

About English engineering units in Egypt, 1915-1917

Introduction

This article can be read in the context of the Senussi Uprising, and as background information for the units that participated in the suppression of the Senussi Uprising in 1915-16.

English engineering units in Egypt

The lack of English engineering units in the Western Frontier Force was pronounced, and when the force was established in November 1915, one had to make do with a detachment from the Egyptian Military Works Department, which, however, did well in Mersa Matruh. After the withdrawal from Gallipoli, the situation changes slightly.

Western Frontier Force

The English official history of the fighting in Egypt (Source 1) mentions that *a detachment of the Kent Field Company Royal Engineers arrived in December 1915*, but does not mention the pioneers' efforts further.

If the information is compared with the history of the Corps of Engineers, as presented on the Royal Engineers museum's website (Source 2), it appears that the detachment was composed of elements from two engineering companies from Kent.

- 1/1st East Kent Field Company Royal Engineers (Territorial Force) 1/2nd
- Kent Field Company Royal Engineers (Territorial Force).

The detachment's efforts are referred to as the construction of roads and field fortifications at Sollum, where the water supply is also being expanded. The port of Sollum, which now had to serve a considerable number of vessels, was expanded with a pier, constructed by the same engineering detachment.

The engineer detachment advances towards Sollum together with Brigadier General Lukin's force, i.a. 1st South African Infantry Brigade, and it is likely that tasks in connection with roads, field fortifications and water supply were also carried out en route to Sollum, while the pier building may not have taken place until after 14 March 1916, when Sollum was occupied.



Filtering Water.

Card No. 8 in John Player's *Army Life cigarette card series*, 1910.

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

The following is printed on the back of the card:

"The necessity of obtaining pure water for troops when on active service has resulted in up-to-date filtering carts being attached to various units.

Each one can filter so that 12 men may draw off drinking water as long as the water supply lasts. The water consumption for an Army Corps consisting of 160,000 men and about 70,000 horses, would be about 1,500,000 gallons per day. "

Lines of Communication

Until April 1917, when the campaign against the Senussi effectively ends, a number of additional engineering units are deployed, in whole or in part. These units included:

- 2/1st Cheshire Field Company Royal Engineers (Territorial Force) manning a pontoon bridge at Bahr Yusuf [2](#)). The company then replaced the bridge with a *barrel pier bridge* (a field bridge). In addition, the company dug a number of wells for use in supplying water to railways. 1/1st
- Welsh Field Company Royal Engineers (Territorial Force), which built a road between El Alamein and Moghara as well as fortifications (*blockhouses*). The company was replaced at some point in 1916 by the 37th Army Troops Company Royal Engineers. 5th Royal Anglesey
- Militia Royal Engineers, who laid water supply in connection with the newly constructed railway line to Bahera (capacity 800,000 liters of water per week). The company established an approx. 30 m long pontoon bridge over Bahr Yusuf (west of Samalut) and fortifications (*blockhouses*).

Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers (Territorial Force)



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

The department traces its history back to the 1st Sussex Royal Engineers (Volunteers), formed on 24 May 1890.

On the establishment of the Territorial Force in 1908, the Kent and Sussex (Fortress) Royal Engineers were created, with K Company of the 1st Sussex Royal Engineers (Volunteers) as its first company, originally designated A Company.

The corps' name soon became the Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers [3](#)), while the company which accounted for the

The Sussex part of the name became the Cinque Ports (Fortress) Royal Engineers.

The department's tasks were in the coastal defense of the Medway & Thames ⁴ together with units of the Essex and Suffolk Royal Garrison Artillery, where the two *Electric Light* companies were responsible for the operation of searchlights, signaling equipment, etc.

Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers, 1914

Subdivisions

No. 1 Works Company

No. 2 Works Company

No. 3 Works Company

No. 4 Electric Lights Company

No. 5 Electric Lights Company

The fortification engineer companies, with the special designation *Works*, used in the fortification engineering divisions of the Territorial Force, were comparable to traditional field engineer companies, but had special training in fortification.

The unit's strength target was set at 17 officers and 522 men in 1908, and Source 3 states that in 1911 only a few men were missing from reaching the target.



The Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers carrying out bridge-building exercises.

From Source 7.

A *Works* company consisted of approx. 100 men, while an *Electric Lights* company numbered approx. 115 men.

The author of Source 3 assessed that a detailed account of the companies' tasks will not be of general interest ... whereby a description of this is not immediately available, but he nevertheless states that it is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of a fully equipped and efficient *Works* company.

The mobilization

On mobilization in 1914, the units take their place in the coastal defence.

The three fortress engineer companies are from June 1915 the foundation of three newly formed field engineer companies.

Designation in June 1915	Division affiliation	Designation from 1917
1st (East Kent) Field Company Royal Engineers, Territorial Force	2nd Mounted Division	495th Field Company
2nd (Kent) Field Company Royal Engineers, Territorial Force	74th Division	496th Field Company
3rd (Kent) Field Company Royal Engineers, Territorial Force	52nd Division	497th Field Company

A list of the engineer companies can be found in [Field Companies Royal Engineers \(The Long, Long Trail\)](#), to which website the above references to the divisions also lead. See also [Royal Engineers Fortress Companies 1914-1918 \(The Long, Long Trail\)](#) for details of these fortress units.

The newly formed 3rd (Kent) Field Company Royal Engineers, formerly No. 3 Works Company, are described as being specialists in bridging.



*Second Lieutenant David Reginald Salomons, No. 3
Works Company Kent (Fortress)
Royal Engineers, approx. 1911.
From Source 7.*

To the front

From October 1915 to July 1916, the 1st (East Kent) Field Company was part of the 2nd Mounted Division (Territorial Force) whose cavalry regiments were deployed both at Gallipoli and in Egypt.

Also the 2nd and 3rd (Kent) Field Companies were sent to Gallipoli.

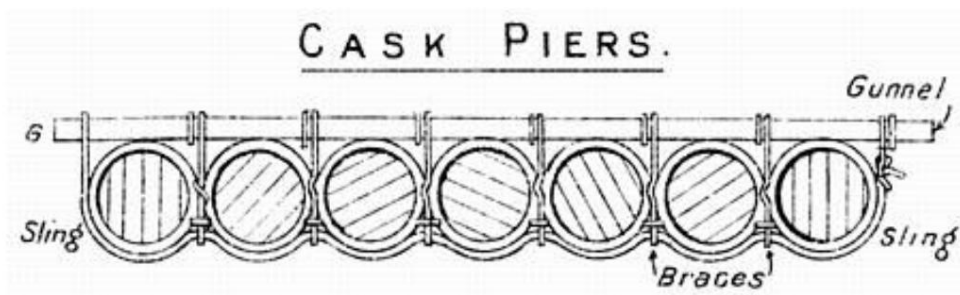
The 3rd (Kent) Field Company was largely lost when the troop transports [6](#) HMS HYTHE, [wh](#)ere the Pioneers were, and S/S SARNIA collided in the embarkation port at Mudros, on the night of 28 October 1915.

For safety reasons, both ships sailed in darkness and were without any other form of marking.

127 men of the 3rd (Kent) Field Company, including the second-in-command, Captain David Reginald Salomons, drowned. A further 27 men were lost in the accident.

David Reginald Salomons, First World War hero (Source 7) provides additional information about the company and the accident. See also Kent's survivors pull out of Gallipoli (A Blast From the Past, 1915).

A "Barrel Pier Bridge"

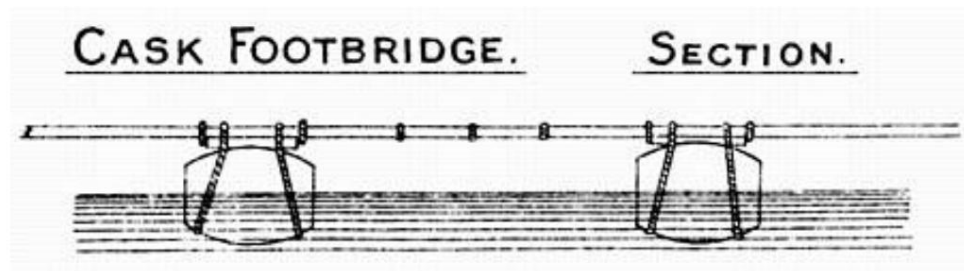


*Pontoon built from barrels.
From Source 8.*

The field bridge which the 2/1st Cheshire Field Company struck at Bahr Yusuf is technically termed a "barrel

pier bridge".

