

## **Les services postaux britanniques et l'acheminement du courrier durant la Première Guerre mondiale**

**Comment, durant toute la durée de la guerre, des centaines de millions de lettres et de paquets ont-ils bien pu être distribués aux soldats de l'armée britannique... de par le monde ?**

Durant la Première Guerre mondiale, jusqu'à douze millions et demi de lettres et un million de colis furent distribués aux soldats par semaine. Le volume de correspondance distribuée sur la ligne de front était conséquent.

Au sortir de la guerre, un total de 2 milliards de lettres furent échangées, 114 millions de colis réceptionnés...

Durant le temps de guerre, les services postaux fonctionnèrent de façon remarquable souligne l'ancien ministre de l'Intérieur Alan Johnson.

Il cite pour illustrer son propos, l'exemple d'un soldat, qui, sur le front occidental s'adresse à un journal londonien, en 1915, en exprimant le fait qu'il est seul et qu'il apprécierait de recevoir du courrier. La réponse ne se fait pas attendre. Dès l'annonce publiée concernant le militaire, voilà que ce dernier reçoit près de 3.000 lettres, 98 colis et trois sacs postaux remplis de petits paquets...

Et si ce soldat avait eu le temps matériel de répondre à chaque lettre, il aurait pu le faire. Sa correspondance aurait été livrée, en Grande-Bretagne, endéans le jour ou les deux suivants le dépôt...

Comment le General Post Office (GPO) a-t-il bien pu maintenir un tel service postal, avec autant d'efficacité, tant pour les soldats que pour les marins, durant toute la durée de la Première Guerre mondiale... si ce n'est par un déploiement d'ingéniosité et grâce, surtout, au courage et dévouement des services ?

Potentialité des services postaux

Alan Johnson et la façon dont une modeste lettre devient une arme puissante durant le conflit...

Les objectifs sont bien établis dès le départ.

Depuis la création de la Penny Poste, en 1840, la capacité de communiquer par courrier de manière fiable et à faible coût se révèle nécessaire aux yeux du grand public.

Pour les combattants, il est essentiel de contribuer à maintenir un bon moral au sein des troupes. L'armée britannique est la première à être consciente de ce fait.

Il est impératif que la distribution du courrier, sur le front, devienne aussi importante que l'approvisionnement en nourriture ou en munitions.

Lors de la Guerre des Boers, en 1899, il avait déjà été établi qu'il était impérieux que les soldats puissent demeurer en contact avec leurs proches demeurés au pays.

La Première Guerre mondiale constitue un défi sans précédent d'un point de vue volumétrique.

Le GPO est déjà une énorme organisation avant le déclenchement de la guerre, en 1914. Elle emploie plus de 250.000 personnes et réalise un chiffre d'affaires de 20 millions de livres sterling. De ce fait, elle constitue, non seulement, la plus grande entreprise de Grande-Bretagne en terme d'emploi, mais, également de par le monde, selon le musée britannique des postes et archives (BPMA).

Ceux qui travaillaient à la GPO tiraient leur fierté dans leur capacité à déplacer rapidement des millions de lettres partout dans le monde, cela, en toute sécurité.

Cette fierté fut plus forte encore au sein de la Royal Engineers (section postale) ou de la REPS tel qu'ils étaient universellement connus. Cette dernière unité, de réserve, utilisée à temps partiel en temps de paix, et, composé de GPO. C'est-à-dire d'hommes ayant une formation militaire de base.

Cette unité des travailleurs des postes fut, par ailleurs, immédiatement englobée aux armées, quand la Première Guerre éclata.

Les questions parlementaires concernant le courrier demeurèrent dans les attributions du ministère des Postes... plutôt que de celui du ministère de la Guerre.

Le courrier transita par les ports français et par trains, dès le début de la guerre, alors que presque immédiatement un bureau de tri fut installé dans le Regent parc à Londres. Il s'agissait d'une énorme cabane en bois couvrant une superficie de plusieurs acres (2 acres  $\frac{1}{2}$  = 1 hectare).

Appelée « Home Depot », l'endroit occupait 2.500 personnes pour le tri, principalement des femmes.

