

THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ARMY POSTAL SERVICE.

Part 5

Royal Engineers (Postal Section) - Second World War (1939-45)

The centre of the worldwide Army Postal Services operation was the Home Postal Depot (HPD) RE, first established in London in the late summer of 1939, but was moved to GPO Reading shortly after the outbreak of war. It was then relocated to GPO premises in Bournemouth to be nearer to the Continent and therefore provide a more efficient service to the troops of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) serving in France and Belgium.

Correspondence addressed to "APO England" and to Army and RAF units serving overseas tended at the GPO was circulated to the HPD RE. The Depot, whose primary responsibility was to collect, sort and despatch military mail to its final destination, also acted as a recruitment, training and reinforcement depot, as well as, a Records Office for the RE (PS) and a supply centre for Postal units worldwide.



Postal trained **ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service)** sorting letters at the Home Postal Centre RE, Nottingham (1944). The ATS made up 48% of the 3,000 workforce employed at the HPC RE.

The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS often pronounced as an acronym) was the women's branch of the British Army during the Second World War. It was formed on 9 September 1938, initially as a women's voluntary service, and existed until 1 February 1949, when it was merged into the Women's Royal Army Corps.

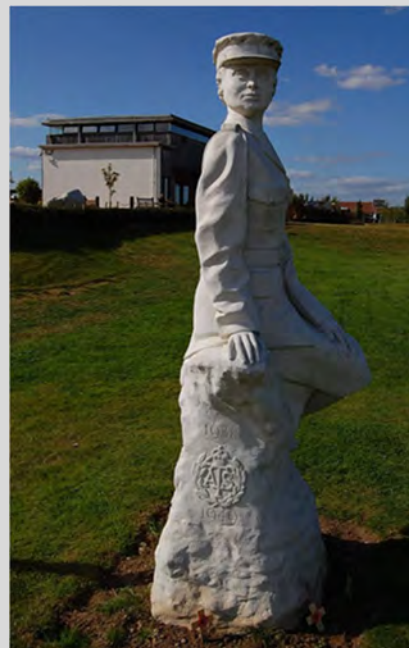
The ATS had its roots in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), which was formed in 1917 as a voluntary service. During the First World War its members served in a number of jobs including clerks, cooks, telephonists and waitresses. The WAAC was disbanded after four years in 1921.

Prior to the Second World War, the government decided to establish a new Corps for women, and an advisory council, which included members of the Territorial Army (TA), a section of the Women's Transport Service (FANY) and the Women's Legion, was set up. The council decided that the ATS would be attached to the Territorial Army, and the women serving would receive two thirds the pay of male soldiers.

All women in the army joined the ATS except for nurses, who joined Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), and medical and dental officers, who were commissioned directly into the Army and held army ranks, and those remaining in the FANY, known as Free FANYs.



ATS Cap badge and ATS memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum.



In Action

The first recruits to the ATS were employed as cooks, clerks and storekeepers. At the outbreak of the Second World War, 300 ATS members were billeted to France. As the German Army advanced through France, the British Expeditionary Force was driven back towards the English Channel. This led to the evacuation of troops from Dunkirk in May 1940, and some ATS telephonists were among the last British personnel to leave the country.

As more men joined the war effort, it was decided to increase the size of the ATS, with numbers

reaching 65,000 by September 1941. Women between the ages of 17 and 43 were allowed to join, although these rules were relaxed in order to allow WAAC veterans to join up to the age of 50. The duties of members were also expanded, seeing ATS orderlies, drivers, postal workers and ammunition inspectors.

The National Service Act



In December 1941, Parliament passed the National Service Act, which called up unmarried women between 20 and 30 years old to join one of the auxiliary services. These were the ATS, the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Women's Transport Service. Married women were also later called up, although pregnant women and those with young children were exempt. Other options under the Act included joining the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), which supplemented the emergency services at home, or the Women's Land Army, helping on farms. There was also provision made in the act for objection to service on moral grounds, as about a third of those on the conscientious objectors list were women. A number of women were prosecuted as a result of the act, some even being imprisoned. Despite this, by 1943 about nine out of ten women were taking an active part in the war effort.

Women were barred from serving in battle, but due to shortages of men, ATS members, as well as members of the other women's voluntary services, took over many support tasks, such as radar operators, forming part of the crews of anti-aircraft guns and military police. However, these roles were not without risk, and there were, according to the Imperial War Museum, 717 casualties during World War II.