I'm not quite sure what such a bridge looked like. My guess is that it is a floating bridge, whose pontoons consist of barrels, which in contemporary engineering terminology are called *casks*.



Walking bridge on barrels.
From Source 8.

Source 8 contains an overview of the dimensions and relative load capacity of different barrels. The largest type has a capacity of 170 gallons (about 765 l), while the smallest only holds 6 gallons (about 27 l).



Royal Engineers Barrel Bridge, 1916.

From a contemporary postcard, postmarked 14 April 1916.

The safe calculation of a barrel's carrying capacity is the room measurement x 0.9 in pounds, i.e. 1,563 pounds for the largest of the barrels.

Barrels could also be used in combination with field bridge equipment, as shown in the illustration to the right.

The term barrel in the printed text probably reflects the more common term for a barrel, a *barrel*.

Sources

1. *History of the Great War, Military Operations Egypt & Palestine, Volume I, From the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917* by Lieutenant General Sir George Macmunn and Captain Cyril Falls, HSMO, London 1927.
2. Royal Engineers Corps History: The Corps and the First World War, The Senussi Campaign (Royal

Engineers Museum)

3. *His Majesty's Territorial Army - A descriptive account of the yeomanry, artillery, engineers and infantry with the army service and medical corps, comprising the 'King's Imperial Army of the Second Line'* by Walter Richards, Virtue & Co., London (ca. .1911).
4. *Royal Engineers (Volunteers) 1859-1908* by RA Westlake, privately published 1983, ISBN 0-9508530-0-3.
5. *The British Army of August 1914 - An illustrated Directory* by Ray Westlake, Spelmount Limited, Tunbridge Wells, Kent 2005, ISBN 0-86227-207-7.
6. *Regulations for the Territorial Force and County Associations, 1908* published in 1908 by The Army Council. Republished in 2003 by Naval & Military Press, ISBN 1-84342-574-2.
7. David Reginald Salomons, First World War hero (Canterbury Christ Church University, Salomons Museum).
8. *Manual of Field Engineering, 1911*, published by the General Staff, War Office, His Majesty's Stationary Office, London 1914.

Postscript

In my article Figures of Britain - Horse drawn coaches - Part 4 I have shown a plate by Caton Woodville which is referred to as showing the *Kent Royal Engineers Volunteers*, circa 1908, but could not find any information about the unit itself. This outstanding should have been put in place, although the unit's designation is more precisely Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers.

Per Finsted

Notes:

- 1) The tobacco company WD & HO Wills issued the corresponding series of 25 cards in 1914.
- 2) Bahr Yusuf is a 15 km long canal that connects the Nile with the Fayum Oasis (about 100 km southwest of Cairo). From the Fayum (Encyclopedia Britannica 1911).
- 3) The first commander of the corps was Major Holman Fred Stephens (1868-1931) (Colonel Stephens Railway Museum). Throughout his life he was involved in various volunteer engineering units, including the 1st. Sussex Royal Engineers (Volunteers) at Eastbourne, where he was commissioned lieutenant in 1896.
- 4) See my article On English Coastal Artillery, 1910-1940
- 6) A post in the Great War Forum describes HMS HYTHE as follows: "*HMS HYTHE was a paddle driven cross channel ferry of 509 tons built in 1905 and owned by the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company (SE&CR). The ship operated on the Dover- Calais route until it was requisitioned by the government in 1914. It was quickly converted into a Screw Minesweeper and was based at Scapa Flow in Scotland. In 1915 the ship was sent to the Dardanelles to work on troop movements from Mudros Bay to the Gallipoli Peninsular in Turkey. At about 1600 hours on 28th October 1915 the HYTHE was in collision with the SS SARNIA, another converted ferry but much larger than the HYTHE.*"