

About English cyclist units under First World War, Part 2



C Squadron, Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry, 3rd Corps Cavalry Regiment, together with cyclists (perhaps from the 3rd Corps Cyclist Battalion), Somme, 20 March 1917 [14](#)).

1918

Each corps on the Western Front now in principle had a cyclist battalion/cyclist regiment; the division was called a regiment if the forming unit had roots in the cavalry. The corps-level cyclist units solved reconnaissance tasks corresponding to the cyclist companies in 1914. They rarely acted as combined units, but operated with companies/squadrons wholly or partially attached to the corps' infantry divisions.

PLAYER'S CIGARETTES.



5TH CORPS.

The corps units also included an actual cavalry regiment, which in collaboration with the cyclist battalion/-

the regiment, solved reconnaissance tasks. During the last part of the war, which from August 1918 was a war of movement, the mobile units were well used.

The cyclist unit of *V Corps* was *The North Irish Horse*, which in February 1918 exchanged its horses for bicycles.

The regiment was designated *the 5th Cyclist Regiment (The North Irish Horse)*.

The regiment was organized into a regimental staff and 3 squadrons (A, D and E) of 99 men (4 officers and 95 non-commissioned officers and privates).

The fencing practice was horse-drawn.



The regiment commander was a major, while the squadron commanders were captains [16](#).

Correspondingly, *The Yorkshire Dragoons* were the Yeomanry (Queen's Own) Cyclist Regiment in *II Corps*.

The corps marks are reproductions of Player's cigarette cards from the series *Army Corps & Divisional Signs 1914-1918 (Series 1 and 2)*, from 1924-25.

Om 11th Cyclist Battalion



The Cyclist Battalion of *the XI Corps* demands special mention as it fought a *last stand* on April 9, 1918, near Neuve Chapelle.

As part of the German major offensive launched on 21 March 1918, 4 German divisions attacked three weak Portuguese brigades [17](#). The Portuguese units tried with all their might to put up a resistance, but quickly broke together.

Behind the Portuguese units was *the XI Corps*, whose commander, General Richard Haking, immediately sent forward his mounted units:

- *King Edward's Horse* (274 mand) [18](#) _____

- *11th Cyclist Battalion* (516 mand).

It succeeded in slowing down the German attack so much that the rest of the corps' units could move forward and stop the attack. The cyclist battalion was largely destroyed as a result, but was later re-established. The author of Source 8 accessed as personnel compensation from *the Army Cyclist Corps*.

About the cycling equipment



7th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Welsh Regiment, Cardiff, 191119). [_____](#)

Before the First World War, it seems that the volunteer cyclists provided their own bicycle.

This system can be analogous to the system in voluntary riding, where each man in principle showed up with his own horse. As fewer and fewer of the soldiers owned horses, the regiments hired horses for use in peacetime training. Discharged horses were used for mobilization.

Similar arrangements may have been used in the cyclist battalions.



A group of cyclists, approx. 1916. From a contemporary postcard.

Seen here are some more uniform bikes which are probably *Army Issue*.

The rifle is now attached to the bike by two devices, one on the handlebars and one at the back, under the saddle.

In the past, it was apparently most common for the front device to be located under the handlebars.



The regulatory packaging of a bicycle, approx. 1915 [20](#).

On the handlebars

are carried: Cooking pot, in sleeve. This includes the remaining part of the daily ration.

Cloak (*British Warm*), rolled up, in sleeping pad.



English folding bike, approx. 1944 [22](#).

(In the absence of a picture of the current model.)

The luggage carrier carries:

Waterproof coat (*cape*).

Pack sack, containing blanket and the soldier's personal equipment.

Any spare ammunition is also carried here.

During the war, among other things, folding bicycles [21](#) were used.

Source 6 mentions that *The North Irish Horse* was given folding bicycles. The bikes were apparently in the style of the type used by, among others, British commando and parachute units during the Second World War.

In Source 8, the author mentions that he first saw bicycles of this type in use in early 1918, when he was serving with the *2/1st Sherwood Rangers*, one of the volunteer cavalry regiments that had been converted into a cyclist regiment.

About uniforms



The statutory packaging for a cyclist,
approx. 1916.

On the back is

carried: Rucksack, containing towel, toothbrush, shaving brush, razor, hairbrush, etc. Any reserve catering is also provided here.

Bag, with entrenchment tool.

On the right hip is

carried: Field bottle.

On the left hip is worn:

Bayonet, in sheath.

Shaft for entrenchment tool.

The regular equipment of the cyclists is identical to the equipment of the infantry.

It appears that the only special equipment items are those carried on the bike:

- The coat, called *British Warm*, is a short version of the traditional military coat.
- The waterproof cover, called a *cape*, can be described as practical for bicycle use.



