

'Neath the plumes of emu feather;

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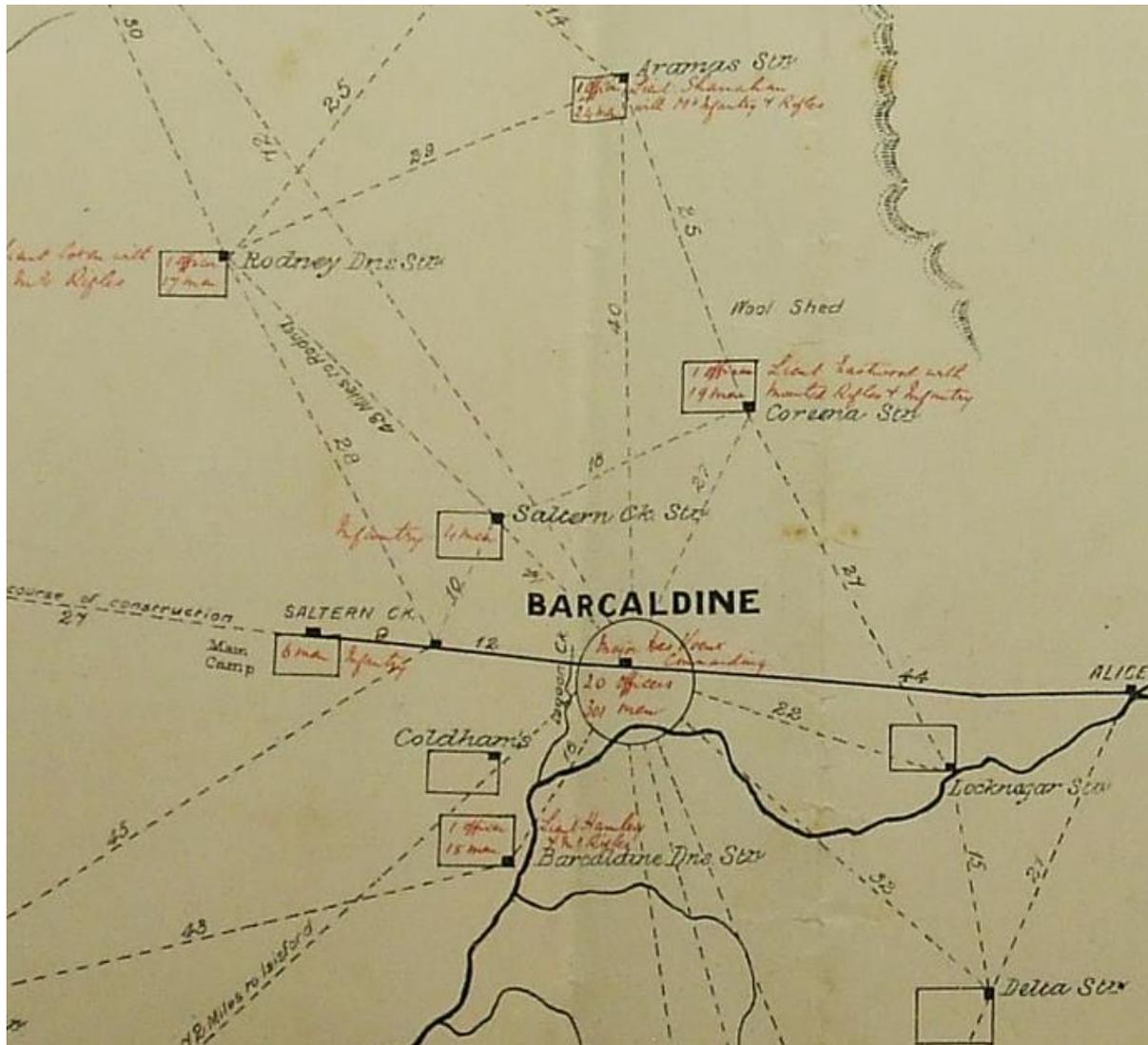
The story of how the Australian Light Horse adopted an emu feather plume on their hats has been told many times over the years. Some tales are accurate, but few are complete. The story of the emu feathers began of course in Queensland, during the 1891 Shearer's Strike in the western districts. These were heady days for the six-year old Queensland Defence Force (QDF). The men were well-trained, had just been through a period of rapid expansion, and were ready to do whatever was asked of them. The Queensland Government obliged, and asked the QDF to volunteer for active service in aid of the civil powers. Their task was to assist the police to keep order during the Shearer's Strike. The background politics of the event are complex yet fascinating, and well worth taking the time to uncover.

