

HISTORY OF THE 14 MAP REPRODUCTION SECTION ROYAL ENGINEERS.

14 Map Reproduction Section R.E.
B.L.A.

The enclosed Unit History of 14 Map Reproduction Section R.E. is sent with my compliments and best wishes.

Copies are being sent to all who have been or are members of the Unit, and also to others with whom we have come into contact and who may be interested to note the results of their help and cooperations.

Once more I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all those whose loyalty and support have enabled me "to carry on" as O.C. and who made possible our Unit's contribution to the Allied war effort.

B.B. Titchener
Capt. R.E.

August 1945.

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EDITOR SJT A.C. BOURNE

ILLUSTRATED BY
SPR. M.W. TURNER
SPR. M. WESTERN

1943 - 1945

FOREWORD

MESSAGE FROM THE O.C.

It is as a great privilege and pleasure to write this Foreword for our Unit history, as it has been to direct its activities since its inception.

In this latter task I have had the loyal service and co-operation of Officers and Men, who have made possible the rather unusual output and activity of the Unit.

We have achieved many things not attempted or done by other Survey Units, as the following pages shew, for example, moving location by route march, building our own camp from scratch, printing within S.A. range of the enemy, and in Antwerp creating and operating a civil section with 300 civil employees.

For all this I thank my various Officers and the manager of the civil section, together with all others whose enthusiasm and loyalty have made our production possible.

I should also like to record the Unit's pleasure at serving under the operational command of Brig. A. Prain, Director of Survey, 21 Army Group, whose personality ensured the maximum effort from us all. I must also mention our local Administration H.Q.'s, Dorking Sub Dist in U.K. and H.Q. 7 Base Sub Area in B.L.A., whose Staff Officers have consistently given me the greatest possible support, often in trying circumstances.

Finally to those of us who will soon be leaving the Services, I say we have the satisfaction of knowing we were part of a job well done, to those younger men who will serve in other theatres "Good Luck" and to all, happy memories of 14 M.R.S.

B.B. Titchener
Capt. R.E.

July 1945

Kingswood.

Svyhist 14 Map Reproduction Section

On April 20th 1943 the 14 Map Reproduction Section R.E. was born. This event occurred at the home of all Survey Units, the Survey Training Centre, now at Ruabon, Denbighshire, N. Wales.

Who, among those present, mostly with a sojourn of only six months in the Army, will ever forget that first unit parade, when we made the acquaintance of Lt. R.K. Allen R.E.! Her violently dispelled any illusions we may have had about our capabilities as soldiers, and warned us of the terrible times that were to follow. Talk about 'blood, sweat and tears'! We were promised a really rough time - come to think of it, he wasn't far out either.

Our trials and tribulations started almost from the first day, when we experienced three changes of camp at Ruabon in one day, finally settling down in the mortuary, fortunately devoid of other customers.

Early in May 1943 Lieutenant Allen and a small party left for Chessington to erect printing machines for the Ordnance Survey.

In 12th May, the O.C., Capt. B.B. Titchener, R.E., returned to the unit at Ruabon from a course at the School of Administration Naworth, after extensive travels during the previous war years.

A small advance party travelled to Coombelands, Addlestone, Surrey, the home of the General Svy. Sections, and erected tents for the main body which arrived on May 15th. Our co-operate life together had started.

Whilst waiting for our movement orders to pour final location from the "higher Svy Formation", most of the unit personnel were occupied with general duties, but the draughtsmen and the photo writers were loaned to the G.S. sections to assist them on their Air Survey programme, which proved to be a most interesting and instructive experience.

On being re-joined by Lt. Allen and his party, the unit moved to what was to be our home until joining the B.L.A.

No transport being available, the move was made by a two day route march to Little Wonford Poultry Farm, Lower Kingswood, Surrey, adjacent to the Windmill Press of Messrs W. Heinemann.

This was one of the early instances of our unit initiative, t being the only case of a Svy Unit moving location on foot.

