

THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ARMY POSTAL SERVICE.

Part 4

Royal Engineers (Postal Section) – First World War (1914-18)

Overview

The First World War mail services to the British Army and later the Royal Air Force (RAF) were provided by the Royal Engineers (Postal Section) (RE (PS)). The Field Service Regulations (FSR), Part 2 published in 1909, referred to the service as the Army Postal Service (APS). The FSR chapter covering the function of the APS was written, at the request of the War Office, by Lt Col (later Brig-Gen) W Price CMG, who was the Director Army Postal Service (DAPS) throughout the war.

The RE (PS) operated in all theatres of war and where expedient their service was dovetailed into the services of the Dominion troops (principally Australian, Canadian, Indian and New Zealand army postal services).

The Royal Engineers trace their origins back to the military engineers brought to England by William the Conqueror, and claim over 900 years of unbroken service to the crown. Engineers have always served in the armies of the Crown; however, the origins of the modern corps, along with those of the Royal Artillery, lie in the Board of Ordnance. The Board of Ordnance was a British government body. Established in the Tudor period, it had its headquarters in the Tower of London. Its primary responsibilities were

'to act as custodian of the lands, depots and forts required for the defence of the realm and its overseas possessions, and as the supplier of munitions and equipment to both the Army and the Navy'.

The Board formed the Royal Regiment of Artillery and established a Corps of Engineers, consisting entirely of commissioned officers. The manual work was done by the Artificer Companies, made up of contracted civilian artisans and labourers. In 1772, a Soldier Artificer Company was established for service in Gibraltar, the first instance of non-commissioned military engineers. In 1787, the Corps of Engineers was granted the Royal prefix, and adopted its current name; in the same year, a Corps of Royal Military Artificers was formed, consisting of non-commissioned officers and privates, to be led by the Royal Engineers. Ten years later, the Gibraltar company (which had remained separate) was absorbed, and in 1812 the unit's name was changed to the Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners.



The Corps has no battle honours. In 1832, the regimental motto, Ubique & Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt ("Everywhere" & "Where Right And Glory Lead"; in Latin fas implies "sacred duty") was granted. The motto signified that the Corps had seen action in all the major conflicts of the British Army and almost all of the minor ones as well

The Board lasted until 1855, at which point (tarnished by poor performance in supplying the Army in Crimea) it was disbanded. Authority over the Royal Engineers, Royal Sappers and Miners and Royal Artillery was transferred to the Commander-in-Chief of the Forces, thus uniting them with the rest of the Army. The following year, the Royal Engineers and Royal Sappers and Miners became a unified corps as the Corps of Royal Engineers, and their headquarters were moved from the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, to Chatham, Kent.

Source: Royal Engineers - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Staffing - Members of the RE (PS) were almost exclusively recruited from the General Post Office (GPO) and at the start of the war had an establishment of 10 officers and 280 other ranks, by the end of the war the establishment was approx. 7,000 all ranks. From May 1917 members of Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) were employed at the Base Army Post Offices (BAPO) and the stationary Army Post Offices (APO) located on the Western Front were also wholly recruited from among the GPO staff.

Mail circulation - Generally, mail (letters and parcels) posted in the UK addressed to troops overseas was circulated by the GPO to the Home Postal Depot (HPD) in London where it was sorted by theatre and unit. It was then despatched to embarkation ports and loaded on vessels for transportation to the theatre's BAPO. At the BAPO the mail was sorted and loaded onto supply trains for transportation to the railhead. At the railhead the mail guard, who had accompanied the mail from the BAPO, and members of the railhead APO transferred the mails to the supply column (usually lorries) for the journey to the Refilling Points where the attached Field Post Office (FPO) staff would receive the mail and then distribute it the Unit Post Orderlies (UPOs) who had travelled to the Refilling Point on regimental transport. Homeward bound mail was sent in the reverse direction back to the BAPO, which would be responsible for loading it onto vessels bound for the UK. On the mail's arrival in the UK it was put into the GPO system for delivery to the addressee.