Le transit du courrier était contingenté par l'armée. Chaque matin il était pris connaissance du mouvement des navires et de la position des bataillons, de sorte que chaque envoi soit expédié efficacement sur le théâtre des opérations.

Il demeure, dans la mémoire populaire de l'époque, l'image d'une flotte de camions de trois tonnes prenant possession du courrier à Folkestone ou Southampton où les navires faisaient escale depuis les dépôts postaux du Havre, de Boulogne ou de Calais.

Pour arriver à destination, des trains avaient dû couvrir la Picardie, sous le couvert de l'obscurité, durant la nuit, alors que des convois spéciaux sillonnaient les routes à enlever le courrier depuis des points de levée, tout au long de la ligne de front.

Contenu du courrier de soldats...

Source: Imperial War Museum

«Cher père ... Ils m'ont enseigné à combattre à la baïonnette aujourd'hui. Je peux vous assurer que ça fait bien mal au bras. Je pense que cette formation éprouvante doit faire de moi un homme ou me voir mort... De votre fils aimant, Ted" (Edward John Poole fut tué lors d'une action deux mois plus tard. Il avait 18 ans)

"Ma chère épouse bien-aimée... Je ne sais pas trop bien comment commencer cette lettre. Les circonstances sont bien différentes à présent, que celles vécues jusqu'ici... Nous allons au combat cet après-midi. Dieu seul sait qui en reviendra vivant... Si je n'en reviens pas, mon regret sera de vous laisser... Oh! Comme je vous aime tant, tous. Alors que je suis assis ici, à attendre, je me demande ce que vous faites à la maison. Je ne devrais pas faire cela. Il est difficile d'attendre de la sorte, impuissant. Au revoir. Tu es la meilleure des femmes ; la meilleure des épouses. Mon amour, ma bien aimée. A toi mon amour éternel, pour toujours, Jim xxxxxxxx" (Le sergent-major James Milne reviendra de la guerre auprès des siens)

«Mon cher père ... Il est un sentiment étrange pour moi, mais très réel, que chaque lettre écrite ou lue soit la dernière. Vous ne pouvez vous imaginer à quel point je suis déprimé. Je suis de nature gaie pourtant, mais ici, dans ces moments bizarres, avec la mort qui rôde, ça me donne de drôles de sensations...  
Avec mon amour. Priez pour moi. Votre.. fils, Frank" (Le caporal Frank Earley sera tué le jour suivant la rédaction de son courrier. Il avait 19 ans)

Revenons-en à la distribution et collecte du courrier...

Au poste de garde, le courrier quitte la route et, grâce à des chariots, il transite vers la ligne de front, afin d'être distribué aux soldats de manière individuelle. En la matière, l'objectif des armées consiste à distribuer les nouvelles provenant de la maison, au moment du repas du soir.

Fatigués et affamés les soldats ont pour principe de prendre d'abord connaissance du contenu de leur courrier, avant de manger...

A l'expédition, le courrier transite par des perceptions ou sous-perceptions postales. Le maître d'oeuvre de l'organisation des postes (Royal Mail) est Duncan Campbell Smith.

Les bureaux de poste sont en outre équipés d'un service certifié d'épargne de guerre, comme dans le civil.

Le courrier était horodaté avec un cachetage de la poste sur le terrain même, dès lors, qu'il était envoyé vers le pays d'origine.

Au début de la guerre chaque correspondance était ouverte et lue par un officier subalterne (censure). Ensuite, il le fut par le « Home Depot ». Mesure prise afin de s'assurer qu'aucune information classifiée, sur les mouvements de troupes ou sur les victimes des combats, ne soit révélée à l'arrière.

Enfin, les soldats purent opter pour la formule «Honneur Enveloppe» signifiant que le

document ne serait lu qu'au foyer, loin d'yeux indiscrets au regard de données confidentielles et personnelles.

À son apogée, l'organisation militaire des Postes traitera, comme nous l'avons déjà relevé, plus de 12 millions de lettres et un million de colis par semaine.

Partout où les forces armées britanniques seront engagées dans le monde, la marine militaire se mettra au service des Postes pour l'acheminement du courrier.

A Gallipoli, les lettres des morts au front furent systématiquement ouvertes. A ce propos, le GPO veillera toujours à ce que la correspondance arrive aux familles, après le télégramme officiel annonçant le décès d'un soldat.