The M.O., and A.D. Svy SECO took a fatherly interest in us en route, whilst our officers harangued us during the 210 minute per hour" halts.

The second day's march was enlivened by a battle crossing of the River Mole and a 5 mile race to the top of Box Hill.

Derelect, and with grass waist high, the Poultry Farm presented a disheartening sight to the lads as they marched in. The advance party had already erected tents, into which everyone wearily crawled, but this was only the start of our troubles, for the days that followed proved to be the most testing time that any new unit could have had. From this derelect farm, an efficient clean orderly Army camp was to be constructed by "Unit Labour", and here was where the 'blood, sweat and tears' came in. First of all came the heartbreaking job of clearing the camp area of grass; this was done by sickles and scythes, and was accompanied by many blisters and aching backs. Then arose the problem of drainage, and for those who are interested in statistics it may be stated that over half a mile of field drains were laid under the camp. Temporarily, accommodation, after our tents had been twice flooded out, was provided at "The White House" for personnel, whilst completing the camp. This entailed daily marches to and from the camp, and everybody toiled on the average 12 hours a day - not at all funny at first, but it served as a good toughening up course for us all.

To give a detailed account of all the troubles and triumphs that went to make the building of this camp possible, would entail using much more space than can be spared, so here is a brief summary. Six disused Nissen huts were dismantled from their site, transported to Kingswood and re-erected.

Hundreds of stone slabs were man-handled into position as floors of the huts. Dozens of trips were made to the Croydon Gas Works to collect clinker for the surface of the 'square' and the road leading to the Windmill Press, our technical location in part of Messrs. Heinemann's premises. Bricks, cement and sand had to be obtained and put to their respective uses.

Naturally, with the lack of experienced tradesmen in building, mistakes were made, work had to be done twice, the best method was not always used, but by the end of September, the unit personnel, unaided, had built a camp that would have been a credit to the R.E. Works Company in the short space of four months.

In the spacious, well lit, modern premises of the Windmill Press the Section next tackled the task of erecting and installing all their technical equipment and by the end of October the unit was in production for the first time, and during the month of November over a million impressions were turned out.

Then followed, under the command of 21 Army Group, what was probably the most important period in the technical and Security history of the unit - the pre-'D' Day operational printing programme. Although, to a large degree inexperienced, the technical personnel of the unit did remarkably well to carry out the very heavy, and highly important military printing commitments. Part of this work, the planning, drawing, printing and binding of the European Town Plan booklets, entailed a fair degree of skill and practice. On the research side it is worth mentioning that the laying of shadium mediums on bromide prints was successfully undertaken by the draughtsmen. A series of photographic maps were printed in half-tone - work normally outside the scope of the young machine minders - in large quantities and high quality. It is still not possible to give details of our highly secret planning publications, but it is gratifying to see how closely our C-in-C has followed in the B.L.A., the operational programmes printed by us. This programme of work proceeded at full pressure until June 11th when the technical production of the Section in U.K. officially closed down.

Dances, whist drives and a unit concert party constituted the entertainment side of our life, while recreation in the form of physical training and football was a regular feature. In the month of March a comprehensive military training programme including mines and booby traps was undergone by all personnel and in January Sjts. Baker, Dyson, Longland and Witt went on a cadre course with a Beach Group. During the camp construction half of the unit left the section to take part in a big military exercise.

Whilst on the Westcott Firing Ranges the news reached us that Allied landings had been made in Normandie and 'D' Day had at last arrived! The following weeks of June and early July were spent in trial packing and re-erection, and also acting as 'hotelier' to the 13 M.R.S. whose London premises had been damaged by enemy action.

The move of the unit overseas started with the departure on July 17th of the advance party under command of O.C. Eventually they landed in the B.L.A. at 0200 hrs on 25th July by driving their transport through the surf to the beach. For the next week the O.C. was engaged in finding a suitable location for the unit.

