

POSTAL SERVICE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR – **EXTRACT**

On 28 February 1913, forty-six years after the first recommendation to establish a military postal unit, the Army Post Office Corps and proposed Territorial Army Postal Service joining the Royal Engineers' Telegraphists when they were formed into the Royal Engineers, Special Reserve (Postal Section) and the Territorial Force (Army Postal Services).

The Army Post Office Corps was incorporated into the Royal Engineers because of the Engineers' interest in electric telegraph systems. An affiliation between the Royal Engineers and GPO had been formed in 1870 as a means of training members in telegraphic skills.

The 24th Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps (The Post Office Rifles) provided the manpower to form the Army Telegraph Corps which in 1885 was re-designated the Telegraph Reserve Royal Engineers, manned, trained and administered by the Post Office Rifles until 1913.

During the First World War, the only link regular soldiers had to the home front was through the postal service.

The sheer number of letters and parcels travelling between the Western Front and Britain meant the postal service would have to adapt to the demands of war. Before the outbreak of war, the British postal service was the single largest employer of labour anywhere in the world. The Post Office employed 250,000 people and handled 5.9 billion items of post every year.

The Boer War of 1899 had established an expectation among soldiers that they would be able to stay in touch with those at home but the logistics of doing so in WW1 proved a challenge on an unprecedented scale.

The way that mail was collected, sorted, despatched, received and delivered had changed very little. There was no mechanisation beyond a stamping machine to date-stamp letters. All sorting was done by hand. Mail was transported in sacks, the dust from which lodged in the throat and eyes and formed "tide marks" around the shirt collar of postmen.

The declaration of war in 1914 and the deployment of the British Expeditionary Force to France began to place immediate strains European relationships with Wilhelm II in Germany and Nicholas in Russia. It changed the postal service forever.

The need for volunteers to join the army coupled with the Post Office's role as a large employer meant that male postal workers were immediately targeted for recruitment. Every male member of staff was sent a letter calling on them to enlist.

Some 28,000 men did exactly that by the end of 1914. There was already an existing battalion of the Post Office Rifles and the swell of recruitment led to a second being created.

The number of postal deliveries in some communities began to drop from a dozen deliveries daily before the war to one or two during it. Also 35,000 women joined to take over the roles and jobs vacated. This new female workforce took on delivery, sorting and translating the letters and parcels.

To ensure that morale on the home front was maintained and wartime secrets did not fall into enemy hands, soldiers' letters operated under a process of censorship. Details regarding losses, military action, exact location and general morale were often removed from letters by censors.

Up to 12 million letters a week were delivered to soldiers, many on the front line. The wartime post was a remarkable operation. Trains ran back and forth across Picardy under cover of darkness dropping some mail off along the route and unloading the rest at railheads.

The GPO always ensured that returned letters didn't arrive before the official telegram telling the family that their son was dead. There were 30,000 unopened letters every day. When a soldier on the Western Front wrote to a London newspaper in 1915 saying he was lonely and would appreciate receiving some mail the response was immediate. The newspaper published his name and regiment and within weeks he'd received 3,000 letters, 98 large parcels and three mailbags full of smaller packages.

How the General Post Office (GPO) maintained such an efficient postal service to soldiers and sailors is a story of remarkable ingenuity and amazing courage.