

THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ARMY POSTAL SERVICE.

Part 3

Army Post Office Corps – Egypt Expedition 1882

The British conquest of Egypt (1882), also known as Anglo-Egyptian War occurred in 1882 between Egyptian and Sudanese forces under Ahmed 'Urabi and the United Kingdom. It ended a nationalist uprising against the Khedive Tewfik Pasha. It established firm British influence over Egypt at the expense of the Egyptians, the French, and the Ottoman Empire.

On 8 August 1882 the new Corps under the command of Major Sturgeon (Army Postmaster) embarked aboard the Black Prince on its first overseas expedition, only 17 days after its formation, and landed at Alexandria on 19 August.

Mails from Britain were despatched 3 times a week via the 'overland route' through France to Alexandria. The Army Post Offices offered a letter and parcel service and sold stamps and postal orders. In addition to the mail services, a free parcel service from the Naval docks at Deptford was also set up. These parcels travelled by Government store ships and transports. This service was the forerunner of the Military Forwarding Office (MFO) service which still exists today.

Stationary Army Post Offices were established at Alexandria, Ramleh, Cairo, Port Said and Ismaila, while mobile Field Post Offices were attached to the divisional headquarters and moved when they moved. On 9 September, during the battle of Kassassin, the Army Post Office, under the charge of Sergeant FJ Inwood, attached to HQ 2 Division came under fire, but no one was injured, nevertheless the incident resulted in Inwood and his men becoming the first volunteers to see shots fired in anger.

Private HF Yardley was mentioned in despatches as was Corporal WT Marchant. Major Sturgeon reported to the General of Communications, as would his successors. He sent telegraph reports of troop movements to assist with the sorting of mail in London. This practice was to be continued and indeed is still done to this day, in particular, tracking the movements of HM ships.

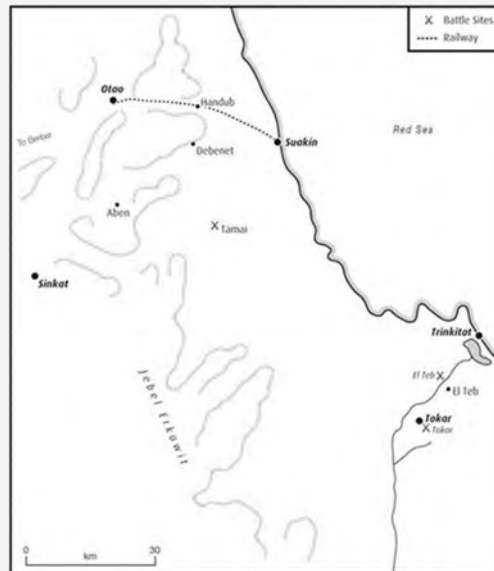
The Expedition was a success. The unit received high praise from the Commander-in-Chief, who wrote:

“The formation of a purely military postal department has been a tried for the first time in this war. It has been very successful ... I have much pleasure in bringing to the notice of the Secretary of State the admirable manner in which the Post Office Corps discharged its duties in Egypt... Their services have been so valuable that I hope a similar corps may be employed on any future occasion...”

That occasion came in 1885 when the Army Post Office Corps accompanied General Wolseley's expedition to relieve General Gordon in Khartoum.

Army Post Office Corps – Sudan Expedition and the Relief of General Gordon 1885

The Army Post Office Corps under the command of Major Sturgeon was despatched to Suakin in support of the expeditionary force raised to relieve General Gordon in Khartoum. They landed at Suakin on 27 March 1885 and established the Base Army Post Office there. Further Field Post Offices were opened at Quarantine Island, the railway terminus and one each with the Headquarters and 2nd Brigade.



The mails travelled the same routes as for the Egyptian Campaign of 1882. A daily mail service between Suakin, the Headquarters, Handub and Otao was arranged. Every morning a messenger travelled by train to Houdoub with the mail. The railway was constructed by Kitchener's 'Band of Boys' a member of which, was Lieutenant M Nathan RE, who was to become the Secretary to the Post Office in 1910. 'The Band of Boys' was the nickname given by the army to the young Royal Engineers officers in the Sudan who built Kitchener's 'impossible' desert railway in 1897.

The Director of Army Telegraphs for the Expedition was Major CE Webber RE, who had been an original member of du Plat Taylor's 1877 Committee. The Field Post Offices offered letter and parcel services, sold stamps and postal orders. Major Sturgeon introduced the sale of embossed envelopes with a sheet of note paper at 1d or two at 1d. This was the first recorded time that stationery had been sold at Army Post Offices, and can be regarded as the forerunner to the Field Service Post Card (Army Form A2042) used in the First World War. This additional service produced a revenue of £60 7s 6d.

