

THE 1913 MANOEUVRES

Crismus Parsons

Sixty years ago the influx of several thousand troops was an occasion the like of which had never before been seen by the people of Wolverton and Stony Stratford, whose rural torpor was – for the space of about two months – disturbed by the military machine in action. In this Diamond Jubilee year it seems appropriate to record something of the Army exercise played out in the dying days of peace, when war was still a game – prior to the dream's rude shattering in 1914 – and its impact on the local scene.

Most of our older inhabitants retain memories of the events of late summer 1913, but those of less advanced years, and newcomers to the area, must rely on the written word and pictorial representation, for which we are most fortunate in being able to draw upon the Society's large photographic collection. Built up with patience and devotion during the past decade by copying old postcards and photographs, this constitutes a unique and enduring record of the past, and contains several dozens of pictures showing the panoply of simulated war in this area, from which a representative selection has been included to illustrate this article.

Official reports of army manoeuvres make rather dry and uninteresting reading, and should largely speaking be left to the students of military history, but notes and excerpts from the "Report on Army Exercise 1913", coupled with the more homely reporting of the Wolverton Express, provide sufficient information upon which to build an outline sketch of the course of events as seen by the inhabitants of the Wolverton Urban District and its environs.

The War Office report deals only with the later events when the whole of the assembled troops took part in an army exercise lasting from September 22nd. to 25th. , the objects of which were stated as being to afford practice in :-

1. Working of G.H.Q. and Army H.Q. at war establishments
2. An approach march of one cavalry division and two armies, each army consisting of two divisions and marching on one road.
3. Supply of the above force, using the same roads.
4. Cavalry covering the advance of the above (Brown) force against slightly superior White cavalry reinforced by cyclists, necessitating its support by the advanced guards of the main column.
5. The driving in the enemy's advanced troops.
6. Deployment of the Brown force for attack.

7. An attack on an enemy in an entrenched position.
8. Organisation of a pursuit.
9. Breaking off the pursuit, and a sudden change of direction.

The main Brown) force consisted of nearly 40 000 men with equipment of varying sorts (see "Field State" Table 1) which advanced from the Chilterns on a front through Aylesbury and Leighton Buzzard, by way of the Ouse valley between Buckingham and Newport Pagnell, to the vicinity of Daventry. The defending (White) army of token units contained about 8 000 men (see "Field State" Table 2). Some of the operations on the 23rd, 24th and 25th were witnessed by His Majesty King George V, who was staying at Althorp Park as the guest of Lord Spencer. The King also inspected certain units of the combatants and received allied observers and foreign attaches. One of our photographs shows His Majesty at what has been identified as Buckingham Station, and another pictures the civilian welcome to the royal car outside Tyringham Lodge – it is presumed that he was visiting Tyringham House where H.H. the Princess Marie Louise of Schleswig-Holstein was staying at this time. (The princess attended a concert in the Church Institute, Wolverton on Thursday 11th September).

Another photograph shows one of the 34 aircraft used in these manoeuvres for reconnaissance purposes by the Royal Flying Corps. Identification of the various planes in use had evidently been considered desirable, but in practice the organisation of the procedure was found to be wanting:-

"A sheet of woodcuts showing four types seen in flight from below, in front and side was found useful. It was not possible to include types of all machines taking part, as fresh machines became available at too late a date to admit of photographs being taken and woodcuts prepared".

At least one airship – the "Delta" – was used for spotting, by the defending force and was seen over Wolverton on Monday 22nd September. When this came under attack by armed planes of the enemy the umpire's verdict of the probable outcome of the encounter seems, in retrospect, somewhat unrealistic:-

"When in the vicinity of Great Missenden, "Delta" was attacked by a B.E. biplane and a Bleriot monoplane. A stiff breeze was blowing at the time, but the hostile aeroplanes rose to the same height as, and closed to within point-blank range of, the airship. In view of their steadier platform, "Delta's " crew were ruled to have driven off the aeroplanes."

Preparation locally. These manoeuvres, involving the whole of the assembled forces, formed the climax of working-up exercises carried out in the first three weeks of September, firstly in Brigade work and then in Divisional training, so the various units involved were on the move from their barracks and depots towards the end of August, converging on their appointed camping areas. The first to

arrive in this area were the 7th Field Co. Royal Engineers on 3rd August, whose task was to prepare the camp sites at Stacey Hill and Warren Farm.