Functions - The Base Army Post Office (BAPO) was the principal in-theatre sorting office for all postal matter passing between the forces' postal service, HPD and other postal administrations. It also carried out the ancillary postal administrative functions required to maintain the postal service in the field. BAPOs were deployed as follows:

Formation	BAPO	Location	Operational dates	Notes
<u>British Expeditionary Force (BEF)</u>	1	Le Havre, France	17 Aug-1 Sep 14 and Oct 14-Aug 19	British force deployed in support of France and Belgium
BEF	1	Nantes, France	6-27 Sept 14	Temporary deployment during <u>Retreat from Mons</u>
BEF	2	Rouen, France	Aug 14-Jul 15	After Jul 15 became a Canadian BAPO
BEF	3	Boulogne, France	Jan 15-Mar 19	Opened to improve transit time of mails through the <u>Folkestone-Boulogne</u> packet route.
BEF	4	Calais, France	Jun 15-Mar 19	Opened to service the BEF Northern Army.
<u>Salonika Force</u>	X	Salonika, Greece	Nov 15-Sept 19	-
British Adriatic Mission	W	Brindisi, Italy	Feb 16-Apr 16	British mission in support of the Serbian army
Ireland Garrison	HD/D16	Dublin, Ireland	May 16-Aug 16	<u>Easter Rising (24-29 April 1916)</u>
<u>Italian Expeditionary Force</u>	S101/L1	Arquata, Italy	Nov 17-Mar 20	British force in support of the Italian army
<u>Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF)</u>	Z	Alexandria, Egypt	5 Apr 15-Dec 19	-
<u>Gallipoli Expedition</u>	Y	Mudros, Lemos, Greece	Apr 15-Feb 16	-
EEF	T	Port Said, Egypt	Jan 16-Feb 20	-
EEF	K	Kantara, Egypt	Jan 18-Mar 20	-
<u>North Russian Expeditionary Force (NREF)</u>	PB1	Murmansk, Russia	Sept 18-Sept 19	British force deployed in support of White Russians
NREF	PB2	Archangel, Russia	Oct 18- Sept 19	-
Occupation of Turkey (Ottoman Empire)	Y	Constantinople, Turkey	Nov 18-Sept20	-

Army Post Offices (APO) were stationary offices usually located on the lines of communications and rear areas.

Field Post Offices (FPO) were located with the forward units and were mobile. Army/Field Post Office accepted, despatched and distributed mail as well as sell stamps, postal orders and later War Bonds. They also encashed postal orders and handled registered mail.

Home Postal Depot (1914-20)

The Home Postal Depot (HPD) was formed on 10 August 1914, but on a very ad-hoc basis, under the administration of the GPO. A letter sorting office (Army Letter Office 1 – ALO1) and a parcel office were established in the GPO King Edward Building, London. It soon became apparent that the facilities were inadequate to cope with the volumes of mail being sent to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France.

Early 1915 the HPD was re-organised and came under the direct management of the RE (PS). Maj CA Wheeler RE was appointed the Officer Commanding in February. A second ALO (ALO 2) was opened in GPO Mount Pleasant and the parcel office was also moved there. As the BEF grew larger and new fronts were opened in the Middle East so the volume of mail grew.

Late in 1916 the HPD moved to a purpose built wooden building (200,000 sq ft) on Chester Road, Regent's Park. This new facility contained the HPD administration offices, a large parcel office and ALO2 both of which moved from GPO Mount Pleasant. ALO2 was responsible for the processing of mails to all theatres except BEF. ALO 1 (handling the BEF mails) remained in GPO King Edward Building for the duration of the war.

A Dominions Army Letter Office (DALO), tasked with handling Australian and New Zealand troops mail, opened in the space vacated by the ALO2 on its move to Regent's Park. The DALO closed in March 1919.

HM King George V and HM Queen Mary visited HPD at Regent's Park on 11 December 1916 and on 1 August 1918 they visited ALO 1 in the King Edward Building.

The staff work that brought about the re-organisation of the HPD and its move to Regent's Park was largely executed by a Principal Clerk in the GPO Secretariat, Fredric Williamson. He was commissioned into the RE (PS) as Lt Col in May 1915 and appointed Director Army Postal Services (Home). In May 1915 he took over responsibility for the mail services to the theatres outside the BEF.

