

# German units at Antwerp in 1914, Part 3

## Introduction

Descriptions of the German effort at Antwerp emphasize the good cooperation between the three arms - infantry, artillery and pioneers - as one of the reasons why the operations were crowned with success. While the infantry and artillery are mentioned in Part 1 and Part 2, here follows a mention of the independent pioneer units, i.e. those that were not part of the previously mentioned divisions and brigades.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide illustrations that show the units directly involved, which is why other images that are merely similar have been used instead.

## Pioneer units

A task like the capture of Antwerp, with the city's extensive fortifications, also required an extensive effort by engineer troops. Among the engineer troops' tasks was the construction of positions for the siege artillery, but not least an active participation together with the infantry's attack columns was paramount. The Belgian forts were surrounded by wet trenches that washed out, just as in parts of the terrain, floods had been carried out or occurred. The fortifications and the field fortifications built between the permanent installations were surrounded by barbed wire fences that had to be breached.



*Magdeburgisches  
Pionier-Bataillon Nr. 4.*

Drawn by Bryan Fosten.  
From Source 3.

## Staff

General der Pioniere: [Generalmajor Friemel 1\)](#)  
Chief of Staff: *Colonel Schulz*

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## **Pionier-Regiment 24** (*Colonel Quentin*)

I. Pioneer Battalion II.

Pionier-Bataillon Pionier-

Belagerungs-Train Train-Kolonne  
Park-Kompanie-

Kommando 1. Scheinwerfer-Zug

## **Pionier-Regiment 25**

(*Oberst Breisig*)

I. Pioneer Battalion II.

Pionier-Bataillon Pionier-

Belagerungs-Train Train-Kolonne  
Park-Kompanie-

Kommando 2. schwere Festungs-

Scheinwerfer-Züge **Other pioneer units** 1.

Kompanie/Pionier-Bataillon

18 1. Landsturm-Pionier-Kompanie, VII.

Armee-Korps 1. Landsturm-Pionier-Kompanie, IX. Armee-Korps

2. Landsturm-Pionier-Kompanie, XI. Armee-Korps Festungs-

Scheinwerfer-Züge

Pionier-Regiment 24 was established in 1908 as 2. *Westfälische (Festungs-) Pionier-Bataillon Nr. 24*, and in peacetime consisted of 4 pioneer companies. During the mobilization, the battalion was reinforced with 2 companies [2](#)) and multiplied as a [regiment](#), with 1st and 2nd Battalions (each 3 companies). The regiment carried the battalion's number.

Pionier-Regiment 25 was established in 1909 as 2. *Nassauisches (Festungs-) Pionier-Bataillon Nr.25*.

The situation during the mobilization has been analogous to the 24th Pionerregiment, in that all pioneer battalions formed two battalions. However, only regiments of the 10 fortress pioneer battalions were multiplied.

18th Pioneer Battalion - *Samländisches (Festungs-) Pionier-Bataillon Nr.18* - originated from Königsberg in Prussia. The battalion was established in 1893. The other pioneer companies were among the 30 pioneer companies of the land storm that were created during the mobilization

## **Organization**

The sources do not provide details about the different companies' manning, equipment and material, but it is mentioned that they roughly followed the standard organization (including from Source 5), which is shown here.

The two fortress pioneer regiments also had a special siege train with tools and materials for the construction of field fortifications as well as for attacking them. The park company was responsible for the procurement and distribution of tools and materials, i.a. for use in the construction of field fortifications, while the pioneer wagons of the tree column transported tools and other material. The pioneer companies, yes they were responsible for doing the work.

### **Pionerkompanie** (*Pioneer-Kompanie*)

### **Park Company** (*Park-Kompanie-Kommando*)

- 6 officers, 24 non-commissioned officers and 226 privates - 3 officers and 205 non-commissioned officers and privates as well as 14 wood constables/sanitation soldiers - 1 baggage wagon and 1 supply wagon - 4 pioneer wagons, 1 baggage wagon, 1 supply wagon, - 7 horses 1 fodder wagon and 1 field kitchen - 6 riding horses and 16 draft horses.

