In the 1870s the British Army was undergoing a program of major reform. The modernization schemes of Secretary of State of War Edward Cardwell were beginning to bear fruit. In an attempt to revitalize the officer corps and to produce a more talented crop of junior officers free from the dangers of croneyism, Cardwell was able to end the practice of purchase. Up-and-coming young officers were quick to adapt to the new meritocracy. More and more, experience and expertise rather than political and social connection played a role in an officer’s career development, and most sought out any opportunity to prove themselves in the new system. The British Army as a whole received the benefit from these personal ambitions.

Few officers in the post-Cardwellian army were more driven to make a name and a career for himself than Redvers Buller. Buller entered the service in 1858 upon purchasing a commission in the 60th King’s Royal Rifles. With the end of purchase in 1874, he could no longer rely on the wealth of his father’s estate and his family’s political contacts to obtain further promotion. As it turned out, Buller excelled in the new system and over the course of the next twenty-five years he advanced steadily through the British officer corps, becoming one of Britain’s most beloved senior generals. The manner in which Buller used his personal experience, much of which took place in South Africa, ultimately helped the British Army prepare for and win the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902.

After establishing a reputation as an officer with a keen mind and strong leadership skills in Sir Garnet Wolseley’s military expeditions to Western Canada (1870) and Asanteland (1873–1874), Brevet Major Buller entered the Staff College and took an administrative post at the War Office. Although the work suited him, Buller wanted to pursue other opportunities that could bring him greater accolades and a faster path to professional advancement. In 1878 he accepted a position on
the staff of General Frederick Thesiger (later Lord Chelmsford) in the military operations against the Gaikas in what was generally termed the Third Kaffir, or Gaika War.

Buller was initially appointed to serve as liaison officer between fellow Wolseley Ring member Colonel Sir Evelyn Wood and a group of Boer, British, and colonial volunteers. This group was attached to a column in Thesiger’s Field Force under Colonel Wood’s command. Buller did not remain liaison officer for long, taking over command of this group of volunteers and forming his own motley ‘commando,’ naming it the Frontier Light Horse (FLH). Buller initially had few expectations for his new command. He wrote his sister on the day he took command, saying, “They are in terribly bad order... and I fear there is not much credit to be got out of being associated with them, but I will do my best.” Later he added, “Whatever happens, I mean to try and make a splash with them somehow.”

The Frontier Light Horse was Buller’s first independent command in the field, and he quickly took advantage of the opportunities this assignment offered. He honed his leadership qualities and ‘field craft,’ but more importantly began to learn the efficacy of mounted irregulars as a component of, and an addition to, traditional British operations with infantry and cavalry. Buller modeled the unit on the principles of the Boer commando, the basic operational body for the South African Boers since before the Great Trek. Unlike the more democratically based commando, however, Buller instituted discipline and order along the lines imposed by the British Army. The FLH was composed of men of various backgrounds, but most significantly, “a fine leaven of Dutch Boers from whom Buller learned a very great deal that was useful.”

According to Buller’s biographer, Sir Charles Melville, there was even a deserter from the 80th Foot serving in the group. From these men,

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