

About English voluntary motor vehicle drivers

Introduction

While reading the book *From Mons to Ypres with General French* (Source 1) by the American journalist Frederic Coleman, which is about his experiences as a volunteer motorcar driver in the British Army in 1914 and 1915, I found it interesting to investigate a little about the background of the story .

Frederic Coleman's book is one of the classic descriptions from the early part of the First World War and provides, in addition to a description of the author's varied experiences, an insight into the conditions of military leadership.



Badge of the Royal Automobile Club.

From the Royal Automobile Club.

25 volunteer motor vehicle drivers

At the mobilization in August 1914, the Royal Automobile Club called on its members to volunteer for service, and a force of 25 so-called *owner-drivers* was selected, including Frederic Coleman.

Their task was to act as a transport element at the British High Command, including transporting commanders, staff officers and others to where it was now required.

Frederic Coleman left England bound for Le Havre, where he arrived early in the morning, Saturday, August 22, 1914. The embarkation also took place at Folkstone [1](#)). One of the vessels used for the transport was the S/S Gloucester Castle [2](#)).



Frederic Coleman's automobile, photographed at Messines, after being hit by shrapnel from a German shell.
From Source 1.

The drivers of the motor cars were dressed in khaki field uniforms, probably of the officer's model, with no other markings than an armband, bearing the badge of the Royal Automobile Club. Nothing is said about the color or other appearance of the armband, only that several of the motorcar drivers were stopped by suspicious posts and that several were arrested on the belief that they were spies...

In addition to the daily meals and free petrol, the drivers received a salary of 10 francs per hour. day.

The vehicles may have been bought or leased by the state, but this is not clear from the book.

In addition to the purely transport tasks, such as driving a staff officer from A to B, he came to act as liaison officer and intelligence officer. He and his colleagues could often provide the respective staffs with up-to-date information about both their own and enemy units.

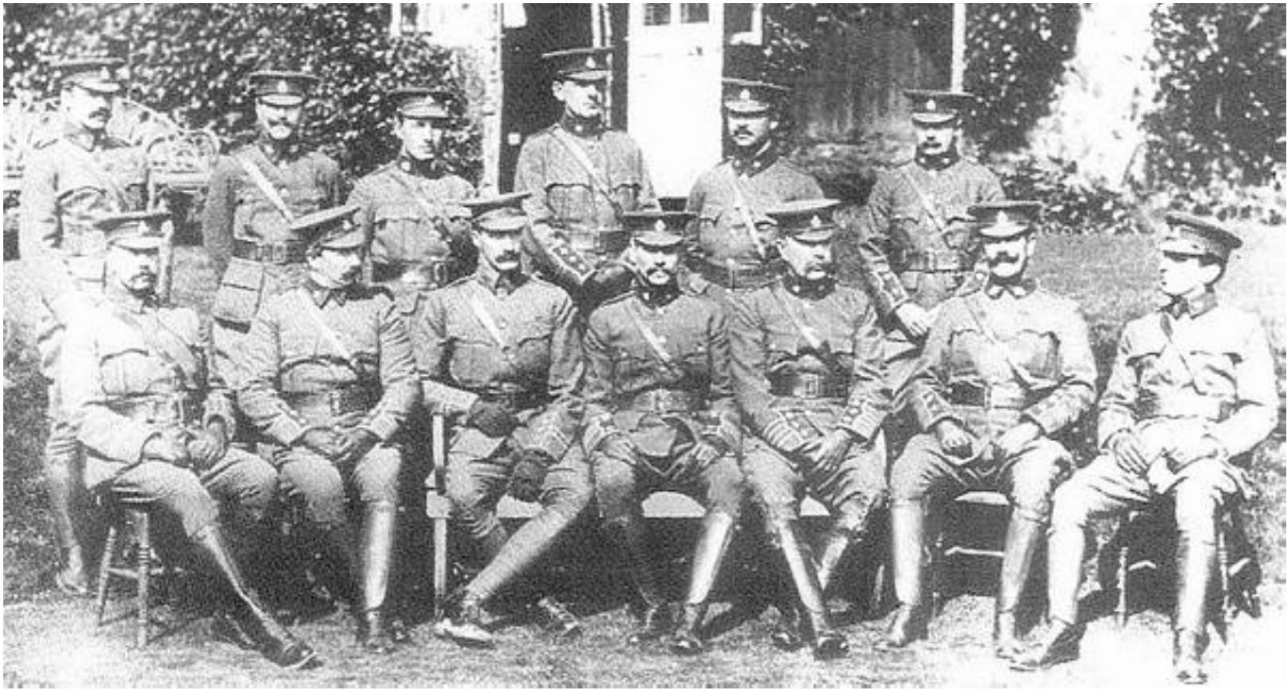
Royal Automobile Club

On 8 August 1897, The Automobile Club of Great Britain was established, and in 1907 the club's patron, King Edward VII, decided that the name should henceforth be The Royal Automobile Club [3](#)).

