

Archive Information Sheet

The Post Office Rifles



Defending Britain from within and without

The Post Office Rifles had its origins in the Fenian scare of 1867 when explosions in London and Manchester and disturbances elsewhere were staged in the name of Irish independence. In response, 1,600 Post Office employees were enrolled as Special Constables under Major J.L. Du Plat Taylor of the 21st Middlesex Civil Service Volunteers (Post Office Company).

Once the Fenian threat had passed it was proposed that the Special Constables who were willing should form the basis of a permanent volunteer regiment. The Postmaster General (whom Du Plat Taylor served as Private Secretary) gave his approval to the scheme. On 13 February 1868 the War Office sanctioned the formation of a regiment of 1,000 men. On 2 March that year Du Plat Taylor was gazetted Lieutenant-Colonel, commanding the 49th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers (Post Office Rifles).

Nine years later, in 1877, Du Plat Taylor suggested that an Army Postal Corps be formed in the Regular Army. The idea was not taken up at the time, apparently because of a lack of funds. A national reorganisation of the Volunteer corps in 1880 led to another name change – with the Regiment renumbered the 24th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers (Post Office Rifles).

Egyptian Campaign

By 1882 the War Office was ready to revive Lieutenant-Colonel Du Plat Taylor's proposal for an Army Postal Corps when hostilities broke out in Egypt. Unrest threatened the security of the Suez Canal, the British lifeline to India.

Du Plat Taylor called for 100 men of the 24th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers to serve abroad and the Army Post Office Corps was born. The party set off from Portsmouth on 8 August 1882, commanded by Captain Sturgeon, who in later years went on to

become the Postmaster of Norwich. By 23 October 1882 they were back in England. During this short campaign they became the first British Volunteers to come under fire – at the Battle of Kassassin – fortunately without any losses. Sadly the Egyptian Campaign eventually resulted in the Post Office Rifles' first fatality – when Corporal F.G. Stocker died subsequent to his return to England from illness contracted in Egypt.

Sir Garnet Wolseley, commander of the Egyptian Campaign, praised the work of the Army Postal Corps: "Their services have been so valuable that I hope a similar corps may be employed on any future occasion on which it may be necessary to despatch an expeditionary force from this country." Perhaps with this in mind, the Secretary of State for War ensured that, upon its return from Egypt, the Army Post Office Corps was embodied in the reserve of the Royal Engineers, although attached to the 24th Middlesex for drill and discipline.

South African Campaign

In October 1899 the Army Post Office Corps was called upon to serve in the South African War. As the January 1900 issue of the Post Office staff magazine, *St-Martin's-Le-Grand*, reported: "From 1885 till the present year the Army Post Office Corps has lived in the easy obscurity of peace, and now again has answered the summons to the field..."

The men quickly established an efficient postal service under difficult conditions. However, the service eventually was criticised by a young war reporter named Winston Churchill. Writing in the *Morning Post* he complained about the number of letters which had been delayed, mis-delivered or lost.

Post Office volunteers from other companies of the 24th Middlesex also elected to fight abroad as riflemen. The contribution made by the 24th was said to be the largest by any Volunteer Regiment

totalling 16 officers and 1,000 men. Two men were killed in action with 44 fatalities resulting from disease. In recognition of its bravery and unique status, the 24th Middlesex was the only Volunteer regiment entitled to the Honours 'Egypt 1882' and 'South Africa 1899-1902'.

Restructuring continues in 'Civvy Street'

More changes came about as a result of the Territorial and Reserve Forces Bill of 1907. The Act brought the part-time Volunteer (rifleman) and Yeomanry (mounted) regiments from across the country together into a single Territorial Army in 1908.

The 24th Middlesex, as a result, were redesignated the 8th Battalion, City of London Regiment (Post Office Rifles).

Distinguished service in The Great War

The Post Office Rifles served with distinction from the moment they arrived in France on 18 March 1915. By 11 November 1918 – Armistice Day – 1,800 men would be dead and 4,500 wounded. After the outbreak of war the numbers of recruits was so great that a second Post Office Rifles battalion – the 2nd/8th Londons – was formed in September 1914. Between them the two battalions earned the London Regiment 27 Battle Honours. At the Battle of Wurst Farm Ridge in September 1917, the 2nd/8th lost over half of its fighting strength, dead or wounded, but its men were awarded 40 gallantry medals. These included a Victoria Cross won by Sergeant A.J. Knight – the only one awarded to a Post Office Rifleman.

Keeping the bombers at bay

Further reorganisations took place after the Great War, which many saw as a dilution of the battalion's Post Office identity. The 8th Battalion was amalgamated with the 'non-Post Office' 7th Battalion in 1921. In 1935 it was converted from infantry to the 32nd (7th City of London) Anti-Aircraft Battalion, Royal Engineers. In 1940 it was transferred again to the 32nd Searchlight Regiment, Royal Artillery.

In memoriam

Memorials to the Post Office Rifles can be found at St Lawrence Parish Church, Abbots Langley, at the Paignton War Memorial, and on a plaque outside the Uckfield village church. There is also a Book of Remembrance in the church traditionally associated with the Post Office – St Botolphs in Aldersgate, London EC1.

There is no formal memorial to the Post Office Rifles in France, but many of the fallen from the Great War have their names recorded on memorials such as the Menin Gate at Ypres and Sir Edward Lutyens' memorial to the missing at Thiepval.

From the archives: correspondence from the 'enemy' during the First World War

Captain Home Peel, the Adjutant of the 1st/8th Post Office Rifles was killed in action on 24 March 1918. The Royal Mail archive contains a number of letters and documents relating to his wartime service. From this treasure trove emerges a portrait of a typical Officer – educated at Charterhouse and employed by the India Office prior to 1914.

Most astonishing of these items is a letter written on German military stationery, which sought to comfort Mrs Peel. This humanitarian gesture was made by E. F. Gayler, who describes himself as; 'late of 45 Stainton Road, Entcliffe, Sheffield'.

He writes: "...although enemy and sometime deeply hurt by the ridiculous tone of your home press I feel it a human duty to communicate these sad news. Capt. Peel was killed in action near Longueval and died, as it seems by the wounds received, without suffering."

The Post Office Rifles (contd.)

Sources

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Post 92: *St-Martins-Le-Grand*, Post Office staff magazine issues 4/1900, 3/1903

The Royal Mail Archive Search Room at Freeling House is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am - 5.00pm, and until 7.00pm on Thursdays.

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The Royal Mail Archive www.postalheritage.org.uk

Freeling House
Phoenix Place
LONDON
WC1X 0DL

T +44 (0)20 7239 2570
F +44 (0)20 7239 2576
Minicom +44 (0)20 7239 2572
info@postalheritage.org.uk