

First World War Remembered The Army Cyclist Corps



First World War Field Telephone Operator
one of many phases of the cyclist soldier's work

CYCLING CAMPAIGN FOR NORTH BEDFORDSHIRE

Founded 1992

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Cover

The cover sketch has been reproduced from Issue No 1255 Volume XLIX of Cycling - The Military Cyclists' Journal dated 4 February 1915.

Introduction

This short article is in remembrance of the year's 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War on 4 August 1914 and is devoted to The Army Cyclist Corps, in particular the Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalions in which many Bedfordshire people were enlisted.

The war was described at the time to be

'The war to end all wars'.



The Army Cyclist Corps remembered

First World War Remembered

- The Army Cyclist Corps

Monday 4 August 2014 marked the centenary of the start of the First World War, a war without parallel eclipsing all previous wars by the scale of its destruction - said at the time to be the war to end all wars.

May we never understate or forget to show our appreciation of our forebears making the ultimate sacrifice they have.

A bicycle was an ideal means of transportation as it was comparatively lightweight - it could be carried over obstructions - and as well as being ridden could be loaded with equipment and pushed. It was particularly well-suited for conveying despatches, guerrilla action, patrols and reconnaissance. A motorcycle was faster, but a bicycle was silent. Cyclist units therefore played a big part in the early stages.

The Army Cycling Corps started in England in a voluntary capacity around 1885 and were believed to be known as Rifle Volunteer Corps. In 1888, the 26th Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps became the first cyclist battalion and it remained the only one until the formation of the Territorial Force in 1908, when three existing infantry battalions were converted to cyclists, and six totally new cyclist battalions were formed. Four more battalions were formed between 1911 and 1914, one of which was the **Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion**. Until 1914 the battalions were used largely as coastal patrols.

The official Army Cyclist Corps (ACC) was formed in 1914 absorbing a number of pre-existing cyclist battalions, from the Territorial Force. More cyclist units were raised during the war, but these all wore the ACC badge whereas the pre-existing units wore their own distinctive unit badges. Fifteen cyclist battalions existed on mobilisation in August 1914.

Cyclists were initially excited by the prospect of exclusive cyclist battalions, enlisting with their friends and fellow riders. The first cyclist units went overseas to France and Flanders and to Gallipoli in 1915.

In the early days, military cyclists proved their worth, and there were numerous reports of their bravery in the British cycling press. But trench warfare forced the reassignment of soldiers from cyclist units to infantry units, and though bicycles were still used extensively throughout the war by all sides, there was less need for actual cyclist units.

By the end of the war in France and Flanders, the cyclist battalions had been reformed and the count was still 15 English with a New Zealand,



*Badge of honour:
WWI Cycle Corp badge*

Australian and Canadian Corp added making 18 in total. During the First World War operations, cyclists often found themselves in unfriendly and difficult terrain and had to give up their mounts. Based on that experience the British Army found no long-term role for cyclists. The Army Cyclist Corps was disbanded in 1919.

It is not possible to know exactly how many military cyclists there were in the First World War, but it is estimated that at least 100,000 British soldiers used bicycles in some capacity and at least 150,000 French and Belgians.

In 1914, the British army had 14,000 men in cycle regiments and battalions, increasing to 20,000 by the end of the war. When the Americans entered the war in 1917, they shipped 26,407 bicycles with them to France although they did not have any established bicycle corps.

Cyclists' Duties

Examples of Initial duties which befell cyclists:

- Scouting

In Belgium, British and German cycling units actually engaged each other.

Early Anglo Belgian armoured trains carried Belgian cycling troops on board to scout away from the railway line.

It was German cycling units that first made contact with the Russians pre- Tannenberg.

The Italians had cycling troops used as a mobile reserve to plug holes in the line in the case of an Austrian break through.

- Courier work

Cyclists were used to cycle down communications trenches. This was particularly important when the security of the trench telephone system was found to have been compromised by German Moritz receiving stations

- Security patrols

The canal system in both Britain and France could have been very vulnerable to sabotage and was regularly patrolled by cyclists.