### **Siege Train (Pionier-Belagerungs-Train)**

- 4 officers and 9 non-commissioned officers and privates
- 1 baggage wagon
- 9 horses

### **Train Column (Train-Kolonne)**

- 3 officers and 84 non-commissioned officers and privates
- 36 pioneer wagons, 1 baggage wagon and 1 fodder wagon
- 154 horses

## **Spotlight units**

The searchlight units existed in a variety of versions, exemplified here by unit types, created by Kurhessisches Pionier-Bataillon Nr.11 (Source 6) - Scheinwerferzüge 3), [Schwere Festungs Scheinwerfer-Züge](#), [Leichter Festungs-Scheinwerfer-Züge](#), Hand-Scheinwerfer- Troop and Reserve Scheinwerfer-Züge.



*German headlight division.*  
From FirstWorldWar.com.

How the individual types differed from each other is not clear, but Source 2 provides the following information:

### **Headlight division (Scheinwerfer-Zug)**

- 2 officers and 39 non-commissioned officers and privates
- 2 light searchlights [4\) with displays](#) - 2 material wagons and 1 fodder wagon - 28 horses

The spotlights themselves had a diameter of 60 cm.

In addition, the division had 4 smaller, portable, acetylene-powered searchlights that were transported on the material wagons.

Source 2 further states that the normal effort was such that the two towed searchlights were brought into position, roughly like artillery pieces, so that they could illuminate the terrain in front of the positions at night, and that before daylight they were pulled back into hiding.



*German searchlight.*  
From FirstWorldWar.com.

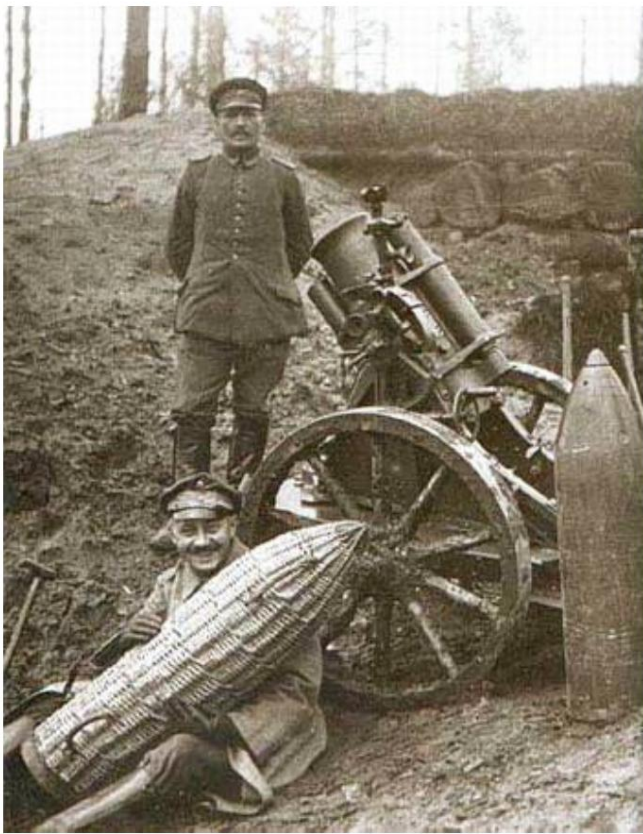
A need quickly developed that the searchlights could also be used against air targets, and a number of searchlight units were transferred to the air force, and later to the anti-aircraft artillery.

Judging by the soldiers with binoculars, the searchlight is probably used more against air targets than for lighting in connection with fortifications.

## **Mine thrower units**

By 1914, certain engineer units were equipped with mine-throwers, a weapon developed specifically to attack enemy field fortifications. It appears from *Antwerp 1914* (Source 1) that there were mine throwers during the fighting, but it does not appear which units operated them, or any other specific circumstances.