Territorial Service (ATS) women working on a Churchill tank at a Royal Army Ordnance Corps depot, 10 October 1942

The first 'Mixed' Heavy Anti-Aircraft (HAA) battery of the Royal Artillery (435 (Mixed) HAA Battery) was formed on 25 June 1941, and took over an operational gun site in Richmond Park, south-west London, in August. It was the forerunner of hundreds of similar units with the ATS supplying two-thirds of the personnel: at its height in 1943 three-quarters of Anti-Aircraft Command's HAA batteries were mixed. Several Heavy Anti-Aircraft regiments deployed to North West Europe with 21st Army Group in 1944–45 were 'Mixed' regiments. A secret trial (the 'Newark Experiment' in April 1941) having shown that women were capable of operating heavy searchlight equipment and coping with conditions on the often desolate searchlight sites, members of the ATS began training at Rhyl to replace male personnel in searchlight regiments.



At first they were employed in searchlight Troop headquarters, but in July 1942 the 26th (London Electrical Engineers) Searchlight Regiment, Royal Artillery became the first 'Mixed' regiment, with seven Troops of ATS women posted to it, forming the whole of 301 Battery and half of 339 Battery. In October that year the all-women 301 Battery was transferred to the new 93rd (Mixed) Searchlight Regiment, the last searchlight regiment formed during World War II, which by August 1943 comprised about 1500 women out of an establishment of 1674. Many other searchlight and anti-aircraft regiments on Home Defence followed, freeing men aged under 30 of medical category A1 for transfer to the infantry.

Similarly, by 1943 the ATS represented 10 per cent of the Royal Corps of Signals, having taken over the major part of the signal office and operating duties in the War Office and Home Commands, and ATS companies were sent to work on the lines of communications of active overseas theatres.

By VE Day and before demobilization of the British armed forces, there were over 190,000 members of the women's Auxiliary Territorial Service.

In May 1941 the Depot was redesignated the Home Postal Centre RE (HPC RE) and relocated to Nottingham, where the organisation requisitioned, for operational and billeting purposes, a hundred and forty of the city's buildings, including; the Vyvella factory premises, the Hickings buildings, the GPO's Queen Street offices and Trent Bridge Cricket ground. It remained in Nottingham until 1947.

The HPC RE was organised into several departments and branches, each responsible for their own part of the postal operation. They included:

Letter and Parcel Sorting Offices, Inquiry Branch, Returned Letter Branch, Locations Branch, POW Mail Section, Telegram, Airgraph, Administration, messing and Motor Transport Departments.

These branches, sections and departments were staffed by a mixture of RE (PS), ATS and civilian personnel.

Heavy manual tasks, such as carrying parcel bags, were often undertaken by Conscientious Objectors assigned to the HPC RE.

GPO trains and road service schedules, as well as, specially dedicated trains were used to convey mail between the HPC, the GPO, the Army Postal Distribution Centres (APDC), the overseas embarkation ports of Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow, the airfields in the Midlands and the seaplane port of Poole.



Tracing record office at the Home Postal Centre RE, Nottingham (1944)

Source: *History of the British Army postal service* -

<https://en.wikipedia.org>

Tracing undeliverable mail

It is a sad fact that during war battlefield casualties invariably produce large quantities of undeliverable mail. In the field, such mail that comes to hand in the units was checked against unit records and disposed of appropriately.

Unit mail which could not be delivered for whatever reason was returned to the Army Post Office (APO) or Field Post Office (FPO), and sent back to postal detachments located at the formation's 2nd Echelon. These detachments checked the mail against the Field Records. Mail that could not be dealt with was returned to the Return Letter Branch (RLB) at HPC RE for further searching and consultation with the Records Office of the appropriate arm. If that proved unsuccessful the letter was eventually returned to the sender.

In the cases where the addressee had been 'killed in action' or was reported 'missing' extreme care was taken to ensure that returned mail did not arrive at the sender's address before the official notification had been issued.

Army Postal Distribution Centres (APDC) (1940–45)

In the dark months that following the fall of France and the débâcle in Norway Britain, with its shattered armies freshly snatched from mainland Europe, started to build its defences in preparation for an invasion by Nazi Germany.

