



Conventional Unconventionality in the British Army

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Mention of 'unconventional' soldiers might spark thoughts of service personnel who came or served in unfamiliar places or did unusual jobs. But we might spend more time than we do considering 'conventional unconventionality' in the British army ' by which I mean all the different arms of service that get excluded by the mythic image of Tommy Atkins the infantryman in the trench. By 1916, the British Expeditionary Force had become the largest corporate organisation in the Empire with the exception of the London County Council: quite aside from the fighting of battles, it had responsibility for the accommodation, feeding, training, healthcare and movement of the ever-changing millions who made up its ranks. Although compared to later armies of the twentieth century, its 'tail-to-tooth' ratio was relatively low, the BEF nonetheless relied on huge numbers of personnel undertaking work behind the lines to sustain its fighting troops. *Pace* Paul Fussell, it is a marker of how little the war actually did to disrupt traditional tropes of heroism that we have a relatively sparse body of memoirs, archival deposits, interviews and historical treatments dealing with the soldiers who served between port bases and trenches ' although notable exceptions are R.H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm* trilogy, W.N. Nicholson's *Behind the Lines* and, above all, Ian Malcolm Brown's brilliant study of *British Logistics on the Western Front*. One of the things that Brown makes clear is just how important the supply chain was to the proper functioning of the army, and how the reliable and adequate arrival of artillery tubes and shells in particular became a determining factor in the success of the BEF's battle-winning system by the end of the war.

That leads me on to those who are perhaps the most surprising omission from the conventional view of First World War soldiering ' the poor bloody gunners.

[Gunner](#) found or type unknown

On the outbreak of war, the British Army had no anti-aircraft provision. By November 1914, six A.A. sections had been formed, officially companies of the Royal Garrison Artillery, and by August 1918 275 were operating in France and Flanders. Each was staffed by around 40 men. In addition to the gunners, the Royal Engineers also had to find men for Searchlight Companies. Image from The National Library of Scotland (CC BY-NC-SA).

The Royal Artillery's ability to deliver devastatingly heavy, accurate, surprising bombardments became a more and more important part of how the British fought as the war went on. By the war's end, about 30% of the BEF's 'teeth' troops were gunners. Although ' the retreats of 1914 and 1918 aside ' they seldom had to face the enemy close to over open sights, their was hardly a safe life behind the lines: not only were they regularly exposed to enemy counter-battery fire and the dangers posed by their own weapons and ammunition, but they also often spent longer in action than the infantrymen they supported. Their travails are evocatively depicted in Charles Jagger's statues on the sides of the Royal Artillery memorial on Hyde Park Corner. Again, perhaps one reason that they get relatively little attention in popular versions of the war is how distant the role of most gunners was

from conventional military heroism. As they calculated ranges, air pressures and angles of fire, or passed shells to load into the open breech, these were soldiers not as glorious warriors but as industrial experts and workers, deciding battle not by their individual action but by the density of explosive force in which they destroyed landscape and lives in a contest of machines. That version of mechanical conflict defies the narratives our culture still likes to apply to combat: it is, perhaps, too unconventional for comfort.

You may also be interested in the downloadable resource pack [Lines of Communication Troops and Gunners](#).

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