For the purposes of this story it is worth knowing that of the 1442 QDF soldiers despatched to the west, 525 of them were Mounted Infantry. Of the 525, the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry (WBMI) provided 98 all ranks. The exact split between the Maryborough, Gympie and Bundaberg remains unclear. Bundaberg is believed to have provided 22 men and the remainder were from the other two towns. Many of the WBMI were sent to Barcaldine in March 1891, and from there began patrols or mounted guard on shearing shed in surrounding districts.

Forty-six years later, William Leishman, a former private in the Gympie detachment of the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry, claimed that he had been present on the occasion emu feathers were first tucked into a mounted infantryman's felt hat, near Coreena woolshed. Leishman's claim is fairly detailed and he repeated it on a number of occasions between 1937 and 1940, submitting it to newspapers in Brisbane and Rockhampton: *I was in a patrol under Lieutenant Vivian Tozer, of the Gympie Mounted Infantry, at Coreena woolshed. Word had come to Barcaldine that the shearers were going to Coreena to force some of the men out. On the way we met another Gympie Mounted Infantry patrol, under Captain Wm. Shanahan, and they were chasing an emu, which came towards us. When it was shot, some of us dismounted, and Terry Rogers and myself were the first to pull the tail feathers out and place them in our hats. Then all in the patrols got feathers and placed them in their hats. Terry Rogers was with Captain Shanahan's patrol. We continued on to Coreena, and got there just as Mr. Tolson of Aramac was reading the riot Act to the shearers. He gave permission to some of the shearers to go in and interview the men, and then things quietened down. I claim that the two patrols under Captain Shanahan and Lieutenant Vivian Tozer were the first in Australia to wear emu plumes in their hats.*ⁱ Leishman wrote essentially the same letter again to the *Morning Bulletin*, and the *Central Queensland Herald* in Rockhampton in March 1940.

Leishman's account of how the first feathers were stuck in the puggaree of a felt hat is probably accurate up to a point. Certainly no one appears to have disputed his account. It is most likely however that he confused two different events into one. The reading of the riot act at Coreena certainly happened. Lieutenant Shanahan was the ranking military officer of the Coreena woolshed guard, his men apparently a mix of mounted infantry from Gympie and infantrymen, perhaps from Bundaberg. The details are small, but important. Shanahan was at Coreena when it happened, and not out on patrol. Lieutenant Tozer was not there and did not arrive until the following morning. Tozer was with Major Des Voeux, Major Patterson, police Inspector Douglas and 30 Wide Bay

mounted infantrymen. They had been told Coreena was in danger of being 'rushed' and they had set out from Barcaldine to reinforce the station. The party rode through the night and at daylight raided the shearer's camp. Inspector Douglas arrested seven of the ringleaders, and with their prisoners in tow, the men returned to Barcaldine, having been 18 hours in the saddle. ⁱⁱ There was no emu hunt on that occasion.



Extract from a map drawn by Captain Aytoun showing the distribution of QDF in the district on 17 May 1891. Source: CSO in-letter, COL/A 668, QSA

Patrols commanded by Tozer and Shanahan may well have run into each during the following week or so. Shanahan was in Aramac a few days later, and it is probable he was part of the reinforced escort of free labourers that moved on from Coreena to Aramac after the arrests.ⁱⁱⁱ He remained in Aramac for at least a couple of weeks and was there in the middle of May when he was notified of his promotion to Captain.^{iv} Lieutenant Tozer had just been appointed Orderly Officer at Barcaldine Camp on around 12 April, at the same time Major Des Voeux took command. Tozer had only just returned from a long patrol to Blackall. Despite his administrative duties he was still able to patrol when necessary and is recorded early in May, providing an escort to labourers bound for Rodney station,^v and accompanying Major Des Voeux on a patrol to Barcaldine Downs station.^{vi} Early in

June Lieutenant Tozer was appointed Camp Quartermaster at a new military camp at Cunnamulla, and moved out of the district. From this it becomes apparent that the emu encounter with the Tozer and Shanahan patrols must have occurred after the Coreena incident (mid-April) and before June.

This hardly matters, however it is not until early July 1891 that any of the many newspapers reporting on the Shearers strike comment on the fact that any troops had taken to wearing feathers in their hats. The first mention is when the steamer *Burwah* arrived in Maryborough on 8 July having brought troops down from Rockhampton. A crowd had gathered to welcome the Maryborough, Gympie and Bundaberg men back from the strike.