Considerable details of the latter site are given by the Wolverton Express which declares that Warren Farm would be the H.Q. of the 4th Division, and a general hospital constructed there. The Mounted Infantry and 11th Infantry Brigade were also to be stationed in Warren Farm fields. "In Mr. Norman's two fields, between Stony Stratford and Wolverton House, the 10th and 11th Brigades will camp. In the corner of the second of these fields a branch hospital will be instituted. In the field on the opposite side of road to these will be the Veterinary Hospital. the Army Veterinary corps and the Army Service Corps will be stationed here. The field first past on Wolverton House from Stony Stratford will be taken up by the 9th Field Co, Royal Artillery. All fields are being connected up with water pipes, connected with the Stony Stratford water supply – above ground. Latrines and wash benches are being laid for each Battalion, and every precaution taken to exercise sanitary management."

No details are given for the Stacey Hill encampment, but this received mention because of trouble with the water supply, when it was found that "pressure in the higher part of the Stacey Hill encampment, when tested, was very poor, and the water would not rise into the 400 gallon storage tanks in this part of the camp." Eventually "the Engineers have sunk the tanks in many places, and in this way the pressure has been increased to a 'trickling point'...." and the tanks filled. Difficulties were anticipated at a later date when the troops moved in, but it was not reported as constituting any problem in the event.

Whilst the army engineers were busy constructing camps, drains and cookhouses, "the Engineering Dept. from Watford of the L.N.W.R. Co." were erecting a platform at the entrance of the goods yards at Wolverton for unloading the guns of the Regiment of Artillery. Also being erected was a platform of 200ft in length "in the centre of the goods road" for detraining horses, and another "towards the Blue Bridge, close to the hedge of the 'Big Field' , to facilitate the carting of camp equipment."

Already by the middle of August efforts were being made to entertain the troops in the community, when it was reported that "Church choirs will gladly help with providing concerts from time to time," but perhaps more congenial fare was provided at "a capital smoking concert held in the N.C.O.'s mess" – which included "gramophone selections, songs sentimental and otherwise, recitations, piano duets etc. Jocular Mr. J. Carter figured largely on the programme with his comic songs and his inimitable witty tales and was a great success."

Arrival of the Troops. "Friday last" (Aug.29th) will long be remembered in Wolverton as one of the most lively days in the history of the town"...."which from 3 a. m. to practically midnight was aglow with excitement, and crowds of interested spectators could be seen everywhere." The first military train arrived

at Wolverton station at 3 a.m., followed by others at approximately hourly intervals, bringing "troops" to occupy the camps at Stacey Hill and Warren Farm." With the early arrivals there was "no unnecessary talking and the services and the bands were dispensed with en route so as not to awake the inhabitants," but by the time the third train arrived, at 5.10 a.m. "many of the men who are employed at the Railway Carriage Works were in the streets," and at 6.10 a.m. when a detachment of the Seaforth Highlanders came in there were "not only men on their way to work, but also hundreds of women and children," and this contingent moved off the skirl of pipes, though "a thick fog overhung the whole country during the morning."

Further trainloads of troops arrived the next day (Saturday) and the girls employed at Messrs. McCorquodale's Printing Works turned out in force for the 3rd Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers, whose band played for the whole of the distance to the Stratford camp, - in the first part of the march with ragtime, and the Regimental March just before entering the camping ground."

N.B. There seems to be some discrepancy in the newspaper reports at this point, as the above excerpts from the Wolverton Express of Sept. 5th gives the distinct impression that the Friday arrivals were the first, whereas in the issue of Aug. 22nd it was stated that the first troops would arrive at Wolverton by 7 special trains on the following Monday (i.e. Aug 25th) and the remainder would follow on the Friday and Saturday of that week (i.e. 29th and 30th as for those quoted above). It is therefore not clear whether the transporting to Wolverton was concentrated into two days - which would be consonant with the reporting concerning the Friday's impact on the populace - or whether there had been an influx earlier in the week which, curiously, had escaped the notice of both the people and the press!

