trooper running the enemy through and himself being impaled is not mentioned. In real sword fighting, as distinct from fencing, there are no points for hitting your opponent 1/100 of a second before he hits you. But the trooper could remember that the bowl of his sword guarded his body to a certain extent. There were three parries, left and right to the front, and overhead.

The last British cavalry sword fighting instructions, *Cavalry Training (Horsed) 1937* repeated the instructions that the thrust delivered at speed was the only permitted form of attack with yet more emphasis. The only exception was when a *melée* was at particularly close quarters, when the trooper was instructed to hit his opponent with the hilt of his sword. Such a blow was stated to put an opponent out of action for a time. There are now only two parries, to left and right, high and low, with the minor change that the point of the sword was now to be kept pointed at the opponent's chest.

This changing emphasis towards

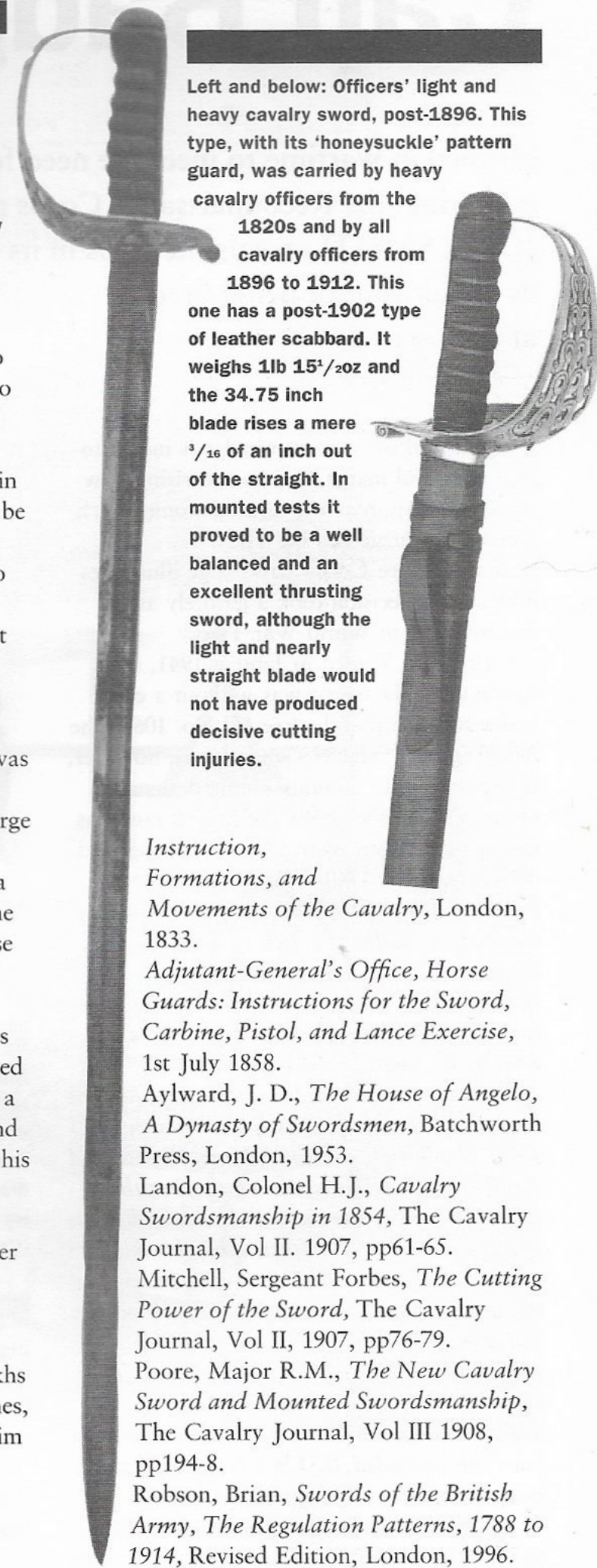
Above: Sword, Cavalry, Officers, Pattern 1912. This has the same thin straight 35¹/₄ inch blade as the 1908 troopers' sword, and differs in the decoration on the guard and in the style of the grip. This latter is of a conventional style, ridged and covered in fish skin bound in silver plated wire. It conforms in rough outline to the specially shaped thrusting grip of the troopers' sword, although it is less effective in ensuring a uniform hand-hold.

favouring the thrust can be attributed up to the 1880s to the opinion of the generals who wrote or approved the cavalry regulations that the enemy was only put out of action when killed. With the woefully blunt state in which British swords were kept, this could be understood. It was also part of 'the cavalry spirit' to ride hard at the enemy, in order to cover quickly the last 100 yards where his rifle fire was effective. After the Boer War it was realised that there was no way that infantry or cavalry could cover the last 400 yards over which the magazine rifle was lethal without terrible casualties. So trust was placed in the Victorian virtue of pluck, e.g. disregard of casualties, and speed. The charge at Elandslaagte in the Boer War certainly showed that thrusting in a pursuit against a mounted enemy travelling at much the same speed was useless. It is instructive that those who left accounts of conclusive hits in that charge used revolvers.

The thrusting sword had its battle trials in the First World War, but cavalry was used so little that the controversy never reached a conclusion. This writer, a dressage rider and former sabre fencer, practises regularly on his thoroughbred with different patterns of cutting and thrusting swords and has to confess to a distinct preference for edge over point. A thrust seems like a way of both parties running each other through simultaneously. A better way, if horse and rider are up to it, would be to do as the Sikhs did and open ranks as the enemy approaches, get in the rear of your opponent, and hit him from behind. It is hardly the old 'cavalry spirit' but it is devilishly effective●

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Left and below: Officers' light and heavy cavalry sword, post-1896. This type, with its 'honeysuckle' pattern guard, was carried by heavy cavalry officers from the 1820s and by all cavalry officers from 1896 to 1912. This one has a post-1902 type of leather scabbard. It weighs 11lb 15¹/₂oz and the 34.75 inch blade rises a mere ³/₁₆ of an inch out of the straight. In mounted tests it proved to be a well balanced and an excellent thrusting sword, although the light and nearly straight blade would not have produced decisive cutting injuries.

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