"The defensive scheme required that the Army Postal Service (APS) form a nationwide postal distribution network for military units. The service was based upon the Home Postal Centre, Royal Engineers (HPC RE) and the establishment of six Army Postal Distribution Centres (APDC) located at:

London - APDC 1. Bristol - APDC 2. Leeds - APDC 3. Crewe - APDC 4. Edinburgh - APDC 5. Belfast - APDC 6

The APDCs received their mail direct from the GPO or the HPC RE. Units were responsible for collecting from, and delivering their mail to their allocated APDC, this system remained in place until the end of the

war. (Their war diaries are held in the RE Library).

As part of this system the concept of the "Closed" address (e.g. Number, Rank, Name, Unit, c/o APO England) was developed. It was an innovation that was to later assist in providing the necessary security to ensure the masking of troop movements during the build-up for D Day and the subsequent success of Operation Overlord (D Day landings). The closed address concept was the forerunner of today's BFPO address system.

British Expedition Force (BEF) 1939-40

Immediately on the outbreak of war members of the RE (PS) were mobilised and advance parties of the Postal units, under the command of Colonel W Roberts the Assistant Director Army Postal Services (ADAPS) BEF, were sent to France with their formations.

The APS provided mail collection and distribution facilities, sold stamps, postal orders and postal stationery, as well as, providing a Telegram service. The transit time for mail between the UK and BEF was 3–4 days. During the 'Phoney War' period a 'cross post' operation was laid for intra-formation mail, the service also carried most of the Royal Signals Despatch Rider Letter Service (DRLS) material. The APS handled an average of 9,000 mailbags a day.

As part of the "Plan D" the Base APO was moved to Le Havre and a Regulating Post Office was established at Bolougne to receive mails from Folkestone. This improved the transit time to 2–3 days.

Postal personnel and their mails were evacuated from Dunkirk during 23 May - 6 June 1940. Sapper (later Lieutenant Colonel) John Turver described his first sight of the beaches and the process of evacuation:

"What a sight met our eyes, as far as could be seen the sand was covered by a winding column of men who were patiently waiting their turn to go to the mole and on to the jetty. The system which was in operation was that groups of fifty men had to be formed under a chosen leader, and then only would they take their place in the waiting column. All this time we carried with us our cumbersome cash box which was our stock of several hundred pounds worth of stamps and Postal Orders...Cheerfully we attached ourselves to a crowd of RE's who were forming their own company into several parties of fifty."

Sapper Turver was successfully evacuated, as was Colonel Roberts and his Postal Directorate, but on his arrival in Dover Roberts was immediately ordered back to Cherbourg to organise the evacuation of the rear area Postal units and any outstanding mails.

Meanwhile, British troops left on French soil west of the river Seine had their own problems, Captain (later Lieutenant Colonel) E G Hucker RE, OC 2nd Line of Communications (L of C) Postal Unit RE, was among them and kept a private diary (held in the RE Library). His entries for 9–10 June 1940 give some insight into the confusion that reigned immediately after the fall of Dunkirk, he recorded:

Sunday 9 June 1940:

...Trucks of inward (UK) mails (285 bags) received at station [Lisieux] and dealt with. HQ Rouen Sub area, Signals and other small units obtained mail but in general unit mail remained on hand as unit locations were not available. Moreover "G" staff (Capt Harper) informed me that the Postal Unit must be kept mobile ready to make another move at short notice. ADST seen and a lorry requisitioned for transport of mail. "G" staff and "Q" staff (Major Jackson Darling) instructed me to hold all mail for 51 Div as it was impossible to reach them across [the] Seine...

Beauman Div called and collected mail, A Div did not call. Mails for 51 Div returned to Mézidon by road for re-consigning to Base. Party left at Mezidon on Colonel Robert's instructions for requisition trucks. Mails from [APO] S6 returned there except those for 51 Div.

Monday 10 June 1940:

Col Roberts left for Mézidon and Le Mans - taking two bags of unsorted English mail for Base APO 1 [Cherbourg]. Acting on instructions party left for Pont L'Evêque in an effort to locate [APO] S9 staff. I saw Col [John] Evans [DADAPS BEF] there who stated he had no knowledge of [APO] S9 staff and that if they had not already been evacuated to a place south of the river [Seine] they would go to England directly from Le Havre. Telephonic communication with Le Havre not possible after 12 noon.

Railway communication between Lisieux & Base APO [Cherbourg] interrupted by the enemy's successful bombing of the line at Serquigny. Mails for 1 AD collected by Lieutenant Cashin on way to Le Mans.

information received that Beauman Div already moved to Le Mans area at about 9.0pm 9/6/40. 2 L of C Postal Unit now in forward positions...