Local Training. This started on Monday 1st September - In the rain, which was partly responsible for producing several minor casualties to occupy the medical services:- a private running on the wet grass slipped and dislocated a knee; an artillery man was thrown off the limber, and a rider fell from a slipping horse, spraining his ankle. Operations were discontinued about 3 p.m. and everyone returned to camp. After another wet day on Tuesday the weather improved and sham fights were staged around Newport Pagnell, Grafton Regis and Cosgrove. Evidently fighting only a five day week, the forces offered entertainment to the public on Saturday 6th Sept. in the Park at Wolverton when a crowd of 5 -6,000 people attended to watch a "Grand Military Tournament."

During the following week the 13,000 troops quartered in the vicinity - ("there has not been a single case for court martial") - engaged in further manoeuvres in the villages and countryside around, on one occasion practising night attacks, and on another "with their pontoons made the passage for the troops and guns over the River Ouse. (see photos).

On the first day of the Army exercise an advance party of the Cavalry of the Brown force came up against the Territorial Cyclists at Thornton Hall where "the cavalry dismounted and lay flat on the lawn and the tennis courts in front of the house and blazed away with a furious rattle."

When, as outlined above, the whole army grouped for its exercise in the subsequent week, the troops moved off to play their part in the grand scheme, leaving the Engineers to clear up the camp sites. This they appear to have achieved in about two weeks, as on Saturday 4th Oct. they held a farewell party at Stacey Hill Farm, which some 2,000 people attended." This "commenced in sunshine but was abruptly terminated by rain at 4.30 p.m."

Some of the comments in the official report merit repeating for the light they throw on the more human aspect of his juggernaut, but at the same time they cast a sobering shadow over the competence of the high command's ability to plan and organise even a modest advance over friendly countryside. This was, alas, but a year away from the confrontation with Germany when it became apparent that "the technical side of this war was supremely important. It was a method of fighting which we were not ready to employ," and at last concern was expressed in the highest quarters at "our unpreparedness to cope with a foe that had at its disposal the resources of science directed by a skilled and highly organised realism." (3)

Transport and communications. "The very considerable congestion of traffic and blocking of roads which occurred outside Buckingham....shows the necessity for increased attention in regard to intercommunication and mutual arrangement between the staffs responsible for rendezvous and refilling points."

"The exercise brought out especially the necessity for the efficient training of despatch riders. There appears to be a tendency to use the bicycles allowed for intercommunication for other purposes."

"Great Care should be exercised in the selection of horses hired for manoeuvres. A number of weedy light horses, quite unfitted for draught work, were seen in wagons this year."

Calvary. "Calvary when halted should usually get into some formation of readiness off the road. Calvary halted in a fenced road are a most vulnerable object and difficult to handle or to move quickly to meet any contingency which may suddenly arise. In column on the road it is often impossible to do more, in case of attack, than to line the fences on each side. In such position a serious attack may prove disastrous."

Cyclist (mobile infantry) "A reluctance to leave their bicycles was apparent at times, leading to fighting on the roads when more suitable fire positions are

available close at hand off the road. Careful consideration is necessary as to the point at which the bicycles should be left,...the nearer the bicycle to the position held the better. This must not however be allowed to lead to an anxiety not to be parted from the bicycle at all for fear of being cut off from it."

Air Service. "Closer co-operation is needed between the air service and the other arms. Three Staff College students were attached to squadrons as observers. The results tend to show that although military knowledge is, of course, essential for aerial reconnaissance, full value will only be obtained if observers have had considerable practice and air experience."

Commissariat. "The Quarter Master general's branch for instance was not always informed sufficiently early of developments in the situation and consequent changes in the disposition of the troops to enable the movements of the trains and supply columns to be modified accordingly,...This necessity of close touch is and added argument against too frequent movement."

Unnecessary damage. "Although troops have the right to go where they wish – and at times this right must be insisted upon – farmers appreciate being asked or being given some warning. In several instances the fields selected for bivouacs were those specially saved for winter keep, and in one case in the south western the damage to the pasture of such a field amounted to £20, whereas the farmer would willingly have given another meadow close by where there was no winter keep and therefore no risk of damage to valuable pasture." "several instances occurred of troops going through seed clover and roots when there was little or no militant necessity to do so; no doubt a wire fence must be cut occasionally, but it is quite unnecessary, as was done in one instance to take down 200 yards of wire fencing and break off the iron standards, in order to obtain material for a wire entanglement." "The nibbling of stacks by horses is a cause of much irritation to the farmer not so much from the actual amount eaten, but because the appearance and market price of the stacks suffers."

