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SIGNALLING AND AMBULANCE WORK.

[R. W. Thomas, Cheapside.

SOLDIERS ON CYCLES.

BY FRANK ORWELL.

Illustrated from Photographs.



THE conservatism of our War Office authorities is proverbial. Innovations or radical changes are regarded askance by those who control the destinies of our military. The result of this fear of the unorthodox sometimes means that we only begin to think about introducing a certain new feature into

our Army when other more enterprising nations have utilised it for several years. When the idea was first mooted by Colonel Stracey, of the Scots Guards, of the potentialities of the cycle in case of war, "my lords of Pall Mall" considered the suggestion as the idiosyncrasy of some fertile but irresponsible brain, and treated it accordingly. But Colonel Savile, another ardent devotee of the wheel and one of the early

promoters of military cycling, hammered away upon this pet theory with commendable persistency and energy, so that now, after some twelve years' spasmodic though successful efforts on the part of one or two Volunteer corps, during which time the cycle has adequately proved its indispensability and efficacy in certain branches of work upon the battlefield, the authorities have decided to adopt the idea and to establish drilled cycling corps in the regular Army.

The history of the military cycling movement may be said to have commenced in 1887. It occurred to Colonel Stracey that military cyclists would be exceptionally useful for reconnaissance, skirmishing, and similar work, while in the conveyance of despatches and obtaining of information they would be vastly superior to the existing methods, often carried on under



MAJOR LILES.

(Commanding officer, 26th Middlesex Cyclist Volunteers.)



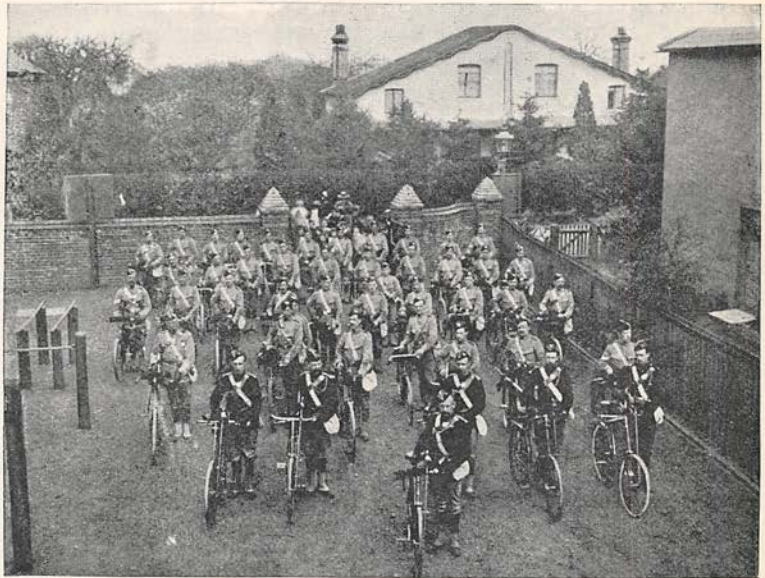
SERGT.-MAJOR SENIOR.
(Drill-instructor of the
26th Middlesex Cyclist
Volunteers.)

adverse circumstances. He was a well known cyclist himself, and it was not long before he obtained the co-operation of other enthusiasts, the most important being Colonel Savile, who was at that time Professor of Tactics at the Military College, Sandhurst. A communication was sent round to various Volunteer corps, requesting all those Volunteers who were cyclists and who felt so disposed to bring their machines with them to the Volunteer manoeuvres in East Kent at Easter, 1887, to see if the scheme were at all practicable. It was a motley gathering. The unwieldy "ordinary" was just being superseded by the now ubiquitous "safety," but the former style of machine predominated, though there were one or two safeties—of the obsolete bone-shaker pattern—with a sprinkling of tricycles. All, of course, were supplied with the solid tyres, as the more comfortable pneumatic was unknown in those days. But, ill-assorted though the array was, it sufficiently convinced Colonel Stracey and his coadjutors of the feasibility of their scheme.

