

Section 018

A Note on Organisation

Introduction

Military histories are notorious for their use of terms, especially those relating to units of the British Army, which are not defined and with which the reader is assumed to be familiar. In this note we try to set out the basic organisational structure of the British Army as it was in the first world war so that when these terms are used the reader may have some understanding of what they mean.

First we must distinguish between the establishment of the Army as a whole with its organisation in peacetime; and the way it is deployed in the field in time of war. The examples are from the Royal Berkshire's usage and there will be variations from one regiment to another.

Also it must be borne in mind that, particularly under the pressures of war, organisational niceties were not always followed and there are numerous exceptions to the basic rules.

The Regiment

The established army, or at least the infantry, is divided into a number of regiments and it is to his regiment that a soldier has his prime loyalty. A regiment will usually be commanded by a Colonel and also have an honorary colonel, often a member of the Royal family. To most soldiers the regiment is his family and typically he will remain with the same regiment for most of his military career.

Regiments are then divided into battalions of which the first two are fighting units and the third is a reserve unit. Typically a battalion consists of around a thousand men and will be commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel.

The battalion is then further divided into Companies commanded by a Major. There were usually eight of these in a British battalion and given letters such as A or E. During the mobilisation in 1914 however the British Army switched to the double company system with only four double sized companies. In addition there was a Headquarters Company which was organised on quite different grounds.

Each company is then be divided into Platoons commanded by a Captain. Platoons are usually identified by number, but were usually numbered straight through the Company so we can have, for example, 15th and 16th Platoons of E Company. In their turn platoons were divided into sections, commanded by a Lieutenant.

In peacetime the regiment was unlikely to have more than its two operational and one reserve battalions although there could be additional territorial battalions. Nowadays many regiments are reduced to only one battalion. In times of war the regiment will expand by forming further battalions using men seconded from its regular battalions and supplemented by volunteers or conscripts. In the case of the Royal Berkshire Regiment they expanded to 16 battalions during the war although this included labour battalions which were later transferred to the Labour Corps.

The expansion in the Great War took two quite different forms. First additional 'Service' battalions were formed which took numbers beyond the peacetime establishment, thus they became 5th, 6th 7th 8th and 9th. Further battalions were formed as labour battalions taking numbers 10 to 13. The Territorials expanded in a quite different way. They retained their 4th Battalion name and prefixed it by a second number. The original 4th became the 1st/4th and the expansion battalions the 2nd/4th and the 3rd/4th. Then each of these groups denoted one of their number to be the 'reserve' and these stayed at home to provide training for additional recruits and men returning to the regiment after a spell in hospital. The new 'reserve' battalions were the 9th (Service) the 3rd/4th. (Territorial) and the 13th. (Labour)

Battalion Strength

The typical establishment of a battalion in WW1 was as follows:-

Headquarters Company

Commanding Officer - Lt Colonel
 Second in Command - Major
 Adjutant - Captain
 Battalion Sergeant Major
 Padre (Lieutenant equivalent)
 2 Clerks (one a sergeant)
 8 Signalmen
 8 Runners
 3 Batmen
 1 Cook

Transport Section

Transport Officer - Lieutenant
 Transport NCOs - Sergeant and Corporal
 11 Riding horses
 9 Pack ponies
 1 water cart with horse
 4 field kitchens each with a horse
 MOs medicine cart - with horse
 1 ammunition limber - with 2 horses
 2 general service waggons - with 4 horses
 Grooms and drivers
 1 Farrier corporal
 1 Saddler
 1 Cook
 1 Batman

Quartermasters Section

Quartermaster - Captain
 Battalion Quartermaster sergeant
 2 Storemen
 4 Cooks
 1 Batman
 1 Sergeant Tailor

Medical Officers Section

Medical Officer - Captain
 Medical orderly
 8 Sanitary men
 Stretcher bearers (Band)

Company (4 off)

Company Commander - Major
 Second in command - Captain
 Company Quartermaster sergeant

Platoon (4 off)

Platoon Commander - Captain
 Second in Command -
 Lieutenant
 Platoon Sergeant

Section (4 off)

Lieutenant
 2nd Lieutenant
 Corporal
 Lance Corporal
 15 privates

In practice however many of the positions were taken by men of lesser rank and numbers varied enormously. In many cases also the second in command was one of the commanders at a lower level, thus a Company Second in Command would also be one of the platoon commanders.

The Specialist Units

We now must distinguish between an infantry fighting unit and a specialist service unit. Within the British Army there are a number of specialist units and these tend to be organised as corps rather than in regiments.