References:-

1. Wolverton Express. 15th Aug. – 10th Oct.1913
2. Report on Army Exercise 1913 (War Office Library) – Pub. War Office. 6 Jan.1914.
3. War Memoirs of David Lloyd George. Vol.1, pp 117, 119.

Field State

		Brown Force	White Force
Personnel:	Officers	2226	499
	Other ranks	<u>36096</u>	<u>6576</u>
	Total	<u>38322</u>	<u>7075</u>
	Civilian personnel	1289	989
Horses:	Riding	6074	3198
	Draught	4015	929
	Pack	<u>48</u>	<u>29</u>
	Total	<u>10137</u>	<u>4156</u>
	Hired horses	2554	417
Guns:	13 pounders	6	9
	15 or 18 pounders	99	22
	4.5 in howitzers	36	-
	6 in howitzers	-	-
	60 pounders	16	2
	Machine	142	22
Technical vehicles:	2 horsed	51	4
	4 horsed	74	2
	6 horsed	56	22
Carts:	1 horsed	104	31
	2 horsed	266	57
	Hired	127	43
Wagons:	2 horsed	516	55
	4 horsed	298	54
	6 horsed	39	12
	Limbered G.S.	187	34
	Ambulance	59	11
	Hired	74	44
Motor cars:		82	23
Technical Vehicles:	Light	4	-
	Heavy	-	5
Tractors:		1	-
Workshop trucks		2	-
Store trucks:		2	-

Trailers:		6	-
Lorries:	30 cwt	22	32
	3 ton	120	5
Bicycles:		1423	790
Motorcycles:		102	68
Aeroplanes:		10	24
Airships:		-	3

OUTLINE COMPOSITION OF FORCES

(A complete list of all the regiments and units represented can be obtained from the War Office publication, but is too long to print.)

Brown Force

C.in C. F.M. Sir J.D.P. French G.C.B. G.C.V.O. K.C.M.G.

Calvary Division Commander Maj. Gen. E.H.H. Allenby.C.B.

Composed of 1st, 2nd & 3rd Calvary Brigades

First Army Commander Lt.Gen. Sir D.Haig K.B.C. K.C.I.E. K.C.V.O.

1st Division: Commander Maj. Gen. S.H. Lomax

Comprising 1st, 2nd & 3rd Infantry Brigades; Hussars and a Cyclist detachment; 4 Brigades of Field Artillery & Heavy Battery; Engineers & Signals

2nd Division: Commander Maj. Gen. H.M. Lawson C.B.

Comprising 4th, 5th & 6th Infantry Brigades; Hussars and a Cyclist detachment; 4 Brigades of Field Artillery & Heavy Battery; Engineers & Signals

Second Army: Commander Gen. Rt. Hon. Sir Paget G.C.B. K.C.V.O.

3rd Division: Commander Maj. Gen. H.S. Rawlinson Bart C.V.O. C.B.

Comprising 7th, 8th, and 9th Infantry Brigades; Hussars and a Cycling detachment; 4 Brigades of Field Artillery & Heavy Battery; Engineers & Signals.

4th Division

Commander Maj. Gen. T.D.O. Snow C.B.

Comprising 10th, 11th & 12th Infantry Brigades; Mounted Infantry & Cyclist detachment; 3 Brigades of Field Artillery & Heavy Battery; Engineers & Signals

White Force

Commander

Maj Gen C.C. Moune C.B.

Calvary Division:

Commander Brig. Gen. H. de la P. Gough C.B.

Comprising Provisional Calvary Brigade, North Midlands Mounted Brigade and London Mounted Brigade. 2 Batteries of Royal Horse Artillery, 2 Cyclist Battalions, Engineers, A.S.C, R.A.M.C. & Field Ambulances

10th Division

Commander Brig. Gen. W.N. Congreve V.C. C.B. M.V.O.

Comprising 3 nominal Infantry Brigades, and (representative) 4 Batteries F.Art., & Heavy Battery

11th Division

Commander Col. G.J. Cuthbert C.B.

Comprising 3 nominal Infantry Brigades, and (representative) 4 Batteries F.Art., & Heavy Battery