30.000 lettres demeureront non ouvertes chaque jour de la guerre.

Pour les agents des Postes il est fort à parier qu'il devait être agréable de manipuler des lettres et des colis, plutôt que des fusils et autres baïonnettes... Sachant également que cette masse de courriers échangés, entre les soldats et leurs proches, pouvait devenir une arme.

Après guerre, il fut reconnu que les services postaux avaient contribué de manière conséquente, et, à leur manière, à l'effort de guerre.

Un nombre conséquent de postiers tombèrent aux combats, parmi eux, certains distingués de la prestigieuse Victoria Cross...

**Luc Pottiez / horizon14-18.eu  
juillet 2016**

DOCUMENT COMPLEMENTAIRE (en anglais)...

# Remembering our contribution



*First World War  
1914 - 1918*

*'...the service between channel  
ports under existing conditions is  
so rapid that the London morning  
newspapers are delivered in many  
instances on the day of publication'*

- Postmaster General Herbert Smith



# Content

- 4-5 **Post Office Rifles**  
'Distinguished hero'
- 6-7 **How the letters reached the front line**  
Five things to know about WWI
- 8-9 **Our war story**
- 10-11 **Power of the written word**  
MP Alan Johnson
- 12-13 **Victoria Cross for postal heroes**
- 14-15 **Diary of a soldier**  
War letters censored  
Keeping quiet

# Welcome

The First World War was a turning point in world history. It claimed the lives of more than 16 million people across the globe and had an impact on the lives of everyone.

The year 2014 marks the centenary of the First World War, an important anniversary for Britain and the world.

At the time of the First World War, Royal Mail was part of the General Post Office (GPO), along with what subsequently became British Telecommunications and Post Office Limited.

The GPO released more than 75,000 employees to fight in the war, including 12,000 men who fought with its own regiment, the Post Office Rifles. It contributed to military operations on a scale never seen before, providing an essential means of communication between the fighting lines and the Home Front.

The GPO also became one of the largest employers of women at the time, as tens of thousands were recruited to help keep the organisation running.

The events of the First World War had an unprecedented effect on the GPO and its people.

This booklet commemorates the role of the postal service during the war and the sacrifices made by postal workers.

*Special thanks to the BPMA for its assistance with research and kind permission to reproduce the images from its collection.*



London General Post Office  
(King Edward building)



The letter explains how EF Gaylor found the body of Captain Home Peel and, despite being the enemy, he thought he should communicate the sad news to his wife.

*‘Although enemy and sometimes deeply hurt by the ridiculous tone of your home press, I feel it as a human duty to communicate you these sad news’*



## ‘Distinguished hero’



Home Peel joined the 8<sup>th</sup> London Regiment in 1914

and was promoted to Captain in 1916. The Battalion was sent out to France in 1915, and for a short period in 1916 Peel was acting Lieutenant Colonel and in charge of the whole of the 1<sup>st</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

During his time at war, Peel took part in the Battle of Somme, and was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO), which was cited in the London Gazette on 1 January 1918, ‘for distinguished service in the field’.

He had previously been awarded a Military Cross for leading an attack on the German trenches at Festubert on 26 May 1915.



# Post Office Rifles

*The Post Office Rifles fought at Ypres, Festubert and the Somme, and suffered tremendous losses. More than half of the fighting force was lost at the Battle of Wurst Farm Ridge in September 1917*

**The General Post Office (GPO) actively encouraged its staff to join the war effort.**

More than 75,000 men left their jobs to fight in the First World War. Of these, 12,000 joined the GPO’s own regiment, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion City of London Regiment known as the Post Office Rifles.

Arriving in France on 18 March 1915, the Post Office Rifles served with distinction in the First World War.

By the end of the war, 1,800 men from the Post Office Rifles would be dead and 4,500 more would be wounded.

Their bravery, tenacity and

character, during the severe circumstances of the trenches, has earned the regiment high praise and a prestigious place in British military history.

For their services, members of the Post Office Rifles were awarded 145 decorations for gallantry, including one Victoria Cross, and 27 battle honours.