The Automobile Club, together with the rival organisation, the Automobile Association (from 1905), played a major role in the spread of the automobile, including not least within the army, where the first practical use of motor vehicles took place in 1901.

Motor Volunteer Corps

This work for the establishment of the Motor Volunteer Corps per 31 March 1903, with Lieutenant Colonel Mark Mayhew (Middlesex Yeomanry) in command.



Officers of the Motor Volunteer Corps, approx. 1903.
From Source 2.



Non-commissioned officers and privates of the Motor Volunteer Corps, approx. 1903.
From Source 2.

At the autumn maneuvers in 1903, 42 automobiles and 31 motorcycles took part, which shows the increasing importance of motor vehicles. In 1904, the corps numbered 24 officers as well as 89 non-commissioned officers and privates. The crew included e.g. persons who were employed as lordship drivers. In 1905, the force had grown to 43 officers and 103 non-commissioned officers and privates.

Army Motor Reserve

In 1906 the structure changes and the Motor Volunteer Corps is disbanded. In August of the same year, however, a new corps was created, the Army Motor Reserve. The new corps admits officers from the Motor Volunteer Corps and others deemed suitable. Everyone must be in possession of a functional motor vehicle, and up to six days of service per year.

In the event of mobilization, the state must be given the opportunity to lease or purchase the motor vehicles in question at a price determined by a commission including representatives of the Army Motor Reserve 4).



Flag Army

Motor Reserve, approx. 1911.

Fra Military Badges

(Roger W. G. Capewell).

Motor Volunteer Corps and Army Motor Reserve - Historical summary 1903

Motor Volunteer Corps is established 1906

The corps is disbanded per 26 July 1906 1906

Army Motor Reserve is established under Army Order 185/August 1906 1913 The Corps is disbanded under Army Order 368/November 1913.

The reproduction is definitely not the best, but it does convey an impression of the cap brand, including both corps' motto *Subito* (immediately, quickly). The badge was made of bronzed metal. The collar mark was an arrow piercing a wheel with eight spokes. In principle, the Motor Volunteer Corps wore similar badges, only these were made of shiny silver metal.

The demand on the members of the Army Motor Reserve was quite extensive. They had to be first-class drivers and mechanics, as well as fluent in languages and good at reading maps. The map reading requirements also included being able to choose their route not just on English but also on foreign maps.

At the same time, they had to be well versed in the organization of the army and especially the composition of the force with which they were to serve. They also had to possess such a great tactical understanding that they could assess ongoing operations, including where the leading elements of the participating units might be located.

Last but not least, they should be able to exercise the necessary discretion in relation to the information they acquire through their service. The above is from the Territorial Force Yearbook, from 1909, and is reproduced from *The Army Motor Reserve* by RJ Smith (Source 2).

It is not known whether the 25 motor vehicle drivers selected in 1914 were subject to the same requirements as the officers in the Army Motor Reserve, but judging by the tasks assigned to Frederic Coleman, it does not seem unlikely. In addition to the purely transport tasks, such as to drive a staff officer from A to B, Frederic Coleman came to act as liaison and intelligence officer. He and his colleagues could often provide the respective staffs with completely up-to-date information about both their own and enemy units [5](#)).

