

About British searchlight units and anti-aircraft artillery during the First World War

Introduction

Here follows another small postcard-inspired account of one of the more overlooked parts of the English army around the beginning of the First World War.

A spotlight section



The Royal Engineers, The Searchlights, c. 1912.

From a simultaneous postcard.



*Electric searchlight worked by Royal Engineers, approx. 1910.
From Source 1.*

It could look like the collapsible tower is being transported on the wagon on the right, while the searchlight may be being transported on the motor wagon on the left of the picture. Behind the wagon is a horse-drawn wooden wagon, on which is a cable drum.



From *Regimental Badges* by TJ Edwards, Gale & Polden Limited, 1951.

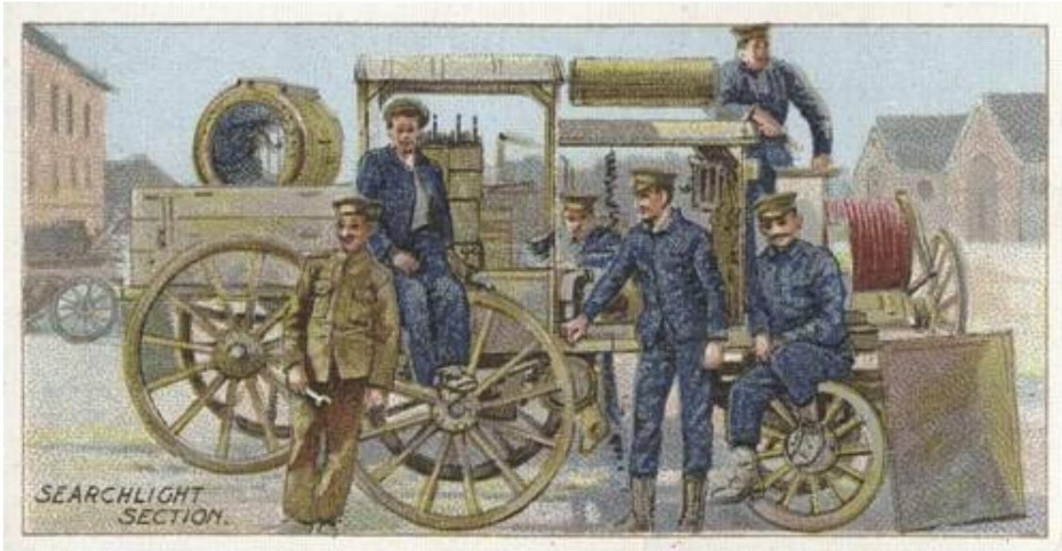
The subtitle to the image in Source 1 reads as follows:

"Special companies are formed for working these searchlights. In the illustration the light is mounted on a

collapsible tower, which can be elevated to a height of 30 feet in a few minutes, and is worked from dynamos. The light itself is 2" in diameter, and objects can be clearly seen by its aid for a distance of 2 miles."

Spotlights were, among other things, used in connection with coastal forts and mine blockades of certain ports. The responsibility for the military use of electricity lay in the hands of the engineering troops - Royal Engineers - who, in collaboration with the fortress artillery - Royal Garrison Artillery - manned the coastal forts.

A cigarette card from the period gives an impression of a searchlight section's rolling (horse-drawn) stock - a generator wagon, a train wagon with the searchlight itself and a cable car.



Searchlight Section, Royal Engineers, c. 1910.

Card No. 21 in WD & HO Wills *Army Life* cigarette card series, 1914.

From the New York Digital Library [1](#)).

The text on the back of the card reads, among other things:

"For guarding against night attack, or protecting a position, the searchlight is particularly valuable. A ray of light can be thrown a distance of three miles with sufficient power to discover any movement on the part of the enemy."