The essential difference is that while the fighting unit tends to operate as a team based on the battalion, the specialist units tend to operate at the company or lower level, although these are often given other titles such as section or squadron. Thus attached to an infantry battalion or division one may find companies of the Royal Engineers, the Royal Artillery or the Royal Pay Corps to provide the specialist skills needed.

The Fighting Units

The battalion, together with its attached specialist units is then deployed as a fighting unit. The basic fighting unit of the British Army is a Brigade commanded by a Brigadier General. Brigades are brought together to form a Division, commanded by a Major General and on the whole the allocation of battalions to brigades and brigades to divisions is relatively permanent.

The next levels, the Corps and the Army are fairly fluid and Divisions are allocated to Corps (commanded by a Lieutenant General and referred to by Roman numerals) and Corps to armies (commanded by a General and referred to as First, Second etc.) usually only for a particular engagement.

The Brigade

Three battalions formed a brigade (although some brigades had up to six battalions) and three brigades formed a division.

Further units, for example of artillery or cavalry may be attached at either brigade or divisional level. Prior to the Great War most British divisions had only two brigades but by the outbreak of hostilities most divisions had their three brigades and they are numbered together in sequence. Thus 1st Division contains brigades 1, 2 and 3; 2nd Division contains brigades 4, 5 and 6 and so on up to 75th Division with 231, 232 and 233 brigades. In addition the Guards and the Cavalry formed their own divisions with their own separate brigade numbers and there were other anomalies like the Royal Naval Division made up of sailors who were without a ship. Gradually however the need arose to move Regular brigades into Service Divisions and vice versa so after a while the simple numbering system broke down.

The Order of Battle

The Division therefore is the battle unit deployed at a strategic level and commanded by a Major General. Typically it will have between 12,000 and 20,000 men. At the top (strategic) level one has a Theatre, (eg the Western Front was a theatre) and within this one deployed a number of armies each made up of up to four Corps which in their turn are made up of from 2 to 5 divisions.

The specific allocation of units at the commencement of an engagement was known as 'The Order of Battle' For

example the 26th Division, fighting in Macedonia in July 1916 was made up as follows:-

77th Infantry Brigade
 8th Royal Scots Fusiliers
 11th Scottish Riflemen
 10th Black Watch
 12th Argyle and Sutherland
 Highlanders
 77th Machine Gun Company
 77th Trench Mortar Battery
 77th SAA Sec Ammun Coln
 78th Infantry Brigade
 9th Gloucesters
 11th Worcesters
 7th Ox and Bucks Light Infantry
 7th Royal Berkshires
 78th Machine Gun Company
 78th Trench Mortar Battery
 78th SAA Sec Ammun Coln
 79th Infantry Brigade
 10th Devons
 8th Duke of Cornwall Light Infantry
 12th Hampshires
 7th Wiltshires
 79th Machine Gun Company
 79th Trench Mortar Battery
 79th SAA Sec Ammun Coln
 A Squadron 1st Lothian amnd Borders Horse
 26th Cyclist Company
 A, B & C batteries CXIV Artillery Brigade
 with CXIV Brigade Ammunition Column
 A, B, C & D(H) batteries CXV Artillery
 Brigade with CXV Brigade Ammunition
 Column
 A, B, C & D(H) batteries CXVI Artillery
 Brigade with CXVI Brigade Ammunition
 Column
 A, B, C & D(H) batteries CXVII Artillery
 Brigade with CXVII Brigade Ammunition
 Column
 26th Divisional Ammunition Column
 107th Field coy Royal Engineers
 108th Field coy Royal Engineers
 131st Field coy Royal Engineers
 26th Divisional Signals Coy
 8th Ox and Bucks Pioneer Battalion
 78th Field Ambulance
 79th Field Ambulance
 80th Field Ambulance
 38th Mobile Veterinary Section
 26th Division Train.

On the whole infantry battalions were assigned to brigades (and hence to divisions) quite randomly, however in a few cases some brigades or even divisions were made up of battalions from only one regiment. Divisions tended to stick together and of our three battalions of the Royal Berks, the 5th served all the time with the 12th Division, the 6th with the 18th Division and the 8th with the 1st Division until the 6th was disbanded in February 1918 and the 8th was transferred to the 18th Division to take its place.

It must be noted however that there were many anomalies and exceptions to these broad definitions and often a battalion could be so reduced that it virtually disappeared or had to be brought back to strength by attaching units from other divisions. Also in times of war smaller units tend to get separated from their comrades and get attached in the field to some other