Training Manual

The British Army's Cyclist Training Manual 1907 (as revised 1911) was replete with items as how to salute while standing by, sitting on and riding the bicycle, drill movements such as "Ground Cycles", "Take Up Cycles" and "Stack and Unstack Cycles" and helpful advice on care of bicycles such as "Bicycle tires should be wiped with a damp cloth after a march, so that all grit, which if left might cause a puncture, may be removed" (still good training advice today).

Main Bicycle Types Used

Three main types of bicycle were used by the British army during the First World War:

Military Folding Bicycles

In Great Britain, they were mainly built by BSA (see photograph below) and Phillips, to a specified pattern. Other styles were built in Austria and Russia as well as by Peugeot in France and Bianchi in Italy.

Civilian Roadsters

The majority of bicycles used were normal roadsters. Military accessories were available from Terry, Brooks, Gamages or individual manufacturers. A rear carrier was the most common accessory. Front carriers and rifle clips were often fitted. The most essential items were an inflator pump and a tool bag containing basic tools and puncture repair outfit.

Military Roadsters

Many of the top manufacturers such as Royal Enfield (see opposite), Rudge-Whitworth, Humber, Raleigh and Swift also offered militarised versions of their civilian roadsters. These were generally single speed machines; usually with more robust frames, that is, if the company also made a tradesmen's bicycle, that frame would be used for the military machine, wider 1¾" wheels, without a chain case but with various combinations of military fittings added.



Men of the Lancashire Fusiliers (Cyclist Corps) with BSA folding bicycles which can be folded and hung on their backs in one and a half minutes



1918 Royal Enfield Military Bike

Footnote

BSA (Birmingham Small Arms) Company continued to manufacture bicycles until 1957 when this part of the business was sold to Raleigh.

Royal Enfield produced bicycles at its Redditch Worcestershire factory until it closed in 1967.

The Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion

As a result of the 1908 Army reorganisation, Huntingdonshire lost its Volunteer Territorial Battalion and had to contribute to two companies of the 5th Battalion The Bedfordshire Regiment.

In 1913 the idea was put forward to the Huntingdonshire Territorial Association to form an independent Huntingdonshire Territorial Cyclist Battalion. This was approved and led to the go ahead by the War Office in February 1914.

A number of NCOs and men from the two Huntingdonshire companies of The Bedfordshire Regiment were transferred to the new battalion. Eight companies were formed with headquarters in Godmanchester; two local and one in St Ives and Somersham, St Neots and Kimbolton, Ramsey and Warboys, Yaxley and Farcet and two in Fletton, Stanground and Peterborough. The Regimental Band was the original civilian Fletton Victoria Prize Band.

The Battalion had its one and only Annual Territorial Camp in Skegness in July 1914.

Within days of returning War was declared on 4 August and the Battalion was mobilised and sent by train to Grimsby with 550 Officers and men to patrol the coast between Scarborough and Grimsby. The Battalion was moved to Scarborough in 1916 and to Whitby in June 1918.

A second Battalion of cyclists was quickly formed and in October 1914 also sent to Lincolnshire for coastal guard duties.

In the spring of 1915 a Third Battalion was authorised but unable to reach full strength was disbanded and the men recruited shared between the other two Battalions.

After two years of training and coastal patrols the majority of the First Battalion were drafted to France on 28 July 1916 to serve in a reconnaissance role and like all those who followed them, were rebadged to other Regiments. The Huntingdonshire cyclists were never able to fight as a unit outside the UK and eventually men with no Huntingdonshire affiliations were drafted into the two Battalions.

With the end of the War on 11 November 1918 (Armistice Day) the 1st Battalion was stood down on 14 April 1919 and the 2nd Battalion on 12 December 1919. A year later it was reconstituted as the 5th (Huntingdonshire Battalion) the Northamptonshire Regiment.

Cycle Artificers

The men who were used to maintain all of the cycles in all three of the Battalions were called Cycle Artificers. It was their job to ensure that all of the machines were serviced and in 'tip top' condition. They were all serving members of the Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion and specially trained in their trade.

