

About the British military intelligence service during the First World War

Introduction

At the beginning of the war, the military intelligence service was only of a very modest size. The service developed over the next few years into a comprehensive organization that covered the entire spectrum from tactical to strategic intelligence - an organization through which one can sense the contours of the larger enterprise during the Second World War.

Organisation 1914

At the time of mobilization in 1914, the General Staff's Intelligence Section consisted of very few officers. The peacetime tasks included gathering and processing intelligence on primarily the European armies. The work was, among other things, documented in a number of handbooks, where e.g. *Handbook on the German Army* was first published in 1912.

The tasks of the intelligence service were formulated in a directive from 1912 as follows (Source 1):

- To provide experienced officers who, with the necessary language qualifications, can be deployed on horseback, on motorbikes or in vehicles.
- To supplement the intelligence sections at various staffs, including special quiet personnel knowledge of French and German, as the staff's knowledge of these languages left something to be desired.
- To provide officers for the expected expansion of the Secret Intelligence Service.
- To provide the cadre for the Expeditionary Force's counter-espionage organization. The framework for this organization was described in the *Staff Manual* from 1912.

The mobilization regulations, which were regulated from 1912, stipulated that the field part of the military intelligence service formed an *Intelligence Corps* in support of the Expeditionary Force's High Command, where the intelligence section's chief - Major GMW Macdonogh stepped in as *Colonel GS 1* (*Intelligence*).

Mobilization

The General Staff's Intelligence Section maintained, without the knowledge of those concerned, a list of persons who were deemed suitable for intelligence work and during the mobilization, telegrams were sent out which - to the great surprise of most - invited them to sign up.

The force included approx. 50 men tasked with gathering military intelligence in the field, in addition to interpreting and field security.

The persons were i.a. painters, writers, businessmen, policemen and regular officers as well as people with experience from the foreign service, all with knowledge of French and German. The strength target was initially 81 men, but only 50 were deemed immediately suitable to be sent off immediately.

Organization 1914 Remarks

Headquarters Wing --

Motorcycle Section

The motorcycles were of the Douglas, Premier, Rudge and Triumph types.

Dismounted Section --

Mounted Section

The section's horses were hunting horses from *The Grafton Hunt*.

Security Duties Section The section comprised 12 police officers from the Security Duties of *the Metropolitan Police*.

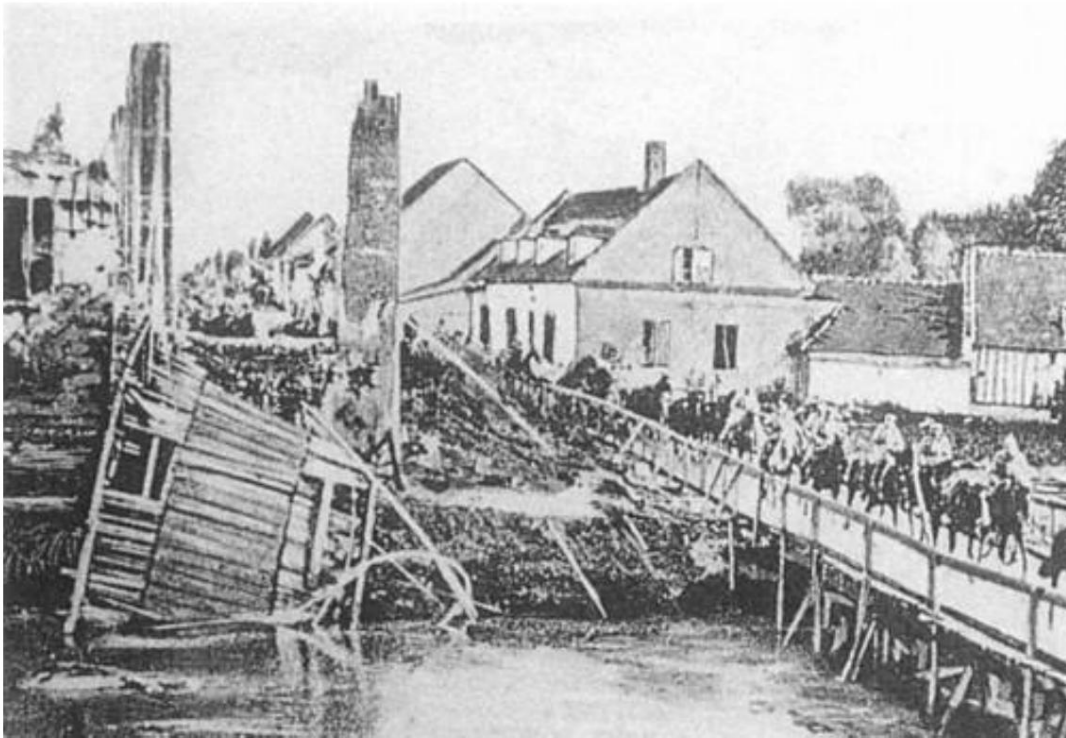
The somewhat motley assembly had gathered a few days before the shipment to France. There was no time for in-depth training in the new tasks, and in the first months of the war, common sense combined with a considerable talent for improvisation was the starting point for the intelligence section's work.