The minesweeper, a type of early heavy mortar, was in 1914 still at a relatively early stage in its development, which really took off when the war later developed into trench warfare.



25 cm mine thrower (alter Art).

The weapon system was sometimes developed into pioneer units, which you can read about in more detail in the article *Die deutschen Minenwerfer und Granatenwerfer im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Battlefield 1918), from which the probably somewhat later image also originates.

In 1914 there were two types - *25 cm schwere Minenwerfer* and *17 cm mittlere Minenwerfer* - of which there were 44 and 116 examples respectively. The grenade was called *Mine*, and hence the name for the weapon system. The development had taken place in great secrecy, and was, as far as known, not known on the Allied side. There was no formal organization of mine throwing units, the weapon system could simply be handed out to the pioneer companies when needed.

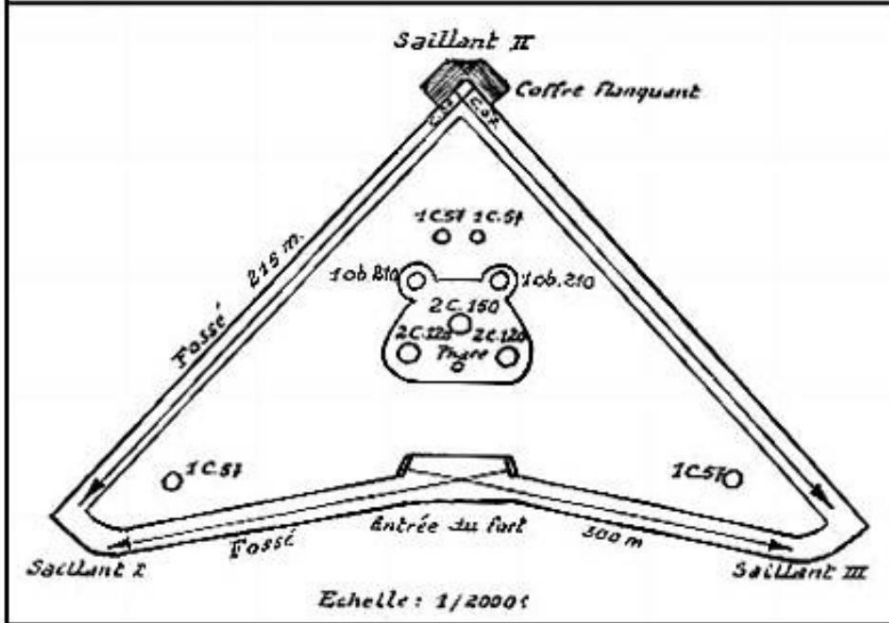
#### **4th Company/Pioneer Regiment 24 at Liège**

Since information about the mine throwers' efforts at Antwerp is not available, fortunately it is the case that the commander of *4. Feldkompagni/Pionierregiment 24*, Hauptman Thorner, in *Die ersten Minenwerfer im Weltkrieg* (Source 4) has described his company's efforts during the siege of Liège . Here, on 13 August 1914, he led the first deployment of mine throwers during the First World War.

It is possible that *4. Pionierkompagni* was also among the engineer troops that used mine throwers at Antwerp. The pioneers in the 4th Pioneer Company were, as the only ones in the regiment, trained as mine throwers. The peacetime training was surrounded by special security requirements and it appears that the guard positions were kept hidden from view by rain.

On the night between 12 and 13 August 1914, the company was in quarters at the University of Liège, and received here 4 pcs. 25 cm mine throwers that were brought out on trucks. The mine-throwers were brought into position so that they could shell Fort Fléron, at distances up to 420 m. None of the soldiers had yet experienced firing with anything other than practice grenades, so now having to fire with sharp grenades, each weighing approx. 100 kg, was met with great excitement.

*Note n°5 - a) Armement du fort de Fléron en 1914*



Sketch of Fort Fléron.

From The Battle of Liège, Belgium August, 1914

The mine thrower's very curved firing path made it possible to shell e.g. the fort's throat barracks, which may or may not have been possible with ordinary artillery. This early version of the 25 cm mine launcher had a firing range of approx. 600 m, the dispersion of the grenades in the target of 420 m is stated to be 3 m.