The Post Office Rifles lost 300 men during a single battle near Longueval in 1918. One of these was Captain Home Peel who was killed in

action on 24 March 1918.

In an act of kindness, a German soldier, EF Gaylor, sent a letter to Home Peel’s wife informing her of his death.

The soldier writes: ‘Although enemy and sometimes deeply hurt by the ridiculous tone of your home press, I feel it as a human duty to communicate you these sad news.’

‘Capt. Peel was killed in action near Longueval and died, as it seems by the wounds received, without suffering.’



## How the letters reached the front line

At the outbreak of war, a sorting office was created in London's Regent's Park called the Home Depot. It employed 2,500 staff, mainly women, to sort post.

The volume of mail to be processed was so large that they constructed what was said to be the largest wooden building in the world at the time.

From there, mail was shipped to Le Havre, Boulogne or Calais where the Royal Engineers Postal Section (REPS) was tasked with getting it to the battlefields. The REPS was staffed with just 250 men, which grew to 4,000 by the end of the war.

Despite the volume, the service was highly efficient.

On average it took only two days for a letter from Britain to reach the Western Front (unless it was held up by the censor).

As many soldiers had friends and relatives fighting in other units, an internal army Post Office system was set up in December 1914. It delivered mail to and from different parts of the front line and headquarters.

All countries involved in the war set up reciprocal agreements for the delivery of post to prisoners of war, free of charge.

The army also ran a fast and reliable pigeon post service. By 1918 there were 22,000 pigeons carrying post to the front.



*'...the service between channel ports under existing conditions is so rapid that the London morning newspapers are delivered in many instances on the day of publication, and reach the trenches on the following day.'* - Postmaster General Herbert Smith.



More than 2,500 staff helped sort mail at the Home Depot in Regent's Park.

## Five things to know about WWI

*Source: British Imperial Museum of History*

1. Britain produced nearly four million rifles, 250,000 machine guns, 52,000 aeroplanes, 2,800 tanks, 25,000 artillery pieces, and more than 170 million rounds of artillery shells by 1918.
2. Medical advances made the First World War the first major conflict in which British deaths in battle outnumbered deaths caused by disease.
3. The First World War left an estimated 16 million soldiers and civilians dead, and countless others physically and psychologically wounded. The war also altered the world's social and political landscape forever. It accelerated changes in attitudes towards gender and class.
4. The introduction of aircraft into war left soldiers and civilians vulnerable to attacks from above for the first time.
5. More than 65 million men volunteered or were conscripted to fight in mass citizen armies. Millions of civilians also contributed to the war effort by working in industry, agriculture or jobs left open when men enlisted.

# Our war story

During the war the General Post Office (GPO) became an institution operating postal, telegraphic, telephone and banking services, and controlled communication lines across the globe.

✉ **12.5 million letters** left the Home Depot every week

By the end of war  
**two billion letters**  
&  
**114 million parcels**  
had passed through  
**Regent's Park**

By 1918 there were 22,000 pigeons carrying post to the front line

**More than 11,000 GPO engineers**  
engaged in the constant work to maintain and keep the telephones and telegraphs in operation

**134 ships carrying post**  
were lost to enemy attack

**19,000 mailbags**  
crossed the channel every day

The GPO set up **telecommunications** between headquarters and the front line

By November 1916 more than 35,000 women were employed in temporary positions within the GPO, an increase of 33,000 since March 1915

**Just two days**  
for a letter to reach the front line

**375,000 letters CENSORED**  
each day at the height of the war

Flanders

Festubert

Somme

Battlefields Passchendaele and Ypres located north-east of the French border

**World War I**  
key battles

During the war, slogan cancellations were used for the first time, encouraging people to buy war bonds





Postal workers sorting mail for troops.

# Power of the written word

*The First World War was a turning point in world history, claiming the lives of more than 16 million people across the globe*

**The General Post Office (GPO) was already a huge operation before war broke out in 1914.**

It employed more than 250,000 people and had revenue of £32 million, making it the biggest economic enterprise in Britain, and the largest single employer in the world.

Telegraphs and telephones were the main means of communication between the front line and headquarters during battle. More than 11,000 GPO engineers

worked to make this possible throughout the war, using the skills they had acquired as civilians.