Uniforms

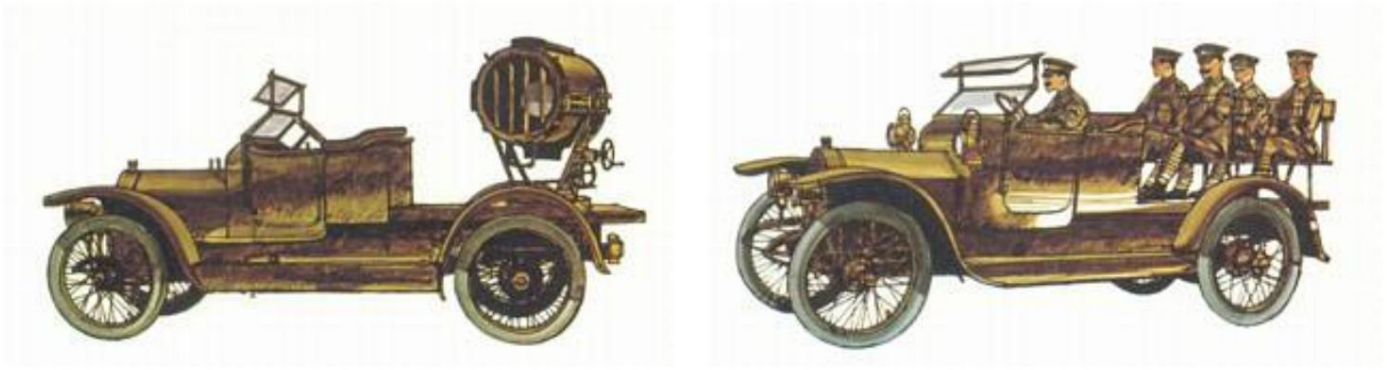
The soldiers on the postcard are wearing the Model 1902 khaki field uniform, while the soldiers on the searchlight tower photograph are wearing a dark blue service uniform and dark blue overcoats.

Most of the soldiers on the cigarette card are wearing blue turncoats and wear the field cap from the khaki-colored Model 1902 uniform. The standing soldier with the wrench on the left of the picture wears this very uniform, combined with the so-called *Brodrick Cap*, introduced in November 1900; the hat was a kind of cap, without a shade.

Experiment with motorization

Experiments with different forms of motorization were *in* the period and the English company Ducros Ltd. in Acton (London), who manufactured the Napier motorcars, carried out a great lobbying effort to get the British Army to adopt their very cars.

During this work, a mobile floodlight and various other superstructures, e.g. for transporting personnel or machine guns. Despite the company's far-sighted ideas, the wagons were not adopted.



*Light motorcars of the Napier Light Car type, 1912.
From Source 2.*

On the use of searchlights in the air force

The military use of airplanes and airships meant that searchlights soon acquired another function, namely. namely in the air force, and belonging to the Engineer Corps was preserved until 1939.

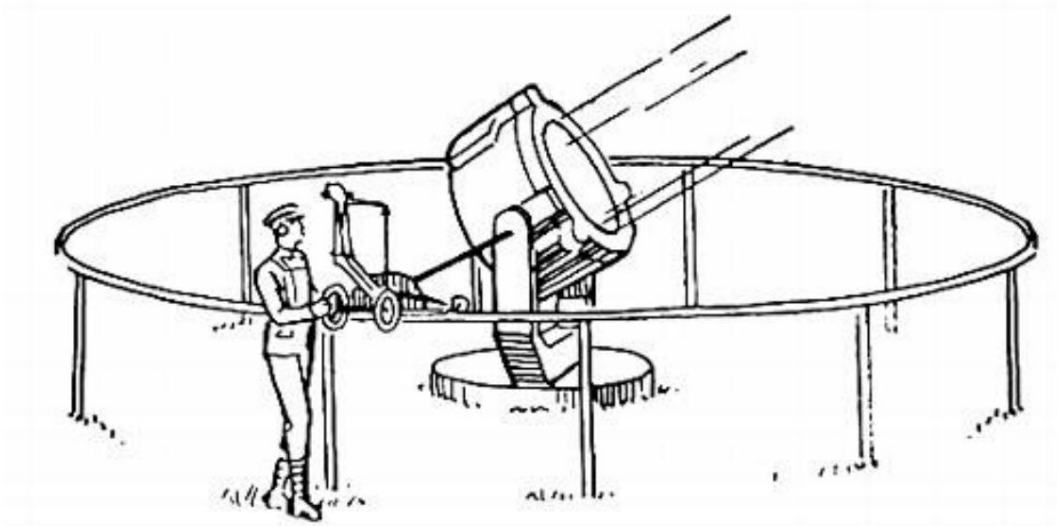
Here searchlight units that formed part of the Air Defense of Great Britain and corresponding field units were transferred to the Royal Artillery, a process that was completed in 1940.