The 420 m that was chosen as the shooting distance was as close to the target as you could get when you wanted to shoot from concealment and adequate cover at the same time. The concealment and relative cover was a fully loaded railroad train that had been left close to the fort.

The fort's main armor could not lower its guns far enough to shell the minesweeper position, and the railroad cars provided cover and some cover against the fort's smaller guns and rifle fire.

However, the positions were so close to the target that they could be reached by shrapnel from the mine throwers' own shells!



The defense of Liège and surroundings - 4 to 25 August 1914.

From a simultaneous postcard.

The rest of the story can be read in Captain Thorner's own account (Source 4), but the above is included here, as the description gives an impression of the conditions surrounding the deployment of mine-throwers.

A description of Fort Fléron is found as part of The Battle of Liège, Belgium August, 1914.

The experience from the Belgian side is a little more nuanced than the impression you get from reading Thorner's report.

A description of the fort's efforts, hour by hour, is also available, see Fort de Fléron, 1914 & 1940 (Jean-Claude Hoet).

For the Belgian units at Liège, see Liège, the Overture (Belgian Fronts).

## Examples of the efforts of the pioneer troops

*Westphalia stand wie ein Fels - Die westfälischen Regimenter im Weltkrieg* (Source 4) provides information about the commander of the 3. Kompagni of the 24. Pionierregiment, Captain Ehringhaus, who distinguished himself at the storming of Fort Wawre-Sankt Catherine and the intermediate works at Dorpvelde. For his efforts, the captain is awarded the Iron Cross 1st Class, one of the first to be awarded by the commander of Armee-Abteilung Beseler, General von Beseler.



*Kurhessischen Pionier-Bataillon Nr. 11.*

From Alte Ansichtskarten.

During the storming of Fort Wawre-Sankt Catherine, 3. Kompagni struck two storm braces (Schnellbrücken) over the 50 m wide, wet moat that surrounded the fort, and not even shelling from the fort's flank defenses could prevent this operation. The storm on the small battery at Dorpvelde is described as close to reminiscent of a pioneer exercise in a training ground.

Gefreiter Nikolaus Müller, Fußartillerie-Regiment 9, wrote down the following account (reproduced from Source 1) of his experiences from the storm at the intermediate work (a small fort) Dorpvelde. The attack was carried out by II. and III. Battalion from the 48th Reserve Infantry Regiment (5th Reserve Infantry Division), supported by teams with barbed wire scissors and stormtroopers from the 3rd Company of the 24th Pioneer Battalion. The situation hardly appears so

exercise-like, which one could otherwise get an impression of.

*"Unter Kommando (1 Unteroffizier, 5 Mann) wurde einer Abteilung der 3. Kompanie Pionier-Regiments 24 zugeteilt.*

*Wir gingen ungehindert bis vor die Draht Hindernisse vor. Als nun auf das Kommando "Leute mit Drahtscheren vor!" die Pioniere in Tätigkeit traten, wurde vom Fort aus lebhaftes Gewehrfeuer gegen uns opened.*



*Pioneers with barbed wire scissors.*

From FirstWorldWar.com.

*Jeder sought cover in den Furchen und Geschosslöchern, so gut es eben ging, während die Drahtschneider ruhig und vorsichtig einen Gang zum Wassergraben freilegten, wichten von den elf Drahtschneidern sieben fielen oder verwundet wurden.*

*Jetzt holten die Pioniere die Laufbrücke vor und stellten die Überbrückung des Grabens unter großen Difficultyen here, trotz des bhavhaft enemylichen Feuers, das von unserer rückenden Infanterie rewirdert wurde. Besonders zeichnete sich dabei ein Unteroffizier der Pioniere (Unteroffizier Holler) aus, who sich completly auszog und annähernd eine halbe stunde in dem kalten Wasser die Brücke zusammenhielt, um ein schnellen Vorwärtskommen unserteils zu famlichkeit.*





Saxon pioneer, c. 1914 [5](#)).  
From Alte Ansichtskarten.