The mail service was again a success as testified by Lieutenant G Parry of 12 Company Commissariat and Transport Corps who recorded

"I have never mentioned anything about our postal arrangements. We used to get our letters very regularly, considering all things, and though some necessarily never reached us, there was nothing to complain about. They only took ten days coming all the way from London, overland, via Brindisi, Alexandria, Cairo and Suez, where a steamer of one sort or another met the mails and ran then down to Suakin... When the detachment of the Post-office Volunteers arrived, everything was very well managed..."

The Army Postal service closed on 30 May 1885 after which the Indian Field Post Office in Suakin served the remaining troops. The services of Army Post Office Corps was not called upon again until the Anglo-Boer War. Three years after the Army Post Office Corps' men returned to Great Britain, an Army Post Office Corps Field Manual (1888) was issued.

Army Post Office Corps – Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902)

On the outbreak of war, the Army Post Office Corps (M Company 24th Middlesex Volunteers) under the command of Major Treble, who was appointed as Army Postmaster, were mobilised and set sail for Cape Town on 14 September 1899 aboard the RMS Dunottar Castle. On arrival in Cape Town the Base Army Post Office was established in the newly built Cape Town Post Office building.

The original plan was that the Army Post Office Corps staff be deployed at the Base Army Post Office in Cape Town and establish Field Post Offices along the Lines of communication (LoFC), however, this did not materialise because General Buller, the Commander in Chief, decided to adopt a two pronged attack; one from Cape Province, the other from Natal. Therefore, the resources of the service had to be split to support the two prongs and a second Base Army Post Office responsible for servicing the troops in Natal was established at Pietermaritzburg.

General Sir Redvers Henry Buller, (7 December 1839 – 2 June 1908) was a British Army officer and a recipient of the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces.



He served in South Africa during the 9th Cape Frontier War in 1878 and the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. In the Zulu War he commanded the mounted infantry of the northern British column under Sir Evelyn Wood. He fought at the British defeat at the Battle of Hlobane, where he was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery under fire. The following day he fought in the British victory at the Battle of Kambula. After the Zulu attacks on the British position were beaten off, he led a ruthless pursuit by the mounted troops of the fleeing Zulus. In June 1879, he again commanded mounted troops at the Battle of Ulundi, a decisive British victory which effectively ended the war.

Buller's VC action, painted by H. Montagu Love (1905)

Source: Redvers Buller - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

His VC citation reads:

For his gallant conduct at the retreat at Inhlobana, on the 28th March, 1879, in having assisted, whilst hotly pursued by Zulus, in rescuing Captain C. D'Arcy, of the Frontier Light Horse, who was retiring on foot, and carrying him on his horse until he overtook the rear guard. Also for having on the same date and under the same circumstances, conveyed Lieutenant C. Everitt, of the Frontier Light Horse, whose horse had been killed under him, to a place of safety. Later on, Colonel Buller, in the same manner, saved a trooper of the Frontier Light Horse, whose horse was completely exhausted, and who otherwise would have been killed by the Zulus, who were within 80 yards of him.

Mails were sent weekly from Britain to Cape Town. The transit time was 14 days. Once in Cape Town the mails were resorted and forwarded to the Field Post Offices attached to formations in the field via the civilian postal services. Mails for the Natal Field Force were sent to East London and hence by a small steamer to Durban and by rail to Pietermaritzburg. This service was disrupted by the Boers advance into Natal and down to Stormberg.

During the sieges of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley, mail addressed to the troops contained in the besieged towns mounted up and could not be distributed to the addressees until after the sieges had been broken.

The re-organisation of troops and the subsequent renumbering of units for the different phases of the war caused sortation and location difficulties. However, the Army Post Office Corps devised a location method (which is still used today) and became invaluable to both the postal services as well as the Headquarters. Due to indifference by units there were difficulties in handling casualties' mail as a letter to the Press bears out:

When General Methuen's column was camped at Jacobsdal, ... one of our Company [Imperial Yeomanry] walked over the site, picked up a mail bag containing a good many letters, so he shouldered the bag and ran to give it to the departing Regiment. The only remark they made was 'Oh, they are only letters for the men away sick.

To solve this problem civilians were employed to maintain lists of military hospital patients so that mail could be extracted for them at the Base Army Post Offices.

During the invasion phase of the war, in accordance with orders from Lord Kitchener's instructions mail from the Base Army Post Offices was forwarded to troops through the rail network, it accumulated at stations awaiting onward carriage.

This practice was the result of an unfortunate incident at Roodewal Station. Lieutenant Preece APOC and seventeen Army Post Office Corps soldiers were at the station when the Boers under General De Wet attacked it on 7 June 1900. The 2000 mail bags on site along with stores were used to build ramparts in defence of the station. After six hours of bitter fighting and the death of the station commander, Captain Gale – Railway Pioneer Corps, the defenders were forced to surrender to General De Wet. During the fighting Private Tuffin and Goble of the Army Post Office Corps were killed and the remaining APOC men were taken prisoner.