2/7th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Welsh Regiment, Paddington Station, London, 1915.

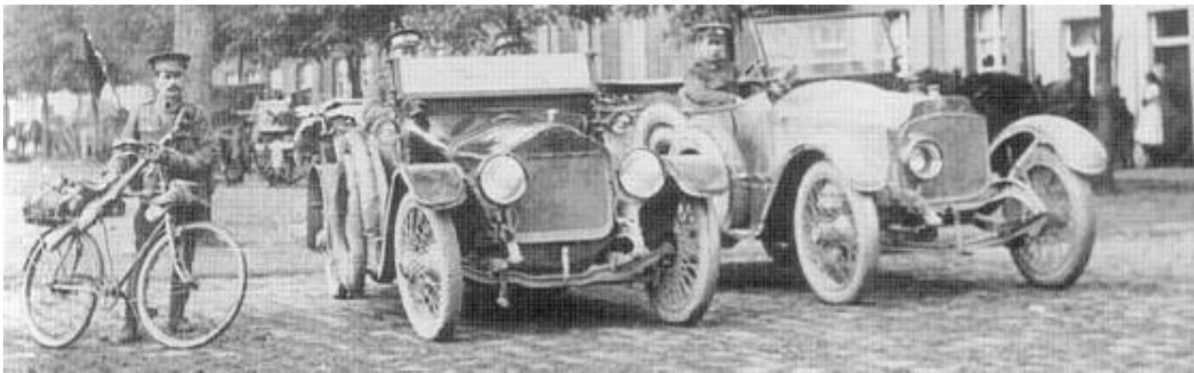
Another source [23](#) states that the picture dates from November 1914 and that the place is Victoria Station, London.

The soldiers are wearing the special short coat (pækkert) that was called *British Warm*.



2nd Cavalry Divisions kommandostation, september 1914 24). ___

This exciting photograph shows, among other things, an English bicycle ordnance that may belong to the signal section of a cavalry regiment (15 bicycles). Another possibility is that he belongs to the division's signal squadron or one of the brigade's signal platoons. He is uniformed as a rider, with a cartridge belt across his chest. On the left in the picture you can see a French bicycle order - dragoon or cuirassiers. In the center of the picture, behind the left horse, is the division's quarter mark.



2nd Cavalry Divisions kommandostation, Messines, October 1914 25). ___

The picture shows a bicycle order together with some of the division's cars. In connection with the army's mobilization, drivers as well as cars and motorcycles were advertised. Many volunteers (members of *the Royal Automobile Club*, *the Automobile Association* and *the Motor Union*) immediately signed up and, after a hasty dressing, were sent to France with their vehicles.



Hverveplakat fra 25th (County of London) Cyclist Battalion, The London Regiment, 1912.

Drawn by Ernest Ibbetson.

Reproduced from postcard purchased at the Imperial War Museum, London.

The central figure wears a badge with two crossed guns on his left forearm, probably designating him as a *marksman*.

Each of the stars on the right forearm marks 5 years of unmarked service.

Although the image has been reproduced previously (in my review of the [book Paper Soldiers](#)), it can now be shown in its proper context.



25th County of London Battalion (Cyclists), The London Regiment.
From *Regimental Badges* by TJ Edwards, Gale & Polden Limited, 1951.



The Northern Cyclist Battalion.
From Source 1.

Some of the cyclist battalions in the Territorial Army wore their own badges, while the majority wore the badge of their parent regiment.

Closing

As mentioned at the beginning, this small document is a collection of information from many different sources, collected over a number of years. I hope this may lead to further information coming to light.

Postscript



In my review of the book *Paper Soldiers*, I included a reproduction of the cut-out sheet *English Soldiers in Battle*, from 1915, drawn by Rasmus Christiansen.

The sheet shows, among other things, this exciting bicycle-drawn pamphlet.

It has since emerged that precisely the previously mentioned cyclist battalion - *25th County of London Battalion (Cyclists)*, *The London Regiment* - appeared with such a pamphlet at *The Naval and Military Tournament*, ca. 1908. The drawing may well represent this particular unit. The current image is reproduced in Source 1.

By chance I saw a reproduction of this part of the clipping sheet in the book *Ridder uden Kors - Aage Westerholz og Danmarks Forsvar* by Hans Neerbek, Odense Universitetsforlag, 1996, ISBN 87-7838-183-5. Aage Westerholz was one of the authors of the voluntary defense in Denmark, including the establishment of bicycle-borne recoilless rifle corps.

On 2 July 1917, postal clerk Ejnar P. Kannik, platoon leader in *the Copenhagen County Rifle Corps*, sent such a clipping for inspiration to Aage Westerholz, accompanied by reports of experiments with hand grenades.

The good postal clerk is probably the father of Preben Kannik (1914-1967), who was one of the initiators of Chakoten.