The matter was now laid before the War Office, who promptly put a wet blanket upon it, yet granted permission to the Volunteer corps, if they felt inclined, to organise a cycling section, though no financial assistance was to be forwarded from the Government towards the support of such a body.

On April 1st—not generally regarded as an auspicious date—1888, was founded the first military Volunteer cycling corps, the 26th Middlesex. Unlike the other cycling sections since formed, this corps is not attached to any battalion of infantry Volunteers, being a cycling Volunteer corps simply and independently. To-day it is the largest, smartest, and most efficient corps in the country, and it is mainly due to its exertions that the War Office has been induced ultimately to adopt the cycle in connection with the Regular

services. Although not attached to any particular battalion, this corps always accompanies the South London Brigade upon its marches. At the present moment it can mobilise a force of 120 men. It is a curious circumstance, that when this corps was founded, it applied in the natural course of things to the War Office for an official drill; but even this formality was denied the cyclists, and they were thus compelled to formulate their own drill. Colonel Savile, when he severed his connection with the Regular forces, held the commandship of this corps for two years. When Lord Wolseley stepped into the position of Commander-in-Chief of the British Army vacated



A RECENT PARADE OF THE 26TH MIDDLESEX.

by the Duke of Cambridge, it was anticipated that some concession to the cyclists would be made, as Lord Wolseley had declared "that they would be invaluable, especially upon the fine roads in India." But the anticipation was not realised, and it was only recently that the Army authorities relented, and now propose to draw a certain number of men from the Regulars and thoroughly to inculcate them in cycling drill at Aldershot.

Any Volunteer corps is now at liberty, if it can, to raise a cycling section, which, by the way, must be at least twenty-one strong—twenty men and an officer. As the Volunteer cyclist receives no subsidy whatever from the Government, he is left free to select the style of machine that appeals most particularly

to his fancy. But any standard pattern, so long as it is strong and durable, and averaging between 25 and 30 lbs. in weight, is suitable. It must be fitted with a brake, and also mud-guards to preserve the uniforms of the riders. The machine is thoroughly overhauled and examined by the corps' cycling mechanic, and if it survives his captious scrutiny, is stamped as good for service. Skilled cycling mechanics are attached to the corps in case of any accident. The Government does not recompense a man for any damage his machine may sustain while actually on service, and, in order that the owners may suffer no pecuniary loss through reparation of accidents while the machines are serving an unappreciative State, the expense is borne by the staff fund of the corps. If the machine is doctored by an outside repairer, the staff mechanic quotes a figure which in his estimation is sufficient to cover the cost of repair, and this is paid out of the fund. Any difference there may be has to be settled by the owner himself.

Before entering the cycling corps the cyclists have to undergo the regulation infantry drill, after which follows instruction in the cycling drill. The latter is very similar to that of the foot soldiers, with one or two ameliorations which are impossible to men mounted on cycles, such as "marking time."

The cyclist's equipment, although as compact as possible, is still weighty, but being well distributed over the machine, does not cause much inconvenience. His Lee-Metford rifle, which alone, with the magazine, weighs about 9½ lbs. unloaded, is adjusted securely to the top bar of the frame of the machine by means of clips; in his belt are carried the pouches containing about 200 rounds of ammunition, while another similar supply is also conveyed on the machine; his haversack and water-bottle are suspended by means of a kind of brace over his shoulder, and his chest is left free from any encircling trappings which might hamper his breathing facilities. On the handle bar his valise is strapped, while an indispensable part of his accoutrement is a complete repairing outfit, comprising wrenches, tyre-mending necessities, inflator, etc.