The troops, who were under the command of Major Patterson, appeared to be in the full bloom of health and spirits. Judging by the plumes worn by the troops, one would fancy that they had been on an 'Emu expedition' instead of a 'law and order' service.^{vii} Presumably Major Patterson had already arranged approval for the change to the uniform of the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry. No records of this approval have been located, but it must have been in place for a short while, or at least long enough to cause a reporter for the *Western Champion* to wax lyrical when he came upon the abandoned military camp at Barcaldine: *Seated upon a heap of empty cases and the usual debris of an encampment, there ruminated on Monday morning the sole remaining soldier of the army which has been so much in evidence during the last four months. Presently the heap of rubbish disappeared in drays and the emu-feathered hat and sombre cloak flittered away like a ghost and was seen no more.* The lonely soldier was probably one of the two Gympie mounted infantrymen who imbibed too copiously on their last evening in Barcaldine, and spent a few days awaiting their trial.^{viii}

The last patrol to arrive back in Barcaldine Camp, a day or two after most of their comrades had left, was also from the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry. The men had ridden in from Muttaborra, *each man having his hat graced with a tuft of emu feathers. (I hear a tuft of emu feathers is to be an acknowledged portion of our Defence Force uniform for the future, an order having been made permitting the decoration.)*^{ix} This patrol was under the command of Lieutenant Benjamin Davies of Maryborough, and consisted of six Maryborough men, six from Gympie, and one from Bundaberg. The men arrived in Maryborough on 15 July 1891.^x

Less than a fortnight later, at the official opening of the Brisbane to Gympie railway line, Governor Norman was provided with an escort by the Gympie detachment of the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry. The *Queenslander* noted the escort were *...looking brown and robust after their western experience, and wearing in their hats the emu feathers obtained during their sojourn in the West.*^{xi} Even if no other date can be ascertained, it is obvious that the emu feathers were in general use with the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry from July 1891.

The hat on which the plume was initially worn was khaki felt with a 2¾-inch brim and had a three plait round puggaree.^{xii} It had been introduced in 1890, and only in May 1892 was the order given for all Mounted Infantry companies to wear it with the brim looped up on the left-hand side.^{xiii} The emu feathers remained a variation that was only worn by the WBMI. Around September 1892 an official pattern number (68) was allocated for the plume, even though it had been in common use

for more than twelve months. Curiously it was not mentioned in the new Mounted Infantry dress regulations of the same month.

The emu plume was even mentioned in verse in the *Maryborough Chronicle* of July 1893. The poem was written by an anonymous Tinanna (Maryborough) resident known as "TR." It describes a training session for the Maryborough detachment of the WBMI, who wore the plume as proudly as those from the Bundaberg or Gympie detachments.

Mounted Infantry Parade

Hark it is the bugle call,
"Fall in, lads, both short and tall;
Mount your horses, quick, make haste!
Now there is no time to waste."
Thus shouts jovial Sergeant Farmer,
Champion bold (without the armour).
"Take your places in the line,
Hurry up ! its long past time
When we should be on parade!"
Some of them have been delayed
By the cleaning of their rifles,
Picket ropes, and other trifles;
Now they all are in their places,
Filling up the gaps and spaces,
Heads erect and shoulders square,
Drill depicted everywhere;
Shining stirrups, spurs, and bits,
Every man with leisure sits,
Calmly waiting to obey
What the Sergeant next shall say;
"Company!" he shouts with might,
" 'Tention! number from the right!
Steady! Flanks of sections prove!
To the right by sections move;
Sections right! take up your dressing
By the centre; too much pressing;
Far too crowded, open out,
Can't you see what your about?
Try and make a decent line;
Back a little, No. 9;
Now, I'm waiting till your ready;
Third man from the left be steady."
Then Lieutenant Davis gay,
Mounted on his noble bay,
Rides upon the scene of action.
Watching closely every section;
Righting wrongs where'er he can,
Scrutinizing every man.
Then the roll is duly called,
And each mounted champion bold,
Seated on his warlike prancer,
When his name is called doth answer.