Volumes of letter mails continued to grow (see Fig 1) so in 1917 it was deemed appropriate to outsource some of the work to provincial offices (Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield). These offices sent despatches direct to the BAPOs. In the same year the German U-boat campaign against the British merchant marine was successfully limiting supply of goods and materials to the UK and this was reflected in the decline in the number of parcels being sent to troops overseas (see Fig 2), which reached a peak of over 1 million in April 1917 but dropped to 400,000 by April 1918 (rationing was introduced in January 1918).

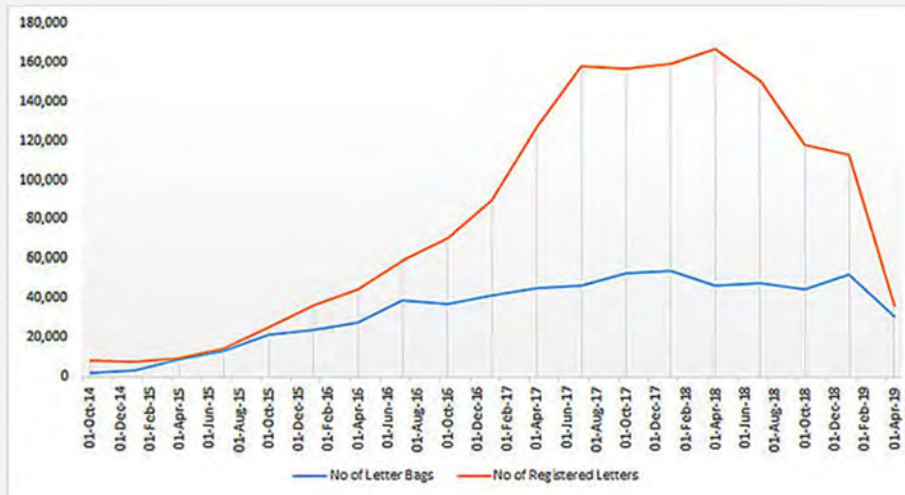


Fig 1 - A graph showing weekly processing of mail bags and registered letters through the Home Postal Depot RE 1914-19.

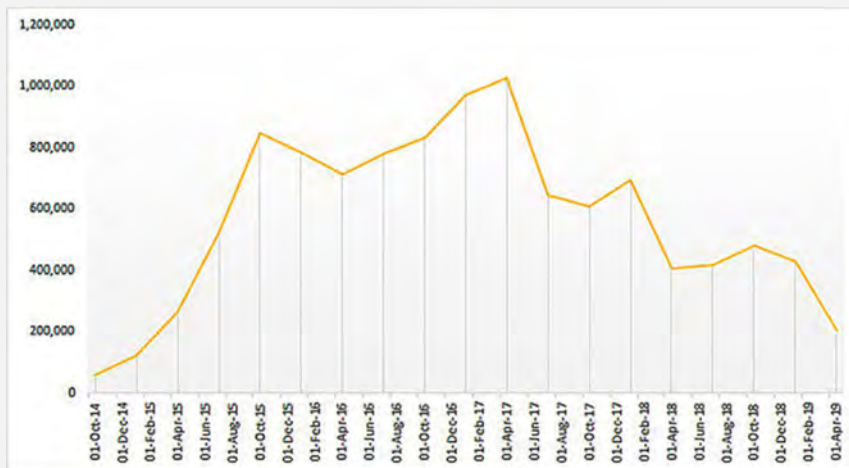


Fig 2 - A graph showing weekly processing of parcels through the Home Postal Depot RE 1914-19.

The transport requirements of the Depot were met at first by the London Postal Service through the existing Civil Post Office contract but owing to labour shortages in the autumn of 1915 the contractor could no longer carry on. The War Office then agreed to attach the 620th Company Army Service Corps (M.T.) to the Depot for the duration. Such was the demand that at one time the company had an establishment of 500 men and 220 three-ton lorries.