Cycle Allowance

It was reported that each man bringing a bicycle to camp in good condition and complete with two brakes, mud guards, carrier, lamp, bell, pump and repair outfit would receive the following allowance:-

If present in Camp for 8 days £1.

For every day over 8 days 1/6 per day, making a maximum 15 days of £1 10s 6d.

No cycle allowance can be drawn by men who are less than 8 days in Camp.

Bicycles will be inspected by a Board of Officers after arrival in Camp, and any found not to be complete as above, and not in sound or efficient condition will be rejected, and no allowance will be paid for them.

Bicycles which have handlebars dropped down low, or which have the top stay of the frame sloping downwards to the front will not be accepted as rifles cannot be attached to them and they are otherwise unsuitable.



A group of Huntingdonshire Cyclists at their Skegness camp before the war in July 1914 (thanks to Martyn Smith)

Information for this article has been obtained from a number of websites including the following from which further information can be obtained:

<http://oldbike.wordpress.com>

<http://www.bendigobug.org.au>

<http://www.huntscycles.co.uk/>

<http://www.godmanchester.co.uk/featured-articles/17-organisations/hunts-cyclists/34-the-huntingdonshire-cyclist-battalions-1914-1919>

The Huntingdon Cyclists' Poem

A number of poems were written about The Huntingdonshire Cyclists' Brigade but this one in 1914 was written by the Rev K D Knowles, Chaplain to the 1st Battalion.

We come from a little county,
But we muster a thousand men,
Recruited in town and village,
And away from the flat bleak fen;
We patrol the Eastern coast, sir,
We are the boys who do not shirk
Though the wind blows stiff
Yet we guard your cliff,
For that is the Hunts. boy's work.

G. N. R. to Grimsby,
Bicycle up to Hull,
Pedal on to Hornsea,
A forty-five mile pull,
Ride up north to Filey,
Or ride down south to Spurn,
We'll do our job for a daily "bob,"
But we've more than our pay to earn.

We're bred from the old Fen stock, sirs,
Which oft times fought with Montagu;
We're hewn from the self-same rock, sirs,
Stern old Oliver Cromwell knew;
And throughout the two Battalions
You'll not find a father's son
Who will bring shame
The old fighting name
Of the lads of Huntingdon.

G. N. R. to Grimsby,
Bicycle up to Hull,
Pedal on to Hornsea,
A forty-five mile pull,
Ride up north to Filey,
Or ride down south to Spurn,
We'll do our job for a daily "bob,"
And the fame that we mean to earn.

The poem and others can be seen under
<http://www.huntscycles.co.uk/poetry%20new.htm>

Cyclists' National War Memorial

Cycling had been an important part of the First World War and also for those returning and it was felt in 1919 that something should be done to commemorate those cyclists who had not returned. Money was raised following a letter in the Cycling magazine for a memorial. Due to its location in what was believed to be near the centre of England, a site was chosen on the village green at Meriden in Warwickshire.

The memorial, a 30 foot high obelisk, faced with 32 tonnes of Cornish granite, was unveiled and dedicated on 21 May 1921 by the then Lord Chancellor, Lord Birkenhead, in the presence of more than 10,000 cyclists from all over England. The inscription on the Memorial reads:

TO THE
LASTING MEMORY
OF THOSE
CYCLISTS
WHO DIED IN THE
GREAT WAR
1914-1919



National Cyclists' Memorial dedication in 1921 (CTC)

The Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC) has organised an annual service during May since this time.

A second plaque was added in 1963 for those cyclists lost in the Second World War.

This year's service marking the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War took place on Sunday 18 May. The service was blessed by the Bishop of Warwick and a new plaque unveiled in honour of those who had been lost in conflicts since 1945.

Cycling Campaign for North Bedfordshire



Our Vision

To see Bedford as a

**‘Town of Cyclists’
&
‘Cycle Friendly Communities’**

Objectives

- ♦ To promote, encourage and support cycling as an important means of transport and recreation.
- ♦ To encourage consideration of the needs of cyclists in all aspects of transport planning and management, access issues and recreational use.



E-mail: ccnb@ccnb.org.uk
Website: <http://www.ccnb.org.uk>

Promotional website: <http://www.cyclebedford.org.uk>