Now they move in two divisions,
Taking up their new positions
In a style which seems to say
"Tho' amateurs they know the way."
Then they into line re-form,
Just as to the manner born,
And advance quite soldier-like,
By half sections from the right.
Clear the way now! Here they come!
Stand aside and make them room!
Each horseman, as he passes by,
Is subject to the searching eye
Of the assembled motley crowd,
Who, in conversation loud,
Comment upon each horse and rider.
Now shouts someone, "There goes
Schneider."
"Now they're off to do their duty!"
"Aint Jack French's moke a beauty?"
"There goes Dawson on his grey."
"Look at that there skinny bay!"
Such remarks as these are heard,
Intermingled with the word
"Right wheel!" Then away they go
Up the street, just like a show,
See them now the corner rounding,
And advance with bugles sounding;
Every section keeps together,
'Neath the plumes of emu feather;
Then on the drill ground they arrive,
Moving smartly, all alive,
Expecting soon to hear the sign,
"Form by sections into line."
With manoeuvring to and fro,
Turning, wheeling, fast and slow,
The afternoon soon passes by.
And the evening shades draw nigh.
Then our horsemen are dismissed,
Feeling they have done their best
To improve, and gain at will,
Knowledge of their mounted drill.
Then move off by threes and fours

To civilian life once more.^{xiv}

The early 1890s saw Queensland and the rest of the Australian colonies, floundering in an economic recession. This caused the Government to exercise fiscal restraint and various Defence Force units, particularly in country areas, were suddenly no longer required. The Maryborough and Bundaberg detachments of the WBMI ceased to exist on 1 July 1893, leaving just Gympie to carry on. There was little to no warning for the units who were cut from the QDF establishment. Most reacted with disbelief, a few with anger. In Maryborough another poet, using the pseudonym “Emu Feather” put pen to paper:

To the Maryborough Mounted Infantry - Disbanded.

And so they've disbanded the Mounted!
That's what it says in the Gazette,
The Government's going to save up the
dimes
To wipe out the National Debt.

So now we're dismissed Civil Servants,
Though, of course, on a different scale
To the blokes that get purses of
sovereigns,
And banquets, and champagne, and ale.

When I heard that we'd all got the 'bullet,'
I felt a bit vexed, I must say.
And sorry to think that our time and our
drill
Were virtually now thrown away.

Now, although I ain't much of a soldier
As far as me training's concerned,
I think it's a pity to chuck up the sponge
And lose hold of the bit that we've
learned.

And after the trouble we've gone to
About keeping our mokes in good “nick,”
For the sake of a few “quid’ a year, lads,
We don't want to see their last kick.

So we'll form ourselves into a Rifle Club,
It will keep us together, you know,
And if ever the Government wants us
again,
They won't have so far to go.

If ever they want us again, did I say,
Pray pardon me, comrades, I'm wrong,
Take my tip, they're certain to want us,
And that, too, before very long.

So Hansen, don't sell that there creamy!
And Petersen, stick to your grey!
Keep an eye on your saddles and bridles,
lads,
You'll be proud of them yet some day.

Our “neddies” keep under the comb and
the brush,
Don't turn them out to the grass;
Let us sew up the holes in our nose-bags,
And be always alert — on our brass.

And comrades, although we're disbanded
now,
Although we have gone to the wall;
When the bugle sounds the “fall in” once
more,
I'm sure we'll respond to the call.^{xv}

At the Easter Encampment at Lytton in 1894, the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry, now exclusively Gympie men, again attracted the attention of the newspapers. *The horses this year are better than usual, and the Gympie divisions as usual bear the palm in this respect, the fine company of the Wide Bay men with their attractive plumes of emu feathers being a credit to their district and to their officers. Major Patterson has every reason to be proud of his fine command.*^{xvi}

GO 159 of September 1894 approved the emu plume for issue on repayment to NCOs and men of all Mounted Infantry corps.^{xvii} No correspondence has been found explaining why the plume was granted to all of the Mounted Infantry, however it must have been with the consent of Lieutenant-Colonel Paterson of the Wide Bay Mounted Infantry, who was at the time the ranking officer in the Mounted Infantry, and with the support of Major Ricardo, Adjutant, Mounted Infantry.

It was also in November 1894 that Bundaberg was able to revive its mounted infantry company, gaining approval to become No 2 Company of the Wide Bay Infantry, and again wear the emu feathers. Sadly, the Company was again disbanded in 1897. Maryborough did not attempt a revival.



To mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, a 21-man contingent selected from all the mounted infantry units, travelled to London in April to take part in the celebrations. The emu feathers worn by the Jubilee contingent were quite large. A Queensland journalist in London during Queen Victoria's 1897 celebrations reported: *You can pick out the Queenslanders by the emu feathers they wear in their hats.*^{xviii} Corporal Ryan, a Jubilee representative from No 2 Company, Darling Downs Mounted Infantry recalled that emu feathers worn by the Queenslanders were in great demand, and it was only by keeping away from the ladies he was able ... *to preserve his plume in the same perfect state as when it was issued to him in Brisbane; his comrade, however was not so fortunate, as he lost the whole of his feathers before leaving England.*^{xix}

The photographs of the Jubilee Contingent men of 1897 provide the earliest known photographs of the emu feathers being worn. The pleated flat puggaree is also visible.

In late 1897 a mounted infantry regiment was formed from all the mounted units in the colony. They became the Queensland Mounted Infantry, a name which had only been in colloquial use until that time.^{xx} It was at this time, October 1897, that Mounted Infantry Officers were able to wear the emu plume, replacing the cock's feathers in their hat.

The first four contingents of Queensland volunteers for the war in South Africa against the Boers in 1899, were equipped as Queensland Mounted Infantry, and wore the emu feather in their hats. The *Queenslander* painted a slightly irreverent picture after the first contingent had departed: *The hats worn by the troops are saucily cocked up on one side, with a small side plume of emu feathers. This cocking-up of the hat and exposure of the whole of one side of the face to the sun is a distinct concession to style and smartness. The hats would be much more useful as face protectors if the brim were turned down all the way round and shaded the eyes. They would perhaps be less becoming, for the cock at the side shows off a good profile, and the bronzing is part of the campaign. You see, dear girls, it is not only the women who sacrifice comfort to appearance and dock their hats from the feathered tribe; the men do so too. It is only a difference in kind and not in point.*^{xxi}

While troops from all the Australian colonies wore the felt hat, it did lead to confusion, British troops at times thinking they were Boers. Lieutenant-Colonel Patterson, who served as a Special Service officer, gave a personal account with a slightly different perspective, on return from South Africa. At a public meeting on his return he noted that the felt hat and emu plume were not always worn: *On January 3rd, the news received of the result of the engagement at Sunnyside sent a ray of sunshine all over South Africa, and in Capetown, - were an officer or soldier seen in the streets wearing an emu feather in his hat, he was saluted. That was something to be proud of. It came to their knowledge afterwards that the*



Lt-Colonel Ken Hutchison, 2nd QMI Contingent

Boers had vowed in future to shoot any man wearing the badge of the Q.M.I., and though the order came from headquarters that the regiment was to discard their hats and feathers for helmets they determined still to stick to them, give the Boers an opportunity of shooting at the wearers, and they, on their part would shoot back. (Cheers.) Since that time the Queenslanders with General Hutton's command had been supplied with helmets, but they still wore the emu feather.^{xxii}

The emu feathers were always popular with ladies. The *Fitzroy City Press* in January 1900 repeated a story: *When asked why he allowed the girls to despoil him of the emu feathers in his hat, a stalwart Queensland replied, "Plenty more emus feathers to pull in Queensland, but no such plenty of girls to pull them as here."*^{xxiii}

The 5th (Queensland Imperial Bushmen) contingent to South Africa was not permitted to wear the emu feather in their hats, on the

grounds that it was not a mounted infantry contingent. The 4th Contingent had also been a QIB contingent, yet it had been able to wear the emu feathers. The Staff Officer for Mounted Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Ricardo, who had been on active service when the 4th QIB was recruited and despatched, raised objections to a non-QMI contingent wearing the emu feather. Consequently the 5th Contingent were authorised only to wear a band of opossum skin around the hat brim.