Writing and receiving letters and parcels were a vital part of sustaining morale and overcoming the boredom, which was a feature of trench life. Many were dedicated correspondents – infantryman Reg Sims, for example, wrote home: ‘In exactly twelve months I have received 167 letters besides paper

and parcels and have written 242 letters.’

At its peak during the war, it was dealing with an extra 12 million letters, and a million parcels being sent to soldiers every week.

On the eve of war, the GPO not only handled 5.9 billion items of post a year but was responsible for the nation’s telegraph and telephone systems, as well as providing savings banks and other municipal facilities.



## Former postman and MP Alan Johnson



In an article for the BBC, ex-postman and former home secretary Alan Johnson describes the postal service during the First World War as a ‘story of remarkable ingenuity and amazing courage’.

He says: ‘For fighting soldiers it was essential to morale and the British Army knew that. It considered delivering letters to the front as important as delivering rations and ammunition.’

Alan notes that the GPO was characterised by a pride in the ability to move millions of letters from anywhere to anywhere, safely and quickly.

‘This pride must have burned even fiercer in the men of the Royal Engineers (Postal Section) or REPS as it was universally known. This was a part-time reserve unit in peacetime made up of GPO men who had a smattering of military training.’

‘This unit of postal workers was immediately subsumed into the army when the First World War broke out, but the Army was only in nominal command. This operation was controlled by the GPO. Even questions in Parliament about forces’ mail were answered by the Postmaster General rather than the War Minister.’

‘The postal workers who went to war were probably glad to be handling letters and parcels rather than rifles and bayonets, but their truly magnificent work was as important to the war effort as the weapons.’

Alan says the work of postal workers at war was ‘truly magnificent’ and ‘as important to the war effort as the weapons’.

‘Mail exchanged between soldiers and loved ones was a weapon. Those who wielded it made a huge contribution to the outcome of the war,’ says Alan.

# Victoria Cross for postal heroes



*'A photograph case and a cigarette case probably saved my life from one bullet, which must have passed just under my armpit!'*

**The Victoria Cross (VC) is Britain's highest award for gallantry. It is awarded rarely, and issued only for the highest possible bravery.**

Many of the VC recipients lost their lives in the act that gained them the medal. The award was first conceived by Prince Albert, Consort to Queen Victoria, in recognition of the bravery of men of all ranks during the Crimean War.

During the First World War, four postal workers were awarded the VC.

Former clerical assistant Sergeant Alfred Knight, who referred to his survival as a 'miracle', was the only member of the Post Office Rifles to be awarded the VC.

Born at Ladywood in Birmingham in 1888, Alfred worked in the North Midland Engineering District and joined the Post Office Rifles shortly after the outbreak of the war.

He is remembered for his actions at the Battle of Wurst Farm Ridge in September 1917.

Alfred charged the enemy position and captured it single-handedly using his bayonet, showing no regard for his

personal safety. He took on 12 German soldiers, killing three and causing the rest to flee.

He recalled being fascinated 'by the pattern made all the way round me in the mud by the German bullets'.

'Bullets rattled on my steel helmet - there were several significant dents and one hole I found later - and part of a book was shot away in my pocket.

'A photograph case and a cigarette case probably saved my life from one bullet, which must have passed just under my armpit!'

Alfred was decorated with the VC for exceptional 'devotion to duty' at Buckingham Palace by King George V on 3 January 1918.

His days in uniform ended as a second lieutenant in the Sherwood Foresters. After the war, he returned to his Post Office career and in 1920 he transferred to the Ministry of Labour.

Alfred died in Birmingham on 4 December 1960, at the age of 72. He is buried in Oscott Catholic Cemetery in Birmingham, and the city's Alfred Knight Way is named in his honour.

(Pictured left) Sergeant Knight with the mayor of Birmingham at a civic reception on 17 November 1917. (Pictured right) the Victoria Cross medal.



## Other recipients include:

**Sgt Albert Gill**, a GPO employee from Birmingham, was killed in action in 1916. He faced down the enemy, despite knowing it meant certain death, to hold up an advance.

