

GEORGE WALKER TREBLE

Army Post Office Corps: Research notes

BACKGROUND:

I think that it would be fair to say that I tripped over George Walker Treble, and through mischance found myself noting down details relating to him and the activities of the Army Post Office Corps. A document considered definitive on the subject was published some years ago^{i ii} ; however, these notes are published in the hope that they may contribute to future research.

GEORGE WALKER TREBLE and the ARMY POST OFFICE CORPS

On 13th February 1868, the British War Office agreed to the creation of a volunteer regiment of 1,000 Post Office employees. On 2nd March 1868, John Lowther Du Plat Taylor was gazetted Lieutenant-Colonel commanding the 49th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers (the so-called "Post Office Rifles").

The Army Post Office Corps (A.P.O.C) was created by Royal Warrant in 1882, the men of the former 49th (renamed the 24th Middlesex) forming the core of the corps in both the 1882 Egyptian campaign and the Sudanese campaign of 1884-85.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the Army Post Office Corps (M Company 24th Middlesex Volunteer Rifle Corps) was mobilised under the command of Captain G W Treble, who was appointed Army Postmaster. He, a sergeant and 6 men left England for Cape Town aboard the R.M.S. Dunnotar Castle on 14th October 1899 arriving on 29th October 1899. A week later Capt. W Price, Lieut. H F McClintock, 8 sergeants and 52 men left aboard R.M.S. Moorⁱⁱⁱ. Over the months that followed, the staff establishment grew to 16 officers and over 1,000 men of other ranks^{iv}.

Essentially, the structure of the A.P.O. was that of two number of base offices (Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg), complemented by some fifty field post offices along the lines of communication and five manned Traveling Post Offices (T.P.O) utilizing appropriately modified railway carriages^v.



Anglo-Boer War 1899 - 1902. Maitland Camp Post Office, Anglo-Boer War 1899 - 1902. [KAB J8369 ^{vi}]

De Aar was the first Advance Depot to be created and designated APO 1 circa 17 November 1899, to be followed by that at Orange River Station. De Aar was redesignated APO 13 on 1 May 1900, eventually to be designated FPO 109 between 1 April 1902 and 20 July 1902.



Canceller 1(B) (no dot between FIELD & BRITISH):
APO 1-1st Series APO 13-2nd Series FPO 109-2nd Series ^{vii}

Clearly, *ab initio* Treble was faced with a number of significant problems. These were:
1. a vast accumulation of unsorted military mail sent from the General Post-office, Cape Town to the Castle for disposal

2. the urgent need to redistribute scarce A.P.O.C. resources based on Buller's revised campaign strategy. This led to the creation of two base offices, one in Cape Town and the other in Pietermaritzburg.
3. an ever-lengthening line of communication as Lord Methuen advanced from De Aar through Orange River to Modder River and Kimberley with a consequent further dilution of A.P.O.C. resources as Treble attempted to supply continuity of service.

As time passed, despite Herculean efforts made by a small group of A.P.O.C. men, some of the problems became chronic. These could be summarized as:

1. the on-going logistical nightmare of finding the whereabouts of rank and file in a war zone. Here, Proud makes the point: "The troops in South Africa at the end of February (1900 showed) an increase of, roughly, 350 per cent (whilst the A.P.O.C. had increased) about 65 per cent" ^{viii}.
2. the haphazard management of parcel post by a separate agency, the "War Office Agency for the Distribution of the Parcels to the Troops". Here, an Embarkation Officer at Southampton used whatever means expedient to forward parcels to the war zone seemingly without thought of the consequences of his actions
3. the inordinate volume of mail of every conceivable kind sent from Britain and the Indian subcontinent, often haphazardly addressed, inappropriately surcharged, frequently misdirected from the country of origin to the wrong base post-office
4. the frequent difficulty in safely and timeously moving this misdirected mail between Cape Town, Pietermaritzburg and points beyond
5. and simply the unrealistic - and, in hindsight, totally unreasonable - expectation by many civilians and military personnel alike that the postal service should function as efficiently in a time of war as in a time of peace.



Railway station and post office, Orange River Station [KAB AG7129 ^{ix}].

Frequently, there was some unpleasant carping with regard to the efficiency of the A.P.O.C. As will be appreciated, in point of fact, the delivery of a service of quality was extraordinarily difficult, yet, for the most part, it was accomplished at great personal sacrifice by the men.

In March 1900, Treble was castigated and nearly repatriated as a consequence of these factors. He reported personally to Field Marshall Lord Roberts his concerns regarding the War Office agency in January 1900; and later a one man commission led by J Greer exonerated Treble of all blame. In defense of his service, Capt. W Price wrote: "The fact of the matter is this, the Military authorities have no idea of the magnitude and difficulties of our work, they take it as a matter of course that letters should be delivered with the same regularity as at home without considering the difference in conditions" ^x.

Lieut.Colonel J Greer ^{xi} had arrived in South Africa 24th March 1900 on SS Briton from Southampton ^{xii} having accepted the appointment of Director of Army Post Office. At that time, Treble had been appointed Officer Commanding Army Post Office Corps. Judged on published correspondence, Treble was promoted to the rank of major circa November 1899 ^{xiii}, and by November 1900 memos reflect him as having the rank of Lieut.Colonel.

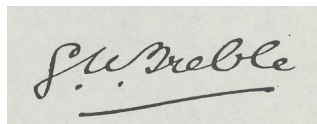
On 5th June 1900, Field Marshall Lord Roberts entered Pretoria. As the "Great March" from Bloemfontein had progressed, Green and Treble had created postal depots at Kroonstad, Elandsfontein Junction, Johannesburg and finally Pretoria, and extended the Railway Mail Service. In September 1900, Capt. W Price arrived in Pretoria and headed up the postal service to the Transvaal until the end of the war.