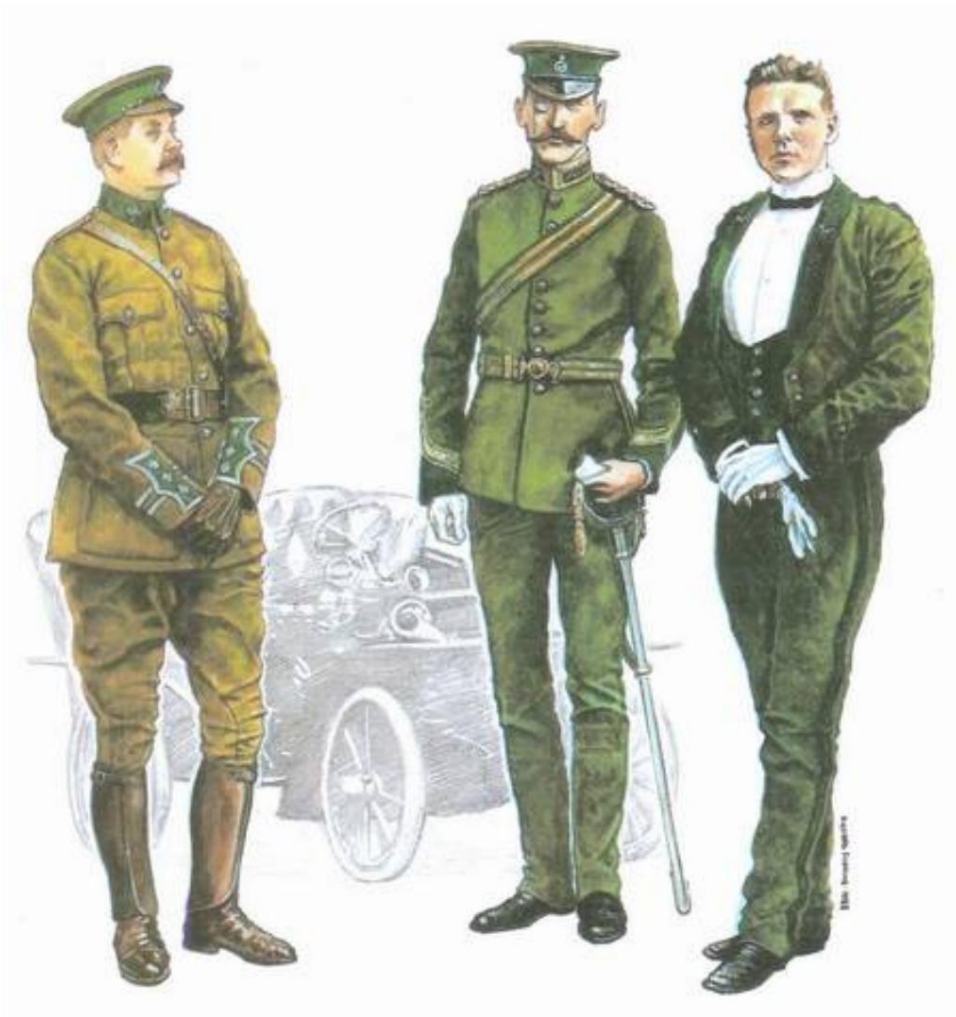
Immediately before disbanding, the corps numbered 134 men.

Relationships

The Royal Navy recruited corresponding *owner-drivers*, who were, however, awarded the rank of second lieutenants in the Royal Marine Artillery. Some 50 such temporary second lieutenants and motor vehicle drivers were sent with the Royal Naval Division to Antwerp in October 1914 [6](#)). See Great War Forum (The Long, Long Trail).

The same source also states that one of Frederic Coleman's colleagues was the later brigadier-general Christopher Baker-Carr, who signed up as a motor vehicle driver. His *1914 Star* (= medal) states the Royal Automobile Club as the name of the unit. The Brigadier General's memoirs were published under the title *From Chauffeur to Brigadier* in 1930, but I have not had the opportunity to read the book.

Other members of the 25-man force include the Duke of Westminster [7](#)), who in 1916 distinguished himself as the leader of an armored car unit that took part in the suppression of the Senussi tribe, on the border between Egypt and Sudan.



Uniform Planche - Motor Volunteer Corps and Army Motor Reserve, drawn by Rick Scollins.

From Source 2.

Uniforms

The figure on the left depicts an officer from *the Motor Volunteer Corps*, in service uniform, from ca. 1903.

The officer in the center is wearing *the Army Motor Reserve's* gala uniform, approx. 1909.

The officer on the right is wearing *the Army Motor Reserve's* company uniform, approx. 1911.

Source 2 mentions that the green color (referred to as Connaught Rangers Green) on the collar and insignia of the service uniform fell into disuse around 1907. Around 1911-12 the uniform coat, analogous to the

then uniform fashion, changed to open collar, with lapels. The collar badges were moved to the lapels, on which an R (for Reserve) was also worn above the badge.

Closing

RJ Smith expresses in Source 2 his surprise that the Army Motor Reserve was disbanded, and has been unable to find a reasonable explanation for the decision.

An explanation of the relationship can be found in *British Military Transport 1829-1956* by David Fletcher (Source 4). From this it appears that it was a lack of uniformity among the available motor vehicles that was decisive for the corps' disbandment - it was not considered possible, under wartime conditions, to be able to maintain such a diverse fleet of vehicles. This decision is perfectly understandable, but stands in some contrast to a question put to the *Army Mechanical Transport Committee* in 1909 by the then Chief of the Army Motor Reserve, namely whether to recommend a particular make/type of car for the members of the Corps to acquire .