*English 60 cm searchlight in France, 1916.
From Source 3.*

During the First World War, the British Army used 60 cm, 90 cm and 120 cm searchlights.

The soldier in the foreground operates the searchlight's sights and controls.



Principle sketch: Spotlight.

From Source 4.

An impression of the stand on which the searchlight's sighting means and control device rests can be obtained from this drawing from the toy company's Britains catalog from 1939.

Organization

During the First World War, the searchlight units of the Corps of Engineers were organized into companies, either independent and/or later (1930s) grouped into battalions. After the transfer to the artillery, the unit name was changed to batteries and divisions respectively.

The closest I can get to a more detailed organization of a searchlight company is a mention in Source 5, where the strength figure (War Establishment) for a mobile anti-aircraft division (Mobile Anti-Aircraft Brigade) is indicated as follows:

- 3 cannon batteries, each with 4 pcs. 13-pdr anti-aircraft guns, organized into 2 half-batteries with 2 anti-aircraft guns. 1 searchlight company,
- with 12 pcs. 60 cm spotlights, organized in 2 sections, each with 3 spotlights.
- Vehicles: 12 gun carriages, 24 pcs. 3-tonne lorries for the transport of searchlights, ammunition and other equipment and supplies, 1 workshop van, 2 passenger cars and 13 motorbikes.
- Personnel: 15 officers and 278 non-commissioned officers and privates, including 119 motor vehicle drivers from the Army Service Corps.



Anti-aircraft gunners spotting a Hun plane, approx. 1916.

Anti-aircraft guns

Although the 13-pdr anti-aircraft gun (76 mm) shares caliber with the light field gun (used by the Royal Horse Artillery) it is basically a pamphlet with different ballistic characteristics.

The cannon existed in two different versions - *13-pdr QF Mk. 4 Anti-aircraft gun* and *13-pdr 9cwt QF Anti-aircraft gun* - both of which were used, mounted on trucks (including Thornycroft and Peerless types).

A postcard in the series Official War Photographs (Series 13, No. 104), published by the Daily Mail.

The text on the back of the card reads as follows:

"An exciting moment at the front. These anti-aircraft gunners have spotted a German airplane, and are hurriedly sighting and aiming their guns."



Anti-aircraft gun in action, approx. 1916.

The anti-aircraft gun is a *13-pdr 9cwt* version, here mounted on a Thornycroft truck. The range finder (the instrument closest to the viewer) is probably a *Barr & Stroud UB2* type.

No. 7 in a contemporaneous series of postcards issued to support the sale of war bonds; the campaign's theme *Feed the Guns with War Bonds* is printed on the back.

It is also stated that the card has been produced on the basis of official information.

There are many indications that the card was drawn with the first of the postcards as a reference.

Sources

1. *ABC of the Army* by Captain J. Atkinson (ed.), Gale & Polden, Aldershot, 1910.
2. *Military Transport of World War I* by C. Ellis, Blandford Press, London 1970, ISBN 0-7137-0701-1.
3. *The Corps of Royal Engineers 1066-1996* The journal Regiment Nr. 13, April/May 1996.
4. *Britains Catalogue, 1939*. Reprinted by VJ Medcalf and P. Carlson, ACT Printers, Chislehurst, Kent, 1976.
5. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - Anti-Aircraft Artillery, 1914-55* by NW Routledge, Brassey's, London 1994, ISBN 1-857753-099-3.
6. *British Artillery Weapons & Ammunition 1914-1918* by Ian V. Hogg and LF Thurston, Ian Allan Ltd., Surrey 1972, SBN 7110-0381-5.

Per Finsted

Notes:

- 1) The tobacco company John Players & Son issued the corresponding series of 25 cards in 1910.