In action a battalion of cyclists require a large amount of space, so that the manœuvres may be executed smartly. When extended in a lateral line, one yard must be left between each man to enable him to ground his machine without clashing with his neighbour. When marching in file, or

single file—that is, one behind the other in one longitudinal line—a distance of one foot at the least, or, as it is called in the military vernacular, a "cycle distance," must be regulated between each cycle. As may be naturally supposed, to maintain anything like order and uniformity the speed of marching has to be gauged by the pace of the slowest rider; but the average marching speed is about ten miles per hour. This fluctuates, however, according to the conditions of the road and weather. It is almost impossible to maintain an absolutely compact order, as accidents to the machine, such as a puncture, compel a man to drop out. As a rule, while *en route* the cyclists "march at ease," and, although they may not leave their positions, they have a little more latitude extended to them than the ordinary soldiers, being permitted to talk and to smoke.

In the event of a machine becoming temporarily disorganised, the cyclist falls out of the column and reports himself to the officer in command of the rearguard, with whom travel the cycling mechanics and stretcher bearers. The mechanics take the machine in hand and repair the damage, the battalion continuing its journey as if nothing had happened. When the accident has been repaired the cyclist has to scorch along in order to catch up with the main body, though he is not permitted to fall into the ranks again until the company halts. If it be only his driving-gear that has become disorganised, he is taken in tow until the next halting place is reached, when the damage is repaired.

At first sight, it must be confessed, the military cyclist does not appear to be a very formidable foe, yet he is a great mainstay to the infantry which he supports, and to which he constitutes the advance guard. In the first place, he has two great characteristics in his favour. He is very difficult to hit, owing to the remarkable celerity with which he moves and the small target he offers to the opposing party. The only way to bring him to the ground is by seriously wounding him—in short, knocking him off his machine, for it is well nigh impossible to incapacitate the cycle. When he is hotly pursued, nothing but an utter collapse of his steel steed will effectively stop him, for if his tyre becomes punctured he can still ride along without much inconvenience upon the rims of the wheels, which, although it may be detrimental to the cycle, is of secondary importance in a matter of life or death.

Then, again, a body of cyclists may prove a great source of anxiety and trouble to cavalry and harass them exceedingly, whether it be while advancing or retiring. Cavalry depend mostly for their success upon "shock action"—that is, the tremendous force with which they hurl themselves into a body of infantry, and their vigorous usage of the sword. The result is, that unless the infantry are well supported, they are thrown into confusion and cut to

numerical strength being at the same time reduced considerably by the intermittent and deadly rifle volleys. Nothing demoralises

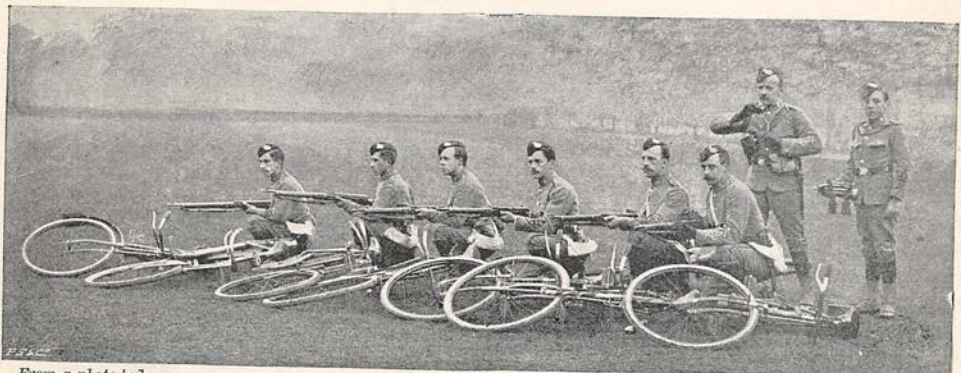
cavalry so much as to find that they cannot get to close quarters with their enemy. Then there is another disadvantage under which they labour. Supposing they wish to dismount in order to use their carbines, one man out of every four must hold the bridles of the horses of his three comrades, so that their attacking force is

thereby reduced by 25 per cent. Even when driven to bay, a *posse* of cyclists is by no means a despicable foe. In this eventuality they take up their position behind the grounded cycles, from whence they can maintain a terrible rifle fire. One hundred cyclists in such a position could fire about 40,000 rounds, so that they could account



CYCLISTS SIGNALING BY HELIOGRAPH.

pieces. But with a company of cyclists it is different. The cyclists have plenty of room in which to move, and if compelled by force of numbers to retire, after discharging a volley at the onrushing cavalry, can in a moment mount their machines and race away. Presently they dismount, rest the machine against their side, disengage their



From a photo by]

[R. W. Thomas, Chertside.