British Expeditionary Force – France, Belgium (1914-18)

1914

Lt Col W Price CMG RE received the APS mobilization orders in late July 1914. The advance parties of the Base Army Post Office (BAPO) and Advanced Base Army Post Office departed for France on 11 August whilst the remaining personnel left the UK on 14 August. The BAPO was established at Le Havre and the Advanced BAPO, which also operated as a concentration office for cross-post, was set up at Amiens. Additionally two stationary APOs were established; one in Boulogne the other in Rouen. Field Post Offices (FPOs) in support of the front line formations were instituted at GHQ, Corps HQs and the Corps, divisional and brigade rail/road heads - mainly concentrated in the neighbourhood of Maubeuge, Cambrai, Saint-Quentin and Le Cateau (GHQ). UK bound mails were accepted at the FPOs from Saturday, 15 August onwards.

During the Retreat from Mons (24 August – 4 September) the FPOs moved back with their respective formations. When the German's push to Paris threatened the British lines of communication the Advance BAPO at Amiens moved westward to Rouen (27 August) then to Le Mans (31 August) then to Villeneuve-Saint-Georges and finally to Abbeville (14 October) By the time the Advance BAPO reached Abbeville it had moved four times in 50 days and had journeyed over 460 miles using trains as well as horse and cart. Likewise between 1–4 September the BAPO moved from Le Havre to Nantes where it was re-opened. Once the military situation stabilised after the battle of Marne the BAPO was moved back to Havre and opened for work on 27 September. It remained in Le Havre for the rest of the war. Service improvements came with the BAPO's return to Le Havre as a dedicated daily packet ship was instituted between Southampton and the BAPO reducing the mail transit time from the UK to the soldier in the front line from ten days to four.

Throughout September and October the BEF received reinforcements from the UK and India. In anticipation of the arrival of Indian troops an APO was opened in Marseilles, Southern France. After the success of the Allies at the battles of Marne and Aisne which thwarted the Germans' intentions to capture Paris, the BEF was redeployed north to the Ypres area and in its wake followed the formations FPOs. The upheaval to the postal lines of communication caused by the retreat and re-deployment highlighted the inadequacies of dependency on the supply system for the movement of mail therefore in November the APS obtained lorries to transport mail between the railheads and set in motion what was to become a very efficient cross-post service. King George V visited the BEF on 1 December 1914 and expressed satisfaction with the APS's performance.

Although there was a lack of experience on which to base a traffic forecast for Christmas 1914 the APS prudently temporarily increased the staff by 600 and obtained use of a further 50 lorries, as well as, getting agreement that all available trains could be used for despatches to the front. In the event Christmas passed without major incident with the APS delivering two million letters and half a million parcels. On Monday, 28 December 50 bags of mail were destroyed by fire when a returning supply train from II Corps was involved in a collision at Neilles Lès Bléquin, about 6 miles south of Saint-Omer, a considerable number of "Princess Mary's Gift Boxes" were destroyed in the incident.

Mary, Princess Royal and Countess of Harewood (Victoria Alexandra Alice Mary; 25 April 1897 – 28 March 1965), was a member of the British royal family. She was the only daughter of King George V and Queen Mary, and the aunt of the current British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II.



Princess Mary, centre, with her five brothers

During World War I, Princess Mary visited hospitals and welfare organizations with her mother; assisting with projects to give comfort to British servicemen and assistance to their families. One of these projects was Princess Mary's Christmas Gift Fund.



The Princess (right) with her mother Queen Mary during the First World War

Princess Mary's Christmas Gift Fund.

Back in 1914, when it was still thought the war would be over quickly, seventeen year-old Princess Mary wanted to send every soldier and sailor involved in the war effort a personal gift for Christmas. **'Her Royal Highness the Princess Mary's Sailors' and Soldiers' Fund'** was created, and donations were invited from the general public. In a letter released by Buckingham Palace early in November 1914 and published in British and colonial newspapers, the princess wrote:

"I want you now to help me to send a Christmas present from the whole of the nation to every sailor afloat and every soldier at the front. I am sure that we should all be happier to feel that we had helped to send our little token of love and sympathy on Christmas morning, something that would be useful and of permanent value, and the making of which may be the means of providing employment in trades adversely affected by the war. Could there be anything more likely to hearten them in their struggle than a present received straight from home on Christmas Day?"

Please will you help me?"