The staffs were not all equally experienced in what they could use intelligence officers for, and the not always correct military decorum of the "civilian" intelligence officers, including not least the way they wore their uniforms, meant that in the beginning they were viewed somewhat askew unorthodox intelligence officers.

Gradually, the necessary methods for the tactical intelligence service and appropriate forms of cooperation with both own and allied staffs were developed, and *the Intelligence Corps* became a valuable part of the Expeditionary Corps.

The first distinction

Several of the intelligence officers were distinguished for their efforts in the early months of the war, including Second Lieutenant R. Rolleston-West, who took part in the blowing up of a suspension bridge over the Oise at the town of Pontoise-Lès-Noyon (about 5 km south-east of Noyon) on 31 August 1914.



*German cavalry pass a field bridge in Pontoise.
The bridge is built next to the destroyed suspension bridge.
Simultaneous postcard and illustration in Source 1.*

In Source 2, the incident is described as follows:

On 30 August 1914, approx. 08:00, the commander of the 59th Engineer Company received word that the suspension bridge over the Oise at Pontoise-Lès-Noyon could still be used by the enemy.

The message was a personal note from the second-in-command of the *1st Battalion/Royal West Kent Regiment*, Major MP Buckle, and asked whether the engineers had the ability to destroy the bridge.

The message was conveyed by an engine orderly in the person of Second Lieutenant R. Rolleston-West, *Intelligence Corps*.

The engineer company commander sent Lieutenant JAC Pennyquick, who immediately reported to the task, back [2](#)) with Lieutenant Rolleston-West to destroy the bridge. 14 explosive charges (shot cotton) were loaded onto the back of the intelligence officer's motorcycle, and with Lieutenant Pennyquick, whose pockets overflowed with fuse, detonator cord and detonators, placed on top of the boxes, they drove forward through the front English lines - first the infantry positions and then the cavalry outposts.

There were still no enemy units in Pontoise-Lès-Noyon and the lieutenants were able to climb onto the bridge unhindered, where they placed 13 explosive charges - the 14th charge fell into the water. The first attempt only triggered the detonator, but the next went better - the charges ignited and the bridge was blown up.

The two lieutenants returned to their own lines, and along the way celebrated their deed with a morning meal on a nearby farm. They were both awarded *the Distinguished Service Order* for their efforts, and this award was the first of the war for the Intelligence Service.

Uniformization

The first "civilian" intelligence officers wore distinctions such as second lieutenants and uniform buttons with the badge from *The General List* (= reserve officers, without particular regimental affiliation).

The permanent officers, who were on loan from their respective regiments, retained their insignia and uniform. Private soldiers also retained their respective regimental badges and any distinctive features.

The privates were included only as watchmen, and their numbers were clearly limited. Source 1 thus mentions that some of the new officers found out that they were perhaps uniformed as officers, but that, to their great surprise, they themselves had to groom their own horses.



Interrogation, approx. 1916.

Postcard from the Imperial War Museum, London, after painting by Francis Dodd.

The postcard is probably from the 1970s.

Officers

It was not until 1916 that officers from the military intelligence service were marked with green markings, but an actual corps insignia did not come until the establishment of *the Intelligence Corps* in 1940.

The officer on the right wears the intelligence service's green ribbon on his cap and green collar mirror. The rank insignia on the forearm (three galleons and a crown) indicates that his rank is major.

The intelligence officer's cap appears to be some sort of officer's version of the soft Model 1914 field cap with earflaps (*Gor'Blimey*) (see for example my article *The British Field Uniform Model 1902*).

The standing officer wears a general staff officer's red cap band and collar mirror. The red and blue armband indicates that he belongs to *General Headquarters*. The insignia - two galleons and three crowns - indicate that his rank is captain.