CYCLISTS READY FOR VOLLEY FIRING.

rifles, take deliberate aim, fire a volley or two, mount again and fly away. These tactics are repeated every few minutes, so that the cavalry are completely nonplussed, their

for a fairly good number of their opponents before their ammunition was expended.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the cycle is not an instrument of warfare,

but is employed simply as a means of expeditious conveyance. The cyclist's paramount business is skirmishing, reconnoitring, carrying despatches, and obtaining information, in which departments he is eminently successful, being able to hold out longer than horses. It is pre-eminence in these duties of war which has earned for the cycle corps the apposite cognomen of "the eyes and ears of the Army." After night-fall, owing to the rapidity and silence with which he moves, the cyclist is especially efficacious, being able to creep along noiselessly in the shadow, and at the psychological moment whizz by the sentry, to that worthy's absolute consternation. Before the latter can utter the challenge, "Who goes

able to pass the requisite examination being few and far between. In battalions of 800 men great difficulty is often experienced in raising even the small number of eight men. The reason for this dearth is that the instruction is tedious and difficult, necessitating several hours a day and constant practice to maintain efficiency for the yearly recurring examinations. Signallers of the Volunteer corps have to pass annually the same examination as the Regulars before they can qualify for their badges. They have to devote at least two evenings every week, and, in addition, Saturday afternoons, to practice, while even Sundays have to be given up to the work when the examination time is approaching. The cyclist

signallers take part in the long distance signal work connected with the South London Brigade. The methods of signalling employed are the flag—semaphore and Morse—and heliograph, which reflects the sun's rays, causing the flashes to be read at a very great distance. This instrument is chiefly utilised in India. By night the foregoing, being ineffective, are supplanted by the limelight and an ordinary oil-lamp, the messages trans-



COVERING A RETREAT.

there?" the mysterious visitor is "gone," swallowed up in the darkness of the night. As to attempting to bowl him over, the sentry might just as well try to hit the moon—the chances in each case are about equal.

One of the most important and indispensable duties of the military cyclist corps is signalling, and the 26th Middlesex possess an eminently smart and very efficient staff for this purpose. A squad consists of six signallers, and two supernumeraries to translate the messages as they are received. Eight men out of 120 does not appear a very significant number on the face of it, but this branch is one of the most exacting in the service, efficient signallers who are

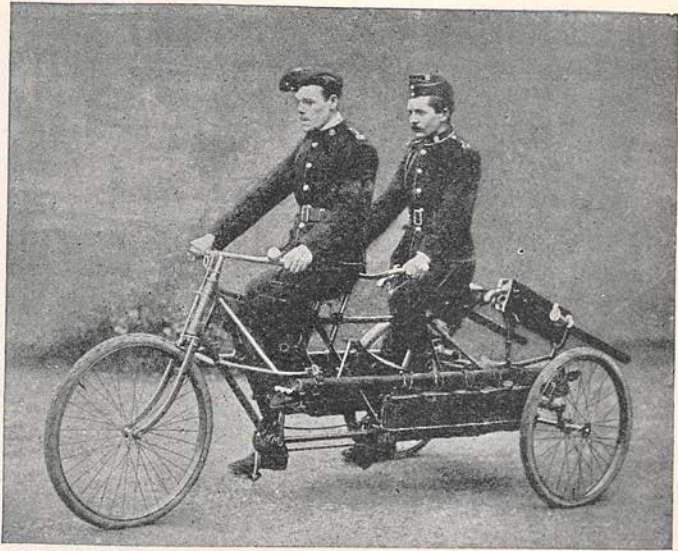
mitted by which can be easily read at a distance of three miles on a clear night. It is only recently that the semaphore has been requisitioned in the Service, so that a cyclist, when riding along or towards the coast, can communicate by this means with a friendly ship lying off the shore, the semaphore, as is well known, being employed for signalling in the Navy. A movement is on foot compelling every cyclist to have a certain knowledge of signalling. The wisdom of this decision is at once apparent. Suppose, for instance, a body of infantry are marching through a country infested with the enemy. Cyclists are thrown out as scouts. When the enemy is descried, the cyclist immediately mounts an eminence, so as to be in