A witty angle on the subject of cyclists and perhaps an occasion for a later treatment, from a Danish point of view...

Sources

1. *The Territorial Battalions, A Pictorial History 1859-1985* af Ray Westlake, Spelmount Limited, Tunbridge Wells, Kent 1986, ISBN 0-946771-68-5.
2. *Field Service Pocket Book, 1914*, published by the General Staff, War Office, London 1914. Reprinted af David & Charles Reprints, London 1971, ISBN 0-7153-5225-3.
- 3rd *Infantry Training (4-Company Organization)*, 1914, published by the General Staff, War Office, London 1914.
4. *The History of the 15th The King's Hussars 1914-1922* af Lord Carnock, Naval & Military Press, London 2003, ISBN 1-84342-537-8. The original edition was published in 1932.
5. *Yeomanry Wars, The History of the Yeomanry, Volunteer and Volunteer Association Cavalry: A Civilian Tradition from 1794* by Peter D. Athawes, Scottish Cultural Press, Aberdeen 1994, ISBN 1-898218-02-1.
6. *The North Irish Horse - A Hundred Years of Service* af Richard Doherty, Spelmount Limited, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, 2002, ISBN 1-86227-190-9. (
7. *The Hertfordshire Yeomanry, An illustrated History 1794-1920* af J.D. Saintsbury, Hart Books, Welwyn, 1994, ISBN 0-948527-03-X.
8. *A Cyclist at War, The Recollections of Ex-Lieutenant J.C. Slingsby, Army Cyclist Corps*, Crown Imperial Magazine, December 1981.
9. *A History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 8: The Western Front, 1915-1918, Epilogue, 1919-1939* af The Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper, London 1997, ISBN 0-85052-467-9.

Per Finsted



Fra Digger History - An unofficial history of the Australian & New Zealand Armed Services.

To note:

14) *3rd Corps Cavalry Regiment* consisted from May 1916 to June 1917 of the regimental staff as well as *C* and *D* Squadron from *the Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry*. The regiment's third squadron was *C Squadron, The Surrey Yeomanry (Queen Mary's Regiment)*. From *Chain Mail - The History of Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry* by John Brereton, Picton Publishing, Chippenham, Wiltshire, u.å. (ca. 1990), ISBN 0-948251-67-0.

15) This collaboration is mentioned in the novel *Generalen* (original title *Bretherton*) by WF Morris, Gyldendal 1930.

16) This arrangement was also applicable in the cyclist regiments in England. Normally, a regimental commander was a lieutenant colonel, while the squadron commanders were majors, but in cyclist units one had thus gone down one step in the ranks. (Source 7.)

17) About the Portuguese Expeditionary Force - *Corpo Expedicionário Português* - see e.g. Portugal in The Great War. The page contains, among other things, a detailed description of the battles on 9 April 1918.

18) *King Edward's Horse (The King's Overseas Dominions Regiment, Special Reserve Cavalry)* was a volunteer cavalry regiment established in 1900. *Special reserve* status meant that the regiment had to provide a squadron to the English Expeditionary Force (1914).

19) Fra *The Welch Regiment, The British Soldier in the 20th Century, Regimental Special* of Mike Chappel, Wessex Military Publishing, Hartherleigh, Devon 1989, ISBN 1-870498-07-0.

20) From *The British Army '14-18, Uniforms and regiments, Part 3: Mounted Troops* by David Nash, Airfix Magazine September 1969. The reproduction appears to be from a regulation, but unfortunately the source is not given.

21) Folding bicycles were, among other things, used in French cycling units, and the idea/material may originate from here. A French hunter with a folding bike.

22) Fra *British Paratroops in Action* of Leroy Thompson, Squadron/Signal Publications, Carrollton,

Texas 1989, ISBN 0-89747-233-0.

23) *The Welch Regiment (41st and 69th Foot) 1881-1969* af Bryn Owen, Tempus Publishing Ltd., Stroud, Gloucestershire 1999, 0-7524-1679-0.

24) From *A History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 7: The Curragh Incident and the Western Front, 1914* by The Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper, London 1996, ISBN 0-85052-437-7. The photographer is Paul Maze (1887-1979), who was a French interpreter at e.g. *The Royal Scots Grays* (in the *5th Cavalry Brigade*). *The 2nd Cavalry Division* was created on 15 September 1914 and consisted of *the 3rd and 5th Cavalry Brigades*. The commander of *the 5th Cavalry Brigade*, Brigadier-General H. de la P. Gough, became the division's first commander. Paul Maze has described his experiences in a very readable book - *A Frenchman in Khaki*, William Heineman Ltd., London 1934.

25) Fra *The Old Contemptibles* af Michael Barthorp, Osprey Elite Series Nr. 24, London 1989, ISBN 0-85045-898-6.