The pioneer's entrenching tool, the handle of which is probably the pioneer spade Model 1897 [6](#)).

*Der erste Gang was zum Panzerturm, der unschädlich gemacht wird. Nach Durchschneiden der Leitungen es weiter gegen di inzwischen auf das Fort zu vorgerückte enemydliche Infantry. Wir suchten in Geschosslöchern Deckung. Auf der linken hinderen Seite feuerten noch immer schwere Geschütze auf unseren vorgehenden linken Flügel. Die Pioniere ließen nun stronge Sprengladungen vor den Rohren läng der Betonwand an langen Strichen nieder, um die Geschütze unschädigt zu machen, was jedoch erfolglos blieb.*

*Gegen 9 Uhr bekamen wir Artilleriefeuer, das aber soon wieder eingestellt wurde. Now we tried to get into the Fort. Der Versuch, durch Seitentore einzudringen, cost einem Unteroffizier und zwei Mann das Leben. Es ließ sich nicht geferten.*

*Daher gruben die Pioniere auf dem Fort die Erde ab und legten die Betondecke frei. Meanwhile, the enemy's guns were fired throughout the night, until after einer zweiten successful explosive landing at 6 o'clock, the breach was struck through the thick Betondecke.*

*Auf die nun fluchtende Besatzung eröffneten wir mit der Infantry ein lebhaftes Gewehrfeuer. Durch die Bresche ich sofort entered das Innere des Forts, unsere Infantrysten folgten nach.*

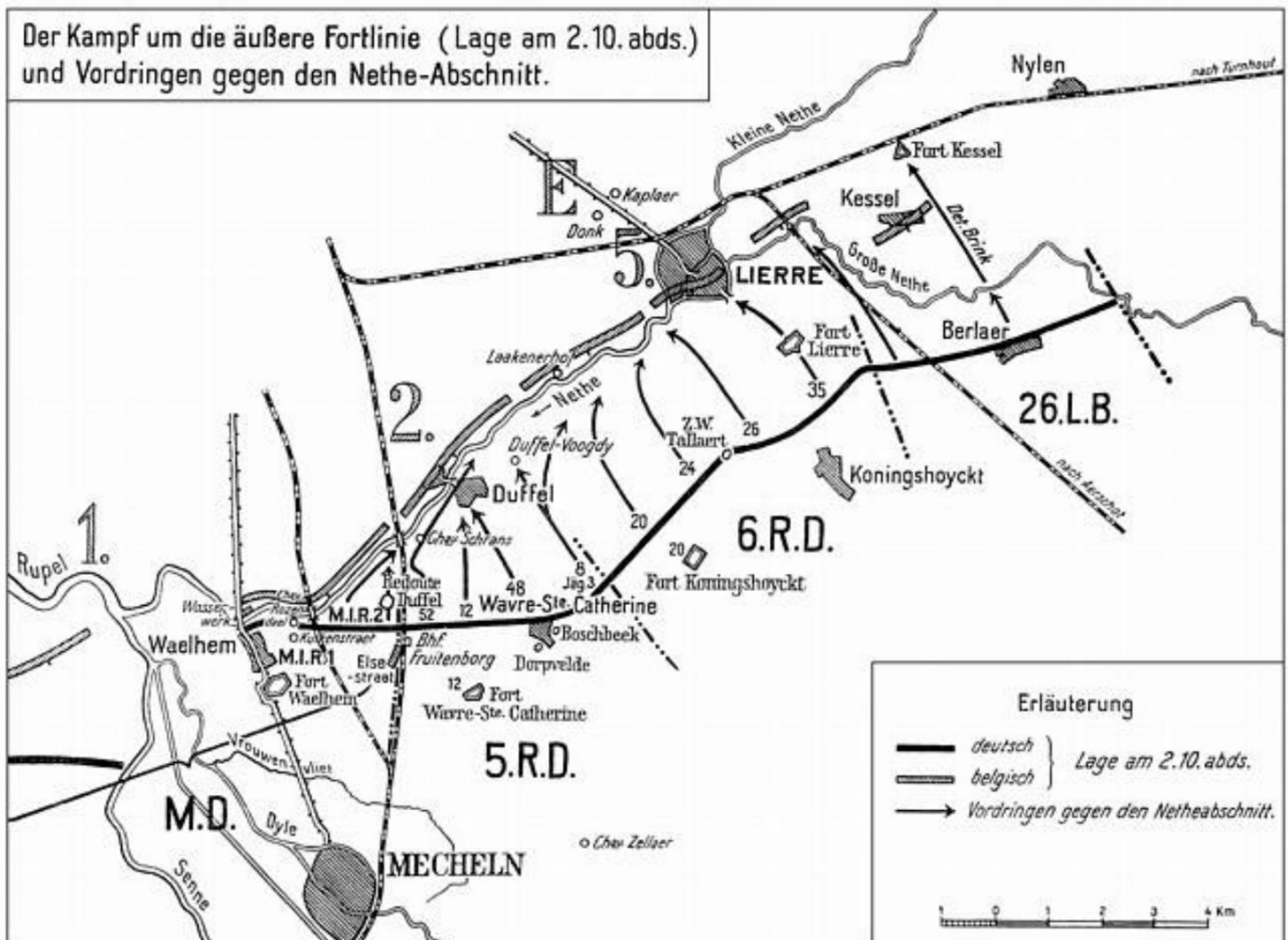
*Der Kommandant des Forts und dreizehn Artilleristen wurden von uns gefangen genommen. Nach Zerstörung der Geschütze ich mit Sergeant Mahmens das Fort ab ab, wier wir noch ein Maschinengewehr in der Schützendeckung fanden. Dabei wurde rechts und lefts vom Fort immer noch lebhaft gekämpft, beicht wir Gelegenheit hatten, noch tätig eingrifeven."*