The main body of the unit, under command of Lt. Allen R.E., left on July 22, crossed the Channel safely and landed at the famous artificial harbour of Arromanches. The remainder of the unit and transport crossed later under the command of Lt. R. West R.E. Then followed a period of uncertainty until Lt. Allen eventually obtained movement orders from D.D. Svy 2 Army, and the party joined 15 M.R.S. at Crouay, not however until a slight confusion with the town of Creully had been straightened out.

Most members of the unit will remember the nights in the field at the back of the farm watching the red tracer bullets flying up at the Jerry planes, and also the terrific procession of our bombers on their way to obliterate Caen. Little did any of us think that we would be stationed in that battered town within a few days.

CAEN

Almost reduced to a heap of rubble, and with hardly a habitable building in the whole town, Caen was an extremely difficult place in which to find a suitable location for a Map Reproduction Section.

However, the O.C., acting on the wise and age old adage that possessions nine points of the law, installed an advance party in a modern warehouse situated in Mandeville, a village about a mile S.E. of the town itself. The premises of "Les Cooperateurs de Normandie", merchants in groceries, dry-goods, wines and cider, was to be our home from 7th of August until 4th of November.

The factory was in reasonably good repair. Having suffered only comparatively slight shell damage which did not seriously inconvenience the unit. The holes in the walls, the missing windows, blackouts, etc., were all repaired, ablutions, latrines etc., constructed, again, as in U.K., largely by unit personnel, who by this time, could take little things like that in their stride.

The only job the unit could not tackle was the removal of a 15-inch shell from one of our own battleships which crashed into the building and buried itself in the basement during the pre-'D' Day bombardment.

The building with its spacious loading bays, extensive hardstanding for transport, garages, etc., was ideal from both the technical and accommodation points of view.

The only disadvantage, if it could be called one, was the proximity of enemy lines and panzer divisions only 2000 yards away. When the unit first arrived, it found itself hourly subject to shelling. The fact that batteries of our own artillery of varying calibres were located around us, crashing and banging all day, together with enemy counter-battery fire, gave the unit its nearest approach to warfare, and many of the lads had a few sleepless nights until they got used to the new conditions. Incidentally, the only glimpse of enemy territory that some Staff Officers from the War Office have had was from the top of our water tower.

An incident which will stay vividly in our memories was the time when some over-enthusiastic Fortresses, dropped their bombs on a vehicle park and a steel work uncomfortably near "Les Cooperateurs". Whether their bombing was by accident or whether the bombs were jettisoned after the planes being hit by gunfire, we never properly ascertained, but the result was hellish noisy and damned unpleasant.

This location is the only instance in this war of a semi-base Survey unit operating so close to the enemy, and consequently the usual administration authorities for occupation of premises were more than usually difficult to obtain. Eventually after D. Svy 21 A. Gp. Had visited Comdr 7 B.S.A., all was arranged and our relations with the latter formation have remained continuously cordial.

The unit moved in on August 7th, as usual, having to beg, borrow or steal sufficient transport for the move. In those early days of the battle of France, transport was virtually at a premium, and the unit was assisted in the move from Crouay by the loan of trucks from 869 Mech. Equipt. (Tn) Coy. R.E., and the R.A.F. Squadron that provided the crane. By dint of much pushin' and shovin' the complete machinery was erected and in running order by 20 August, including the improvisation of a water supply. Apart from the considerable amount of work entailed in the cleaning up of the factory, great interest and not a little speculation was aroused by the efforts of Cpls. Snelling and Jarman to repair the well and water pumping installations. This work inspired the poem from the pen of Lt. R.K. Allen, R.E. reprinted here from the R.E.VIEW, our unit newspaper which first saw the light of day as a wall-board at Caen.