The gift was to be a small embossed brass box containing a number of small items. Most contained one ounce of pipe tobacco, twenty cigarettes, a pipe, a tinder lighter, Christmas card and a photograph of the Princess. For the non-smokers the brass box contained a packet of acid tablets, a khaki writing case with pencil, paper and envelopes, and the Christmas card and photograph. Boxes for the nurses contained the card and chocolate.



Tobacco & Cigarettes in Gift Box



"Bullet" pencil and writing paper



1914 Christmas Box



"Bullet" pencil, card and photograph of Princess Mary

The response to the appeal was overwhelming. The cost of purchasing sufficient quantities of the gift box for 145,000 sailors and 350,000 soldiers was estimated at £55,000 – £60,000, but the appeal raised £162,591 12s 5d, meaning the gift could be sent to all British and Imperial service men and women: about 2,620,019 in all. The gift boxes were to be delivered in three waves:

First all naval personnel and troops at the Front were to receive theirs before, on or shortly after Christmas Day. Wounded soldiers in hospital, men on furlough, prisoners of war (whose gifts were held in reserve) and nurses serving at the Front were also included in this first wave, as were widows and parents of soldiers killed in action. The wording on the card was 'With Best Wishes for a Happy Christmas and a Victorious New Year from the Princess Mary and Friends at Home'

The second wave included all other British, colonial and Indian troops serving outside the British Isles; and finally in the third wave, all troops stationed in Britain. Second and third wave recipients were to

receive their gifts during or shortly after January 1915 – although in reality some had to wait much longer than that. For them, the wording was amended to ‘With Best Wishes for a Victorious New Year from the Princess Mary and Friends at Home’. The front of the card bore the Princess’s monogram, with the year 1914 for the first wave and 1915 for the rest.

Several practical obstacles had to be overcome before the Committee could tackle the logistics of delivering such a large number of gifts to troops at the Front. A shortage of brass, a key component in military equipment, created delays in manufacturing the boxes. In fact, a later shipment of brass from the United States was lost when a German submarine torpedoed the cargo ship Lusitania off the southern coast of Ireland on May 7, 1915.

Filling the boxes also required an immense quantity of supplies - 44,840 pounds of tobacco; 710,069 pipes; 13,050,000 cigarettes and 500 000 cards! Amazingly, an estimated 335 000 boxes were delivered by Christmas Day 1914. Brass shortages meant that some personnel did not receive their packages until the summer of 1916. By January 1919, the British War Office reported that 252 250 gifts remained undelivered, and placed advertisements in newspapers in hopes of contacting the remaining eligible soldiers.

The "Sailors' and Soldiers" Christmas Fund" ceased operation in 1920 - six years after its inception. The remaining money was transferred to Queen Mary's Maternity Home, an establishment founded to support the wives and children of sailors, soldiers and airmen. More than 200 000 British pounds has been raised during the campaign, mostly from thousands of small donations made by ordinary citizens.

A total of 2.5 million gift boxes were distributed during and after the war. After consuming its contents, many servicemen and women used the empty tins to carry small personal items throughout the war, making the "Princess Mary Christmas box" the most common "Great War" keepsake among soldiers of the British Empire. All of this blossomed from a young Princess's wishes to brighten the first Christmas at war for thousands of British military personnel - a truly remarkable story.

Acknowledgement: [Royal Victoria Hospital and Military Cemetery at Netley website](#).

1915

The APS continued to re-organise itself to meet the challenges of the changing tactical situation and an increase in troop levels on the Western Front. Packet boat connections were introduced between Folkestone and Boulogne where a BAPO was established in January, which improved the transit times for mails from 4 days to 2 days. In his dispatch of 5 April 1915 the CinC, Sir John French, put the high quality of the postal service on official record when he reported that:

The Army Postal Service has continued to work well and at the present time a letter posted in London is delivered at GHQ or at Headquarters of Army or Corps on the following evening and reaches an addressee in the trenches on the second day of posting. The delivery of parcels has also been accelerated and is carried out with regularity and dispatch.

In anticipation of the arrival of the Territorial Divisions in the spring of 1915, followed by Kitchener's new Army Divisions, experienced RE (PS) NCOs were drafted home to train the RE (PS) personnel attached to these new formations. Source: *History of the British Army postal service* - <https://en.wikipedia.org>