**Major Henry Kelly** worked for the GPO at a sorting office in Manchester at the outbreak of war. He was awarded the VC after conspicuous bravery during an attack in Le Sars, France. Under heavy fire he led three men into an enemy trench, and then, when forced to retreat as enemy reinforcements arrived, he carried his wounded Company Sergeant Major to safety. Major Kelly continued to work for the GPO after the war.

**Sgt John Hogan**, a postman from Oldham, was 30 years old, and a sergeant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Manchester Regiment, British Army during the First World War. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for great courage under fire on 29 October 1914 near Festubert, France.

# Diary of a soldier - Thomas May

*The soldier describes the anxiety and terror of life on the front line*

**Thomas May joined the General Post Office (GPO) in 1910 as a postman.**



before he left for France in 1915.

The diary itself is written by Thomas in pencil, and runs from 17

**Two years later he joined the Post Office Rifles at the age of 20.**

He survived the war and returned to work at the GPO, rising from postman to assistant superintendent by the time of his death in 1953.

Many of May's personal items were donated to The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA), including a green leather-bound pocket journal given to May

March to 9 July 1915, covering his posting to France, including the battle of Festubert.

The diary also includes a map of Flanders, various helpful French and German phrases, a calendar for the year 1915, and different methods of working out your position in day and night - all to aid the soldier should he get lost or separated from his battalion.



Page from Sergeant Thomas May's diary written in pencil between March and July 1915 while a member of the Post Office Rifles, with details of his daily life, including thoughts on 'going over the top'.

## Extracts from diary

Much of the diary describes the drudgery of daily life on the Western Front. However, it also conveys a real sense of the fears and reality of fighting:

*'While at dinner a shell fell 20 yards away killing five Herts Territorials. For once had a good dinner, but was spoilt owing to the horrible sight.'*  
(29 March 1915)

*'Later on in the day a shell burst just by me and flung me right down on the traverse, the only damage it done was wounding a comrade sitting the other side of me and tearing several parts of my equipment.'*  
(26 May 1915)

You can read more about the BPMA's collection at [www.postalheritage.org](http://www.postalheritage.org) and about its planned new national Postal Museum at [www.postalmuseum.org](http://www.postalmuseum.org)

# War letters censored

*Forbidden subjects were either ripped out of letters or scribbled out. If mail carried explicit information it was destroyed*



**In addition to the responsibility of providing a postal service to front line soldiers and sailors, the Post Office took on the role of censor.**

At the beginning of the war, there was only one person employed in censorship, but by

November 1918, 5,000 people were involved.

The role of the postal censor became very important as even innocent comments in letters could provide vital information for the enemy on troop positions, movements and battle plans.

Signs of low morale in letters could also boost the morale of the enemy.

Letters would be opened by official censors at one of the base Post Offices at Le Havre, and later Boulogne, to ensure vital military secrets were not given away.

## Keeping quiet

**Field Service postcards were issued to troops on the front line from November 1914.**

These postcards had options for the individual to select between a series of simple statements, such as 'I am quite well' or 'I have received your letter'. It was to ensure that troops were only giving the most basic details to family and

friends back home.

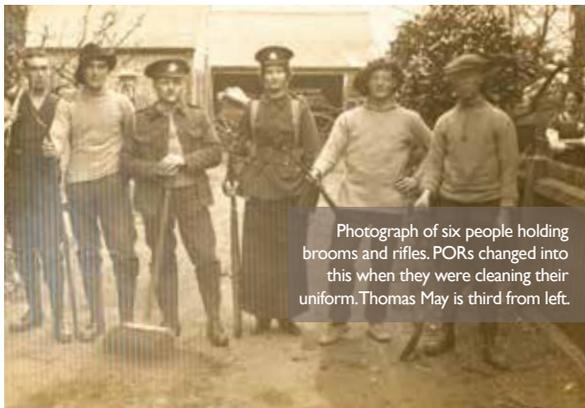
Soldiers could avoid the postal censor by signing an 'honour envelope' confirming that the contents of the letter did not reveal military information.

It stated: 'I certify on my honour

that the contents of this envelope refer to nothing but private and family matters.' This meant the mail would not be censored at the army base, but it would be censored when it reached home.



Soldiers signed honour envelopes to avoid censorship.



Photograph of six people holding brooms and rifles. PORs changed into this when they were cleaning their uniform. Thomas May is third from left.