Most of those who were at Caen will remember the heat wave and the plague of flies and mosquitoes only too vividly. As a result of these pests, the health of the unit suffered badly, and in the month of August the sickness incidence averaged 15%, this however was much better than many other adjacent units. Great care had to be taken to maintain scrupulous cleanliness around the location, especially the area adjacent to the cookhouse. This was made all the more difficult by the many barrels of rotting fruit and the vats of wine that were found to be everywhere, which, when removed, made a marked difference to the general demeanour of the personnel, and reduced the number of flies and mosquitoes. The following month saw the unit in full operational production, and with the sickness down to 4% the unit was in a much happier frame of mind, both for work and play. On the work side a total of 2,073,600 cylinder impressions was recorded. Also an immense amount of work was given to unit personnel by the "transit" Survey units which parked themselves on us for periods varying from 3 days to 3 weeks. Accommodating them, collecting, collating and forwarding their stores kept all hands very busy, but the resulting thanks from most of these units made us feel our efforts were well worth while. This extra travail continued up till the 24th October by which time, after a monthly total of 2,200,000 impressions, all technical production ceased, and packing preparatory to another move was commenced. The advance party left for Antwerp on 20th September, after the O.C. had made a preliminary recce of that great port.

On the lighter side, much was done, both by the unit itself and by ENSA. Football matches, impromptu concerts and a series of whist drives were the unit's efforts at entertaining itself and the Garrison cinema and theatre in Caen were very much appreciated.

On October 30th the second advance party left for Belgium and packing of equipment and stores was continued until its completion on November 2nd. Once again the transport difficulty reared its ugly head and it was only after considerable negotiation that the unit moved to Antwerp between 4th and 9th of November.

ANTWERP

From the windmills of Surrey to the windmills of Belgium seems a long journey, but that was the trip accomplished by our Section. Antwerp, the most strategically important port in the European War, was the end of our trail in this theatre and, owing to the swiftness of Field Marshal Montgomery's advance, we found the city almost untouched by battle - a vivid contrast to Caen. Here all the amenities of a big continental city were, for the first few weeks, available to all of us; cafes, cinemas, theatres, shops, trams, ice-cream and fruit and all the things that our unit had so sorely missed since it left Blighty. Add to this, the almost embarrassing welcome that the Belgian people accorded to us, and it is not difficult to understand why the lads thought they were in Heaven, in spite of the several talks which the O.C. had given up in Caen, regarding the true conditions in Antwerp.

Once again, as at Caen, we were very close to the German lines - the north bank of the Albert Canal was still occupied by the enemy - and those in the advance party well remember the nightly sorties by the White Brigade (the Belgian Resistance Movement) in their queer white robes.

Here, perhaps it will be as well to let one of the advance party speak for himself: -

“In the early hours of 29th September I have vivid recollections of being awakened, cold and shivering to hear people whispering such phrases as ‘We’re moving up’ and ‘this is it’; the darkness relieved by the madly swinging lamp in the back of the 3 tonner; the long journey through France and Belgium and the search for the O.C. who was eventually run to earth in Brussels. He took us to Antwerp, and before our truck rolled to a standstill we found ourselves the victims of a Pompstraat reception, the children nearly overturning the 3 tonner by sheer weight of numbers. Bedding was showered on us, and sleeping conditions were not far removed from the Ritz that night. The next night, in the search for beds we drove far from ‘home’, and either the sound of the truck’s weary engine or the light from the lamp, attracted the unwelcome attention of the enemy and we were greeted by a shower of tracer bullets! Needless to say, the turn round was accomplished in record time and with the lamp extinguished we raced back to the new Billet, bedless!

In these early days of the occupation of Antwerp by Allied troops it seemed strange to be suddenly confronted by a couple of anxious Mothers whose sole desire was that a “Tommy” should shake the hands of their offspring. The first café that I entered was eight cognacs deficient (and a civilian policeman about 320 francs) when I left, and at another, a bottle of champagne was shared between four of us. Such was the warmth of people’s welcome.

During the first weeks of our “occupation” of Patria we had to guard the building against all comers, and many were the ‘big noises’ that we turned away. We slept in what was to be the O.C.’s office (one day eating his special biscuits). Food was very short and we, like the civilian population, gorged ourselves on grapes and pears, in place of more solid stuff. A small vehicle and a small store of rations were always kept in readiness in case the advance party had to retreat hurriedly - in those days, a distinct possibility - and we were very relieved when the rest of the unit arrived, bringing with them supplies of cigarettes and money, the commodities that we had little of’.