## Passage of water obstacles



Royal Saxony. 2. Pioneer Battalion No. 22 - Tonnenfloß und fliegende Fähre, 1910.  
From Alte Ansichtskarten.

The area's natural and artificial water obstacles made good use of the field bridge training at the 5th and 6th. Reserve Infantry Division (see Part 1), but also more improvised equipment, such as ferries and stormtroopers.



Map sketch 3: The situation as of 2 October 1914.

## Fortress troops

Festungs-Luftschiffer-Abteilung 10  
Festungs-Luftschiffer-Abteilung 22  
Festungs-Eisenbahn-Betriebs-Abteilung 1  
Festungs-Eisenbahn-Betriebs-Abteilung 2  
Festungs-Eisenbahn-Bau-Kompanie 5  
Festungs-Eisenbahn-Bau-Kompanie 10  
Belagerungs-Telegraphen-Abteilung  
Festungs-Vermessungs-Abteilung 1  
Festungs-Vermessungs-Abteilung 10

In its overview of units that formed part of the *Armee-Abteilung Beseler*, Source 1 mentions a number of units of the fortress troops.

However, the sources I have at my disposal are extremely sparse regarding the mention of these units, including their organization and uniforming.

However, I've tried to extract what I can about fortress units, and until further details become available, this is the best I can get.

One can consider the fortress units as a reserve for the field army, originally envisaged to be deployed in an attack on Germany. Since such an attack did not take place, part of the fortress units could therefore be sent to the front to reinforce the field army.

## Balloon companies



*German balloon troops, approx. 1914.*

From Rosebud's WWI and Early Aviation Image Archive.

The two *Festungs-Luftschiffer-Abteilungen* provided part of the observation balloons, from which observations were made for e.g. The siege artillery (see Part 2). The other observation balloons came from *Feld Luftschiffer-Abteilung 1*, and it is possible that the organization of the fortress units resembles the organization of a balloon company discussed in Part 1.