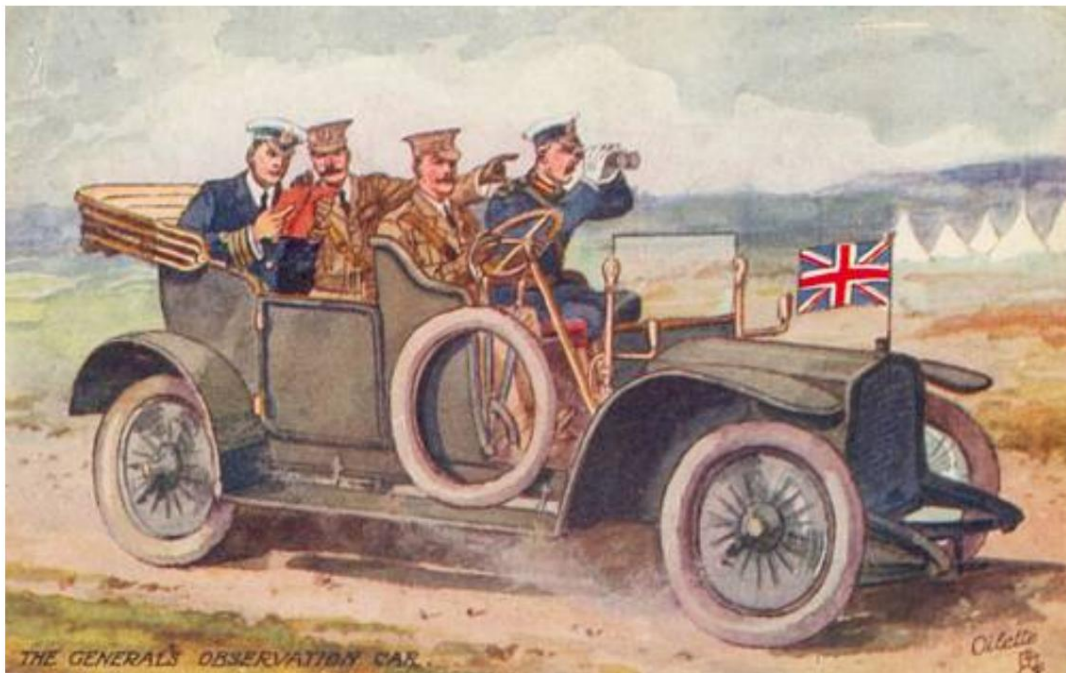
The answer was that a good stock of spare parts and the possibility of using these across car brands was of crucial importance, but no particular brand was recommended.

The result was that each man provided a vehicle of his choice, and that disparity prevailed.

At the outbreak of war, they fielded 25 motor vehicle drivers with cars of all kinds of brands, whereby the situation they wanted to avoid actually arose. Based on Frederic Coleman's information, however, it seems that each wagon carried a stock of spare parts and spare wheels/tyres, so the first part of the recommendation from 1909 was implemented.

Sources

1. *From Mons to Ypres with General French* af Frederic Coleman, Sampson Low, Marston & Co. Ltd, London 1916. Dele af bogen kan læses på hjemmesiden Great War in a Different Light - Fighting on the Aisne in 1914, The Winning of the Marne og Christmas Truce in the Trenches.
2. *The Army Motor Reserve* af R.J. Smith, Military Modelling, august 1989.
3. Royal Automobile Club Volunteer Force 1914 (Western Front Association).
4. *British Military Transport 1829-1956* by David Fletcher, published by The Tank Museum, HMSO Books, London 1998, ISBN 011-2950570-6.



The Generals Observation Car, ca. 1914.

From a simultaneous postcard.

The text on the back reads, among other things:

"The use of motor traffic of every kind has proved invaluable in the war and is indeed, absolutely indispensable. Not only for rapid movement of important officers from point to point of field operations, but for despatch riders, etc., above all for transport of men, munitions and daily supplies of every sort."

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) A search of the Royal Automobile Club's archives shows that there exists a photograph of some of the 25 drivers and their vehicles, including Lt. Col. Mark Mayhew, taken at Folkstone immediately before departure. See Motor Service Volunteer Corps (Royal Automobile Club Archive).
- 2) The ship was built in 1911 and belonged to the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company - See description: S/S Gloucester Castle (Clyde-Built Database) and a photograph: S/S Gloucester Castle (British Merchant Navy).
- 3) Se Royal Automobile Club (Wikipedia).
- 4) It is possible that a similar arrangement was in force in 1914.
- 5) The job as a motorcycle driver, and other related tasks, is not unlike the experiences described in the book *Adventures of a Motorcycle Despatch Rider during the First World War* by Captain WHL Watson, Diggory Press, Burgess Hill, West Sussex, 2006. Originally published by William Blackwood and Sons, 1915. See my review [here](#).
- 6) Se f.eks. Command in the Royal Naval Division og Uniformer - Royal Naval Division, 1914-1918.
- 7) See Hugh Grosvenor (1879-1953), 2nd Duke of Westminster (Wikipedia).