The O.C. had, for some weeks been journeying back and forth from Caen to Antwerp, where he was instructed to requisition premises for four separate Survey Units; for our unit he requisitioned the premises of N.V. Patria, at 2/14 Pompstraat, chiefly remarkable before our arrival as the printing premises of the largest newspaper in Belgium “DE DAG”. This Patria-building contained all the machinery and equipment needed for the production of a newspaper by rotary letterpress and several magazines by letterpress photogravure and also general jobbing printing by litho and letterpress. He arranged that the litho machines should be operated for map printing by civilian labour before our military manpower left Caen.

Early in November our main convoy of personnel and equipment from Caen arrived in Antwerp after the usual difficulties in obtaining transport to move the unit.

The arrival of the convoy with personnel and equipment at Pompstraat, which is in the old slums of Antwerp with very narrow cobbled streets, presented a problem owing to the narrow access and small entrances. By a very carefully worked out system of direction of approach under the control of the military police, the trucks of the various sections of the convoy were unloaded without much time being lost, although the usual difficulty of obtaining a crane caused some delay. By 16th November all the equipment had been erected and all stores unloaded - an overall time of 7 days.

Our production was organised as the normal military section in a separate part of the building producing security and secret work. In another part of the building the civilians operating the civilian plant were organized as a civil printing section for non-security work. It soon became obvious that a central civil control was essential, so through the contact with Etablissements Plantin the services of the technical Director of the “British American Tobacco Printing Works” were obtained. Monsieur Emile Tricot commenced his duties on the 23rd October and has been in control of the civil section ever since.

By the end of November this combination of military and civil printing personnel was in full production working 24 hours per day in three shifts of 8 hours each. The civilian section was operating three one-colour quad crown offset machines and during the month printed 289,900 impressions, the military figures for this period being 1,280,000, a total of 1,569,000 for November. The letterpress facilities were used to a limited degree in military work and also to print the first copy of the R.E.VIEW in magazine form, as opposed to the wall-board with which we were familiar at Caen. The month of December was remarkable for the highest monthly total of cylinder impressions by our machines, no less than 2,340,500. This figure together with the civilians 970,000 showed that from five double demy offset machines nearly 1000 impressions per hour, per machine were maintained throughout the month, including all time spent on plate changes, make ready, wash-up and maintenance - a fine performance.

This month, Christmas and early January were enlivened by the progress of the German offensive under von Rundstedt in the Ardennes which had as its objective the port of Antwerp. Various

preparations were made by the unit in case these unwelcome visitors should reach our neighbourhood, but fortunately the attack was completely defeated and we were able to return to a more normal life. Normal life in Antwerp between October 1944 and March 1945 meant living under a continuous bombardment of flying bombs and rockets. For the German High Command had decided that they must try to destroy Antwerp and use the V-1 and V-2 projectiles for the purpose. The town rapidly emptied of all civilians not actually engaged on military work and with sufficient means to clear out, and during the long bitterly cold winter with snow and ice on the streets the remaining population was subjected to a bombardment of 2441 V-1 and 1261 V-2's. Against the V-1's our closely packed anti-aircraft barrage was very successful but against the V-2's there was no defence and it only remained for rescue parties to clear up what they could of the resulting mess. The nearest incident occurred about 150 yards from our location and the unit rescue party under Sgt. Baker put in some good work. Incidentally this was mentioned in the local military newspaper, a quotation from which appears elsewhere. During this period cinemas and theatres closed, life became rather grim and the fact of living and working under the menace of these ever increasing missiles was unpleasant, to put it mildly. However the enemy's efforts did not stop the lads from celebrating Christmas in the usual Army manner, decorating for the occasion being handled by the draughtsmen.