After the surrender the mail bags were looted by the Boers. Stock (postage stamps, postal orders etc.) valued at £5099 0s 41/2d were stolen

As late as 1909 attempts were made in Britain to cash postal orders looted from the station and when De Wet's house was searched in 1914 over 3,000 unused British stamps, souvenirs of the attack, were found there.

By August 1900 the war moved from a fluid one to garrisoning the territory that had been gained. Consequently, the Field Post Offices were converted into Stationary Army Post Offices and were issued with a new series of date stamps, which included the name of the town where the office was based.

To service these Stationary Offices, five Travelling Post Offices (TPO – Post Offices operating from a railway carriage) were set up and were operated by the APOC. The TPO vans were improvised from large box trucks fitted out with sorting frames, tables etc. by the Royal Engineers.

Working the TPOs could be dangerous as an APOC sergeant's report of 19 June 1901 illustrates:

... after leaving Machavie en route for Kokemoer and Klerkdrop [on a branch line running out of and to the west of Johannesburg], the mail train was derailed and attacked by the Boers. It occurred at about 3.45 p.m. Immediately the train was at a standstill, it was riddled from end to end with bullets ... before I could realise my position, I was surrounded by Boers some pointing their Mausers at me ... By the time I got to the counter everything was removed. Two Boers were filling their pockets with registered letters. I was ordered out of the coach...

By the end of the war the Army Post Office Corps was providing the mail service to both military and civilians alike in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. To ensure the continuity of this postal service to the civilian population, personnel of the Army Post Office Corps were transferred to the colonial Post Office and remained in South Africa.

When the war began 111 all ranks of the Army Post Office Corps were deployed. At the end of the war there were 400 Army Post Office Corps soldiers deployed. During the war about 500,000 letters and newspapers and 12,000 parcels were delivered to the troops each week. £2 million of postal orders and £110,000 of stamps were sold. They also assisted in the handling of mails for the troops from Australia, Canada, India and New Zealand.

In October 1902 the last Army Post Office was closed, but it was not until February 1903 that the last detachment of the Army Post Office Corps left South Africa. After the Army Post Office Corps returned to Britain, its staff returned to their peacetime duties with the GPO. They kept up their military skills by participating in army manoeuvres every September from 1903–13.

Inter-departmental Committee on Postal and Telegraph Services (1908–11)

The Territorial and Reserve Forces Act (1907) obliged the GPO, as the largest employer in Britain, to provide extra postal detachments for the newly created Territorial Divisions. This was in addition to the four other army units already recruited from the GPO. These, with their commitments to the Royal Naval Re-

serve, had obvious staffing implications, which if not correctly managed could adversely impact on the civilian postal services. To address this situation the GPO called a meeting with War Office "to consider and report as to the relations between the postal and telegraph services and the Army; and as to the organisations already in existence or proposed for giving effect to those relations.

An Inter-departmental Committee on Postal and Telegraph Services consisting of members of the War Office, Royal Engineers Telegraph Reserve and Lt Col William Price CMG, who had served as an officer with the Army Post Office Corps during the Anglo-Boer War, among others was formed in November 1908. An interim report was submitted to the War Office and Postmaster General in April 1909 and the final report was issued, two years later, on Wednesday, 5 April 1911.

In the final report, the Committee expressed the opinion that it was important that "the Postal Corps and the Army Signal Service should co-operate" and that they should be "placed on a common basis". The report went on to say that because the "Army Signal Service was a branch of the Corps of Royal Engineers" it therefore follows that the Postal Service should also serve under the aegis of the same Corps. Their reasons for this conjugation were:

- 1. That in the field, economy and efficiency in dealing with correspondence would be increased, because of the synergies created through mutual assistance and co-operation between the two services. The movement of messages is not the exclusion of the Army Signal Service.*
- 2. That in both war and peace administration would be simplified. It would also facilitate an easier transfer of personnel from one branch to another, as well as helping the GPO to control and maintain enlistment to the services.*
- 3. That it would allow personnel of both services to have the same conditions of enlistment, service and rates of pay. This would assist in recruitment as well as preventing jealousy and friction between the services. In the past the difference in pay between the telegraph reservists and the Army Post Office Corps had caused dissatisfaction.*

(Postal Section) and (Army Postal Services) 1913

On 28 February 1913, forty-six years to the day 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 Royal Engineers, Territorial Force (Army Postal Services) respectively. The first Director Army Postal Service (DAPS) was Lt Col W Price CMG.

The Army Post Office Corps was subsumed 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 of the Corps in telegraphic skills. In 1884 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 RE, both the APOC and Telegraph Reserve RE were manned, trained and administered by the Post Office Rifles until 1913.

Source: *History of the British Army postal service* - <https://en.wikipedia.org>