The painting is mentioned in Source 1, but is not reproduced here.

NCOs



An Intelligence Corps sergeant interrogating a civilian in Bethune, May 1918.
From Source 1.

NCOs, on duty, wore an armband with the inscription IC (*Intelligence Corps*).



The armband may have been green - analogous to the officers' insignia - and the letters may have been black.

It is not known when this armband was introduced.

Many

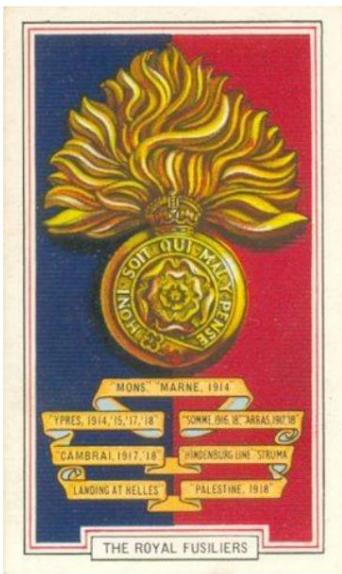
Non-commissioned officers and privates could be enlisted in a special unit - *10th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment)*. The designation was a pure cover, as there also existed an actual *10th (Stockbrokers) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) (New Army)*.

The intelligence unit is known by different designations (Source 3) - *10B, 10th (Intelligence Corps)* and *10th (Intelligence Police)*.

As identification, a "bracelet" [3](#) is used with the inscription *10th RF INTceB* combined with the number of the Army in which the soldier was a member.

During the performance of more or less secret tasks, other identities were assumed, just as the intelligence service also included non-commissioned officers and privates from other units.

In official papers, including publication of honors in *the London Gazette* [4](#), officers were usually listed under the heading *Intelligence Corps*, while non-commissioned officers and privates were listed under the regiment to which they were attached; reference to the soldiers' specific battalions was not used.



The Royal Fusiliers.

Cigarette card No. 48

from the *Army Badges series*,

issued in 1939 by

the tobacco company Gallaher Ltd.

Bag på kortet står følgende: The Royal Fusiliers. This famous London regiment was founded in 1685 by James II. They were the first regiment to be equipped with fusils, and their function was to protect the ordnance of the time. Many of their early recruits came from the celebrated London Train Bands, and they have the privilege of marching through the City with fixed bayonets, flying colours and drums beating.

Their honours show a long record of service dating from Namur 1695.

During the First World War, the regiment, which fielded 47 battalions [5](#)), was awarded no fewer than 77 *battle honours*, of which the 10 shown on the cigarette card were selected to be worn on the banners.

Se også f.eks. The Long, Long trail - The British Army in the Great War, Land Forces of the British Empire samt The Regimental Warpath 1914- 1918 for nærmere oplysninger om *The Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment)*.

Closing

As indicated in the introduction, the intelligence service during the First World War leaves little to be desired in relation to the more well-known efforts during the Second World War - efforts behind enemy lines, agent work, espionage and counter-espionage, yes the whole spectrum of "beards and blue glasses" was also in use during the First World War. Added to this is the very tiring and monotonous work of collecting and, not least, processing the many pieces of intelligence, so that you could constantly keep up to date with the enemy's intentions, order of battle and morale.

Source 1 can be recommended as an introduction to the English military intelligence service, not only during the First World War, but right up to the 1990s.

Sources

1. *Forearmed - A history of the Intelligence Corps* af Anthony Clayton, Brassey's (UK) Ltd., London 1996, ISBN 0-08037-701-7.
2. *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* af James E. Edmonds, Macmillan & Co., London 1933. *The relevant operation here is discussed in Chapter 11.*
3. *Kitchener's Army* af Ray Westlake, Spellmount, Staplehurst/Kent 1998, ISBN 1-873376- 98-7.

To note

- 1) GS here means *General Staff*.
- 2) The English main battle line then lay approx. 10-15 km south of Pontoise-Lès-Noyon.
- 3) Source 1 uses the term *bracelet*.
- 4) The London Gazette is a counterpart to the Danish Statstidende.
- 5) Among these battalions belonged 38.-42. Battalion that consisted of Jewish soldiers. The 38th and 39th Battalions were front-line battalions, while the other three were training and replacement units. See also my article General Sir Edmund Allenby's joint operations in Palestine, 1917-1918 by John Mordike.