The text on the card

reads: *Um feindliche Flieger zu täuschen und anzuletern, wird eine Strohuppe in den Korb des Fesselballons gestellt.*

Clever enough, but it hardly solves the observation task...

The soldiers' uniforms are a mix of field gray and dark blue uniforms.

## Railway units



*II. Battalion, Railway Regiment Nr. 1.*

From Eisenbahn-Regiment Nr. 1

(Formationsgeschichte,  
Deutschlands, Gen-Wiki).

The publisher is a German cigarette card.

Eisenbahn-Regiment Nr.1

Eisenbahn-Regiment Nr.2

Eisenbahn-Regiment Nr.3

Eisenbahn-Bataillon Nr.4

Betriebs-Abteilung der Eisenbahnruppen Kgl.

Bavaria. Eisenbahn-Bataillon

The peacetime organization of the German railway troops included the following basic units:

Railway regiments were organized into two battalions, each with 4 companies.



*Gefreiter, Eisenbahn-Bau-Kompanie Nr. 8, 1914.*  
From Source 8.

In connection with these units, a number of additional divisions and subdivisions were created during the mobilization, including the *Festungs-Eisenbahn-Betriebs-Abteilungen* and the *Festungs-Eisenbahn-Bau Kompanien*, which were part of the *Armee-Abteilung Beseler*.

Briefly, *Eisenbahn-Betriebs-Abteilungen* was responsible for the operation of railway lines, while *Eisenbahn-Bau Kompanien* was responsible for building and maintaining the rail network.

Source 8 is recommended as a starting point for further studies of German railway units, during both the First and Second World Wars.

Source 8 also mentions the book *Preußische Eisenbahntrouppen 1871-1945* by Hans Georg Kampe, which seems to be worth studying more closely if you want to know more about railway units, as well as the military railway south of Berlin.

Source 2 mentions that in 1914 a *Betriebs-Abteilung* counted among its non-commissioned officers 4 stationmasters, 12 locomotive drivers and 7 train drivers.

## Telegraph troops

During the mobilization in 1914, three *Belagerungs-Telegraphen-Abteilungen* were created (Source 9), but how these were organized and equipped is not clear. Among the possible equipment may be field telephones or telegraph wagons, which are shown in the following pictures.



*German field telephone, approx. 1914.*



*Telegraphen-Abteilung des Oberkommandos der 9. Armee auf dem Marktplatz in Osterode in September 1914.*

Both images were found on the Internet.

With regard to uniforming, refer to Source 9 and Telegraphen-Bataillon Nr. 2 - Frankfurt/Oder (Verein Historische Uniformen).

## **Cartographic units**

The two cartographic units, here *Festungs-Vermessungs-Abteilung 1* and *Festungs-Vermessungs-Abteilung 10*, operated in connection with the siege artillery and were responsible for producing the map material that was used when measuring and shooting with the heavy pamphlets. (Source 2)

## **Machine gun units**

In connection with the field army's machine gun units, see About German machine gun and hunter units, 1914, there were a number of fortress machine gun units, of which 15 divisions had been established in 1913 (Source 10). Three of these divisions were part of *Armee-Abteilung Beseler*, where they were assigned to the Siege Artillery, perhaps as artillery cover.



*Soldier from a fortress machine gun section, approx. 1914.*

From the Axis History Forum.

- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Abteilung 4 (Graudenz)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Abteilung 6 (Posen)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Abteilung 9 (Straßburg im Elsass)

Under the auspices of the fortress troops there also existed a number of *Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupps*, of which we find six at Antwerp, where they were assigned to the infantry and the siege artillery, perhaps as artillery cover, but perhaps with other tasks... my sources cannot shed more light on the subject .

- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupp 2 (*Marine Division*)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupp 4 (*6. Reserve-Division*)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupp 5 (*Siege Artillery*)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupp 6 (*5th Reserve Division*)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupp 7 (*Siege Artillery*)
- Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Trupp 8 (*37. Landwehr-Brigade*)

Confusingly, a *Festungs-Maschinengewehr-Abteilung* consisted of 4 machine guns, while a *Festungs Maschinengewehr-Trupp*, which given its name you might think was smaller, had 6 machine guns. The origin of these *Troops* cannot currently be traced, as Source 11 presents a rather confusing amount of units from the respective German fortress cities.