Official Memos written by Treble from Cape Town dated April through to July 1902, suggest an organised mind, a "systems man" ^{xiv} but, unsurprisingly, tell us little more than that.

George Walker Treble left South Africa mid-July 1902, issuing the following by way of farewell:

CAPE TOWN. 13th July 1902 ^{xv}

LIEUT. COLONEL TREBLE, being about to embark for England, relinquishes the command of the Corps in South Africa on and from to-day's date. In doing so he desires to place on record his great appreciation of the support which he has at all times received from the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the Corps. He desires to thank all ranks for their hearty co-operation during the campaign.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "G. W. Treble", with a horizontal line underneath.

(Sgd.) G. W. TREBLE
Lieut. Colonel
Commdg. Army Post Office Corps.



Anglo-Boer War 1899-1901. Post Office wagon [KAB J3399 ^{xvi}]

And what of the Army Post Office Corps?

Some Post Office volunteers from companies other than "M" company elected to fight as riflemen. Overall, two men were to be killed in action and 44 fatalities to result from disease. Indeed, the contribution made by the 24th Middlesex Volunteer Rifle Corps was so significant that it was the only volunteer regiment ever to be awarded the honours "Egypt 1882" and "South Africa 1899-1902".

In October 1902 the last Army Post Office was closed; but it was only once continuity of service was assured that, in February 1903, the last detachment of the Army Post Office Corps left South Africa.

Though the regiment was relieved of its postal duties after the Haldane Reforms of 1908, it kept its association with the Post Office and continued to recruit postal workers into the Territorial Force under its new title 8th (City of London) Battalion, The London Regiment (Post Office Rifles).

The TREBLE GENEALOGY

Henry Arthur. TREBLE b.c. 1828 Ash Priors, Somerset d. September 1900 Chippenham
married Annie M. NN. b.c. 1834 Rathkeale, Limerick, Ireland

In 1881, the family of four lived together at Church Street, Belford, Northumberland.

1. George Walker TREBLE b.c. June 1865 Belford, Northumberland Teacher m.
Williton c. June 1895 Williton vol.5c pg.457
2. Henry Arthur T. TREBLE b.c. September 1869 Belford, Northumberland m. (first)
September 1897 NN. Milton
2. Henry Arthur T. TREBLE b.c. September 1869 Belford, Northumberland m. (second)
December 1904 Newcastle-on-Tyne NN.

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15. South African Archives Repository, Cape Town.
16. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints : <http://www.familysearch.org>
17. The Post Office Rifles. Archive Information Sheet. Postal Heritage Trust 2005.

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- ⁱ Proud, E B. History of the British Army Postal Service: 1882-1902. Publ. Proud-Bailey, 1982. ISBN 1872465501, 9781872465500
- ⁱⁱ Batten, A. Proceedings of the Army Post Office Corps in South Africa 1899-1902 - records from the Post Office Archives in London. Publ: PFSA. 1983. This document mirrors the earlier work of Proud, including his errors
- ⁱⁱⁱ As a consequence of a change in battle strategy Lieut. HF McClintock, 12 N.C.Os and men left to a Base Office at Pietermaritzburg without disembarking the R.M.S. Moor.
- ^{iv} "A few days before Christmas" (1899) aboard S.S. Goorkha and Roslin Castle; 23 October 1899 aboard Oriental; 11 January 1900 aboard S.S.Cestrian; 25 February 1900 aboard S.S.Canada; 21 May 1900 aboard S.S.Montfort; 9 June 1900 aboard S.S.Monteagle; 7 April 1901 aboard Manila; 27 July 1901 aboard Wakool; 28 November 1901 aboard Britannia; 26 February 1902 aboard Dunera; 10 May 1902 aboard Nunia
- ^v Main Line (Naauwpoort to Bloemfontein, to Johannesburg; S.E. Line (Johannesburg to Charlestown), S.W. Line (Elandsfontein to Klerksdorp), Eastern Line (Pretoria to Waterval Onder to Komatipoort), Northern Line (Pretoria to Pietersburg).
- ^{vi} KAB Jeffreys Collection Photo J8369 DESCRIPTION Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902. Camp post office, Maitland Camp
- ^{vii} Proud, E B. pg. 154
- ^{viii} Proud, E B. pg. 70
- ^{ix} KAB AG Collection Photo AG 7129 Orange River Station Post-office 1899
- ^x Letter dated 10 April 1900 quoted in full in Proud, E B. History of the British Army Postal Service: 1882-1902. pg.80
- ^{xi} Peter Prime writes 2008: Lt Col J Greer, Postmaster of the Northern District, London was appointed Director of Army Post Office in South Africa. He sailed for S Africa on 24th March 1900 on SS "Briton" from Southampton. He was given £100 to kit himself out and continued to draw his civilian pay of £600 per annum. On 10 September 1900 he was upgraded as Assistant Adjutant General.
- ^{xii} There is a clear discrepancy as to dates between Proud (October 1899) and Shipping Lists <http://www.britishmedals.us/files/sl1900.htm> confirmed by Peter Prime (24th March 1900). I have quoted the latter.
- ^{xiii} Letter from Hy. Wright to The Editor, Post dated 22 November 1899, quoted Proud, E B. pg.171
- ^{xiv} Proud, E B. pg.124-6, 140-2
- ^{xv} Proud, E B. pg.142
- ^{xvi} KAB Jeffreys Collection Photo J3366 DESCRIPTION Anglo-Boer War 1899-1901. Post Office wagon.
- ^{xvii} Includes two unreferenced and poor photographic reproductions of the Field Post Office, De Aar [Proud, E B. pgs.168, 178]