full view of the body of infantry he is supporting, and communicates with them, often giving important information by so doing.

But war has its horrors, and, as provision for the wounded, stretcher-bearers are attached to the rear guard, carrying portable and collapsible stretchers. The manner in which they are carried when in use is shown in our illustration on page 374. One cyclist is stationed at each corner of the stretcher upon which their unfortunate comrade is reclining, secured to the saddles of the two leading bearers and upon the handle bars of those in the rear. In cases of emergency, when the staff stretcher is not available, a hurdle or gate is improvised.

Several experiments have been made by which the corps may be equipped, as an additional strength, with quick-firing machine-guns such as the Maxim or Gardner. Our illustrations on this page represent the result of one of these experiments as utilised by the cycling section of

the 1st Tower Hamlets Volunteers. It consists of a tandem tricycle specially constructed of gun metal fitted with two Maxim guns,



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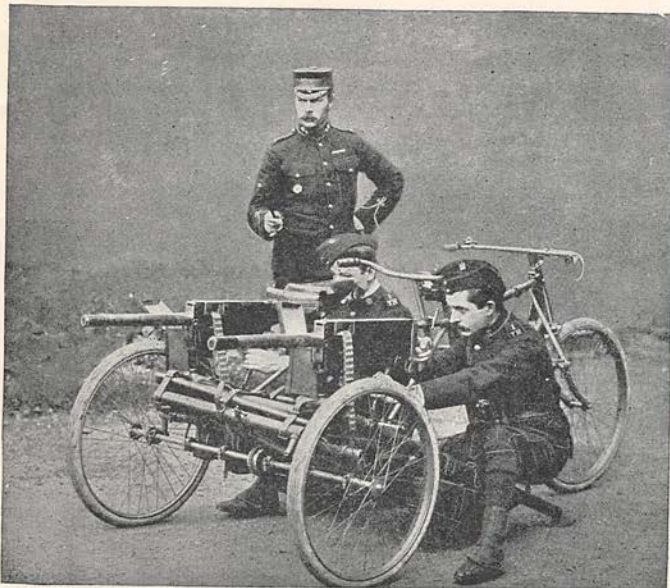
ON THE MARCH.

[Gregory & Co., Strand.]

with an adequate supply of ammunition. The first illustration is of the machine when not in use. It is very complex in construction, and extremely heavy, to withstand the

necessary strain and vibration from firing. The ammunition is carried in the box-like appliances at each side of the machine. In the next illustration the guns are shown in action, the belt containing the cartridges being placed in position ready for firing. If necessary the guns can be detached from the cycle and fitted upon tripods. The main objection to this cycle is that it is too heavy, and though it would be of invaluable assistance in checking an advance along a road, it would be very unwieldy over rough ground.

In conclusion, we might mention that some very good displays have been given by a section of the 26th Middlesex Cycling Volunteers at the Royal Military Tournament.



From a photo by

[Gregory & Co., Strand.]

TANDEM MAXIM GUN OF THE 1ST TOWER HAMLETS VOLUNTEERS (CYCLING SECTION) IN ACTION.