*Unsere Maschinengewehr-Kompagnie auf dem March.*  
From Alte Ansichtskarten.

Apart from the number of machine guns in the respective fortress machine gun units, there is no information available about the units' detailed organization etc.

They may have resembled field army units, but may have been less mobile, and perhaps equipped with improvised transport equipment.

## Sources

1. *Antwerp 1914* by Erich von Tschischwitz, *Schlachten des Weltkriegs*, Band 3, published by the German Reichsarchiv, Verlag Gerhard Stalling, Berlin 1925.
2. *Imperial German Army 1914-18 - Organization, Structure, Orders-of-Battle* by Hermann Cron, Helion & Company Ltd., Solihull / West Midlands 2002, ISBN 1-874622-70-1. The book is an English translation of one of the standard sources on German organization, published in 1937 as volume V of the series *Geschichte des Deutschen Heeres im Weltkrieg, 1914-1918*. The translation of unit designations is not consistent in places.
3. *Imperial German Handbook 1914-1918* by DB Nash, Ian Allan Ltd., Shepperton / Surrey 1980, ISBN 0-7110-0968-6.
4. 2. Westfälische Pionier-Bataillon Nr. 24. As part of the Im Kriege section, there are two articles used here as sources - *Die ersten Minenwerfer im Weltkriege* by Hauptmann Thorner, *Illustrierte Zeitung "Minenwerfer"*, Ausgabe 3.882, Kriegsnummer 173, 1917, as well as excerpts from the book *Westfalen stand wie ein Fels - Die westfälischen Regimenter im Weltkrieg* by Wilhelm Westecker, Berlin 1939.
5. *Deutsches Heer 1914 - 1918 Formationsgeschichte* (Interessen- und Arbeitsgemeinschaft Weltkrieg 1914-1918) - especially *Allgemeines zur Formationsgeschichte*.
6. *Die ehemalige Pioniergarnison Hann. Münden* (Bodo Redlin).
7. *Copenhagen's Land Fortification 1886-1920, Part 2* by Lt. O. Andersen, *Krighistorisk Tidsskrift*, August 1975. The article assesses, among other things, the Germans' possible opportunities to break through Copenhagen's land fortifications, based on the siege of Liège in August 1914..
8. *Geschichte der Eisenbahntruppen* (Johannes-Paul Kögler).
9. *Fernmeldetruppe und Militär - Die Geschichte der Fernmeldetruppe des Heeres* (Hans Georg Battles), especially the *Telegraph Troop 1899-1914* and *Erster Weltkrieg 1914-1918*.
10. *The Imperial German Army, pre-1914* (A Pocket German Army).
11. *Provisorische Gliederung - Verzeichnis der im Kriege vorhandenen Einheiten*





From Alte Ansichtskarten.

Per Finsted

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### Notes:

- 1) Major General Georg Karl Franz Amandus Friemel (1859-1960) (web.genealogie)
- 2) Source 5 states that upon the mobilization of Pionierregiment 24, the 1st to 3rd Pionier-Ersatz Kompanien were created.
- 3) Die Uniform der Pioniere (Verein Historische Uniformen) briefly mentions uniforms and equipment for the searchlight units.
- 4) However, in *German Air Forces 1914-1918* by Ian Sumner, Osprey Elite No. 135, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2005, ISBN 1-84176-924-X, the number of towed searchlights is given as only one, which is probably a clerical error.
- 5) There were two Saxon pioneer battalions - *Kgl. Saxony. 1. Pioneer Battalion No. 12* and *Kgl. Saxony. 2. Pionier-Bataillon No. 22*, but from which unit the soldier originates is not available.
- 6) On pioneer uniforms, see Die Uniform der Pioniere (Verein Historische Uniformen).