It was not a popular decision, and the controversial Lieutenant-Colonel Ricardo's ruling was the subject of numerous newspaper reports, most of them like this from *the Brisbane Courier*: *The alteration which has been made in the distinctive badge for the hats of the members of the Contingent now preparing to leave for South Africa is open to objection on several counts. In the first place Queenslanders have been known at the seat of war since our men were landed there by their plumes. An emu plume in the hat has been a badge of honour; and no doubt activity, vigilance, courage, and resource have been stimulated by the thought that there has been distinctive character to sustain as marked by the sign of the colony of origin. A deed of daring on the battlefield witnessed by other troops and associated with the emu plume has resulted in the word being passed at once that a Queenslanders had distinguished himself. It is the proud boast of our troops that they have carried their feathers to the front and have taught the Boers to fear their presence and admire their prowess. In the second place, objection may be taken to the change because there is already a force in South Africa whose badge is the 'possum skin, or something so much like it that one may be mistaken for the other. Rimington's scouts wear fur round their hats just as it is proposed that our men shall wear it. Why do anything to make confusion? An excuse has been made that our mounted infantry here are entitled to the monopoly of emu plumes. The idea seems to be that the Contingents which have gone and are going are not mounted infantry in the official sense. Why, then, were emu feathers adopted in the first instance? The First Contingent was not composed of men from the mounted infantry forces of the colony to any greater extent than succeeding Contingents. Whether or no, it contained a large proportion of men who were genuine outsiders. But the excuse will not hold water. The last Contingent should be placed on the same footing, so far as distinctive marks are concerned, as the first, and no ground for grievance should be afforded men who are going to South Africa with their lives in their hands.*^{xxiv}

Ricardo's decision stood however, and even the 6th QIB Contingent also wore the opossum skins on their hats.^{xxv} Queensland's contingent to the First Australian Commonwealth Horse wore neither emu feathers nor opossum skins, but the plain puggaree worn by the other contributors.^{xxvi} Queensland's mounted infantry militia also continued to wear the emu feathers in their hats.

After Federation in 1901 it took some time for the colonial military forces of the various Australian States to settle into their new guise of the Commonwealth Military Forces (CMF). As part of the necessary changes, all mounted infantry regiments were redesignated Light Horse. At the end of 1903 national Dress Regulations for the CMF were gazetted. The Queenslanders were no longer the sole bearer of emu feathers, the Light Horse in South Australia and Tasmania also being granted that privilege too, as were the Field Artillery of those three States.^{xxvii}

Even the *Evening News* in Sydney thought the sudden expansion of the distinctive plume was unfair. *A large amount of sympathy will be forthcoming for the Queensland Mounted Infantry, on the appropriation of their distinctive badge by the South Australian and Tasmanian troops. For thirteen years the Queenslanders have worn the plumes of emu feathers in their hats; they were, too, the only soldiers to wear them during the campaign in South Africa, and they, thus, and fairly, consider themselves to possess a proprietary right to the emblem. It is improbable that any desire to wound the feelings of their Northern brethren in arms is responsible for the new departure. The cause is far more likely due to official poverty of invention. However this may be, some explanation is certainly owing to the Queensland forces with respect to the business. Canadians sport a maple leaf in their hats, and an ear of wheat would have been an infinitely more appropriate device for the South Australians; and an apple, say, for the Tasmanians. But to ignore the long claim of Queensland to her emu feathers, and at the same time annex them, does certainly seem uncalled for and shabby treatment.*^{xxviii}

And there begins the story of how the Australian Light Horse gained their distinctive badge.

ⁱ Courier-Mail, 29 October 1937

ⁱⁱ Queensland Times, 18 April 1891

ⁱⁱⁱ Queensland Times, 18 April 1891

^{iv} Morning Bulletin, 22 May 1891

^v Warwick Examiner, 13 May 1891

^{vi} Darling Downs Gazette, 27 June 1891

^{vii} Maryborough Chronicle, 9 July 1891

^{viii} Western Champion, 14 July 1891

^{ix} Morning Bulletin, 15 July 1891

^x Maryborough Chronicle, 16 July 1891

^{xi} Queenslander, 25 July 1891

^{xii} Townsville Daily Bulletin, 28 October 1937

^{xiii} GO 554 28 January 1892

^{xiv} Maryborough Chronicle, 1 July 1893

^{xv} Maryborough Chronicle, 26 August 1893

^{xvi} Brisbane Courier, 24 March 1894

^{xvii} GO 159, 27 September 1894, QGG

^{xviii} Telegraph, 4 September 1897

^{xix} Darling Downs Gazette, 2 October 1897

^{xx} GO 265, 14 October 1897

^{xxi} Queenslander, 11 November 1899

^{xxii} Gympie Times, 31 May 1900

^{xxiii} Fitzroy City Press, 26 January 1900

^{xxiv} Brisbane Courier, 1 March 1901

^{xxv} Brisbane Courier, 21 March 1901

^{xxvi} Brisbane Courier, 10 February 1902

^{xxvii} Orders for Dress and Clothing Military Forces of The Commonwealth, Melbourne, 1906

^{xxviii} Evening News, 23 November 1904