The continuous three eight-hour shifts per day per week maintained a satisfactory printing output during January, February and March, when a big new programme was commenced. Owing to the shortage of paper for printing maps it became necessary to CANCEL the face of existing maps, trim the paper to a new size and despatch to forward units for printing maps on the back of the existing one. Our work consisted of collecting captured German maps from various depots, opening the bales, flattening, then printing the repetitive word "Cancelled" on the face of the existing maps, cutting to the new size, wrapping and packing in wooden cases made for us for delivery to our forward supply depots. The target figure achieved monthly was 4,000,000 sheets which meant 45 to 50 tons per week. Naturally, this additional burden on the unit's resources necessitated the occupation of additional premises and the engagement of further civilian labour. Two extensive warehouses were taken over for this purpose, and an additional 150 civilians were employed making a total of nearly 300.

These persons together with our unit which received an increased war establishment and attached pioneers gave the O.C. continuous control of 400 persons, a very far cry from the small self-contained printing unit envisaged two years previously.

May and June were our chief production months for impressions per 24 hours. The graphs on page 32 show the number of impressions per 24 hours. These are "nett" figures and do not include "overs", setting sheets, and impressions on paper smaller than "double Demy" or the large amount of semi official letterpress printing undertaken by the civil section. One of the latter items has been all the letterpress printing used by the "labour" services of Antwerp, i.e. the whole of the civil labour employed by the Allies in Antwerp since the Liberation, has been operating only on "bumph" printed by us, and could not have continued without our efforts.

Another important work has been the 7 Base Sub Area news-sheet BASIC, printed by us 7 nights per week without a single failure during the whole of the V-1 and V-2 bombardment. There have been special VE-Day, Montgomery and Sunday editions.

The announcement that privilege leave was to commence in the B.L.A. raised the hopes of all of us, but they were soon to be dashed, in the usual Army manner, when we found that we would have to wait three or four months. Nevertheless everyone was very enthusiastic over the leave ballot and by the end of June all members of the unit had enjoyed that precious but all too short seven days in Blighty.

The welfare and recreation of the unit owing to the heavy operational programme has been of a rather patchy nature, but dances had been held and the unit football team, playing in the local sub-area league, had many successes and finished third at the end of the season.

Then came that day of all days : V-E day - and the unit proceeded to celebrate in no uncertain manner. All ranks were free of duty, and the P.R.I. funds provided for two beers and 100 cigarettes for every man. The Patria Works were beflagged and effectively floodlit for the whole of V-E Week, incidentally, the only unit premises in Antwerp to be so treated, this caused quite a stir among the surrounding civilians.

Now, in July, all of us are doing a job that none of us like - waiting. Some of us waiting for demobilisation, happy thought: others waiting to continue their Army life in the Far or Middle Eastern theatres, all of us anxious to get the whole horrible affair over and to return to our civvy clothes once again. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we shall find it impossible to forget our experiences in the 14 Map Reproduction Section; and although at times, like every one else, we have been "browned off", there will always be a fund of happy memories, and a host of good friends, that will make very pleasant recollections in the many years of peace we all hope to enjoy.

Svyhist 14 Map Reproduction Section

This proverb was confirmed once more when he was successful in arranging our large “cancellation” programme for which two large extra premises and many more tradesmen were necessary, and in a record time the new organisation was in full production.

I must mention also that I have never appealed in vain to my civil section personnel for devotion to duty; during all the V1 and V2 bombardment everybody stood to his post and the falling of these missiles did not affect our production at any time.

Every one of us understood we had to give our full support to the immense Allied war effort, and this was our way of proving our gratitude to our British friends.

E. Tricot
Manager

14 M.R.S. SONG.

Composes as a chorus song for the concert party at Kingswood.

Verse : -

If you wonder who we are,
What we're doing to win the war;
We'll try to tell you
In rhyme and song,
Don't go away! It won't take long!

Chorus

We're the 14 Map Reproduction Section
Branch of the Royal Engineers.
We don't do much fighting,
Our job's not exciting;
But we are the chaps,
Who print all the maps,
By which the Army steers.
We've a camera, press and a drawing board,
And the pen they say, is mightier than the sword.
Our double demy's,
Will win a big prize
For this branch of the Royal Engineers.