The entries after this date become sparser and terser as the situation became more desperate, however, the unit was eventually evacuated intact from St Malo."

**Middle East Force (MEF) 1940-45**

At the time that war was declared peacetime garrison troops stationed in North Africa and the Middle East were using the civilian postal services, as they had done since 1882, but by July 1940, under a special arrangement with the Egyptian government, a Base APO was established in Cairo and the Royal Engineers (Postal Section) were allowed to run their own post offices and collect the resulting revenue.

Postal units were deployed with their formations throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Some of the RE (PS) personnel, along with their formations, were captured at Crete and Tobruk and spent the rest of the war as Prisoners of War (POWs).

Surface mail routes through the Mediterranean became extremely vulnerable once Italy entered the war in June 1940 and by mid-1941, after Germany had conquered the Balkan regions, the direct air service to Cairo was cut. This meant that new routes for mail had to be found.

Surface mail was sent via the Cape of Good Hope and an air route was forged across the southern edge of the Sahara desert from Takoradi, West Africa to Khartoum, Sudan. From there it was carried north by rail.

These new routes were slower than the old routes and in a very short time they began to have an adverse effect on the morale of both the troops and their families. The situation was aggravated by the uncertainty and casualties caused by the German bombing of the major cities of Britain and the enemy U-boat action against the convoy ships carrying mails and supplies.

The mail, if it got through at all, could take 4–8 weeks to do so. To improve the service it was necessary to find a way to lighten the mail so that more of it could be carried by air. The solution, initiated by the APS and the GPO, was the introduction of the "airgraph" and the "air letter form

Airgraph



GPO Airgraph poster— showing an example of an airgraph

The airgraph was invented in the 1930s by the Eastman Kodak Company in conjunction with Imperial Airways (now British Airways) and Pan-American Airways as a means of reducing the weight and bulk of mail carried by air. The airgraph forms, upon which the letter was written, were photographed and then sent as negatives on rolls of microfilm. A GPO poster of the time claimed that 1,600 letters on film weighed just 5oz, while 1,600 ordinary letters weighed 50 lbs. At their destination the negatives were printed on photographic paper and delivered as airgraph letters through the normal APS or GPO systems

In 1940 the Minister of Transport, Lieutenant Colonel Moore-Brabazon MC RFC, put forward the idea that airgraphs be used to reduce both the bulk and weight of mail travelling between the MEF and the UK. The matter was referred to the APS and the GPO, who jointly investigated the possibility of using airgraphs. This eventually led to a service being instituted between England and Egypt in 1941 when 70,000 airgraphs were sent in the first batch and took three weeks to reach their destination.

Kodak had offices in Cairo that were capable of processing airgraph negatives, but it was not until the appropriate equipment arrived from America that their Cairo office. That the APS was able to provide a return service to the UK. In the theatres of war the whole airgraph operation was coordinated by the APS. Completed airgraph forms were collected by the A/FPOs and forwarded to the Kodak processing plants, which were co-located with the Base APOs.

The use of the airgraph was not rationed and its postage was also set at three pence (3d). Although the airgraph proved to be immediately popular its use was limited because of its size (approx; 2ins x 3ins) and lack of privacy, so when sufficient aircraft capacity became available its use declined in favour of the air letter.

The airgraph service was later extended to: Canada (1941), East Africa (1941), Burma (1942), India (1942), South Africa (1942), Australia (1943), New Zealand (1943), Ceylon (1944), and Italy (1944).

Airletter



GPO Poster

Lieutenant Colonel R. E. Evans RE, ADAPS MEF, proposed that a lightweight self-sealing letter card that weighed only 1/10 oz be adopted by the British Army for air mail purposes. He recommended its use to Sir Anthony Eden, the Secretary of State for War during his visit to the Middle East in late 1940. By January the following year, General Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief, MEF was told by Eden that:

Your Assistant Director Army Postal Services may forthwith introduce an Air Mail Letter Card Service for the Middle East. Use British stamps from all countries, including Egypt.

On 1 March 1941, the service between the Middle East and the UK was started, using a combination of Imperial

The postage on each air letter was three pence (3d) and, due to limited air capacity, they were initially rationed at one per man per month but towards the end of the war, as more capacity became available, the ration was lifted

The private nature of the air letter ensured its popularity among its users and that popularity, with its lightness, brought about its continued use as today's civilian air letter (aerogrammes) and the military "bluey".

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