ROYAL SIGNALS
A SHORT HISTORY

The Corps of Signals was formed on 28 June 1920, the title "Royal" being conferred on the new Corps on 5 August 1920. Its ancestry in the field of military communications is long and illustrious; the direct forebears being the RE Telegraphs, the Army Signalling Service and the RE Signal Service.

Some form of signalling has been used by Armies in the field since earliest times. The Greeks had the Torch and the Water Telegraph and the Roman Army used coloured smoke as a means of communication. In the sixteenth century, England used a system of Beacons, to give warning of the approach of the Armada. In 1796, the Admiralty adopted a shutter-type machine which was invented by Lord George Murray and this became known as the "Murray Lettering Telegraph". It was used as a means of communication between London and Devonport. The Chaplain General, the Reverend John Gamble formerly a Mathematics don at Pembroke College Cambridge, invented the Radiated Telegraph which he sold to the Army in 1797 and this proved a more mobile system than the Murray Telegraph. Also during the eighteenth century semaphoric machines and an elementary form of mechanical telegraph were used.

The next important advance in the method of communication was the invention of the Morse Code in 1835 and the development of the first electric telegraph (the Single Needle Telegraph) in 1837. These changed the face of military communications, as surely as the internal combustion engine and the aeroplane changed methods of transport. In 1854, the British, together with the French and the forces of the Sultan of Turkey fought the Russian Army in the Crimea and it was then that the electric telegraph was first used in a war role. Nevertheless, until about 1860, signal despatch carriers (mounted orderlies) remained the primary means of communication. It was during the Crimea campaign that the Royal Engineers first became involved in the provision of communications for the Army and a Lieutenant and 25 Sappers formed what was in effect a "telegraph troop".

In 1857, only 2 years after the Crimea, General Sir John Fox Burgoyne, who had been Chief Engineer to Lord Raglan in the Crimea, made the first formal suggestion for an army signal service to control all means of intercommunication. In 1867 the need was accepted by the War Office and in 1869-70 the Royal Engineers became responsible for telegraphy by electrical means. Although an effort was made at that time to combine the teaching and control of electrical and visual means of inter-communication under one direction, it was not successful and the other 2 major means of communication remained separated, visual signalling under the Army Signalling Service, and despatch carriers (orderlies) under regimental and staff control. In the meantime, the RE Telegraphs and the Army Signalling Service were laying the foundations for today's more complex systems. The RE Telegraphs provided detachments for a number of operations and expeditions between 1868 and 1885; Abyssinia (1868), the First !,shanti War (1873), the Zulu War (1879), the Egyptian War (1882), the Bechuana Land Expedition (1884-85), the Nile and Suakim Expedition (1884-85) and the second Ashanti War (1896).

It was as a result of the experiences gained in the Crimea and Abyssinia that authority was eventually given in 1869 for the formation of a Signal Wing at the Royal Engineers depot at Chatham and for training to be given in communication techniques. In the following year, 1870, C Telegraph Troop was formed and it was responsible for the provision of telegraph communications for the field army. C Troop RE saw active service in the Zulu War of 1879 under the command of Major A C Hamilton. It was during this campaign that the heliograph was first used extensively. It was subsequently employed on the North West Frontier of India and was used in an active service role during World War 1 and in the desert operations of World War 2. The next major step forward in military communications was when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876. The use was explained to officers of the Telegraph Troop RE and they immediately decided to bring into service their own version of the telephone. There were both British and Indian Army pattern telephones brought into use in the army. Wireless was soon to come and herald yet another new era.

In 1884 C Troop and the Postal Telegraph Companies were amalgamated to form 1st and 2nd Divisions of the Telegraph Battalion RE. During that year the Battalion took part in the Nile Campaign and later played a prominent part in the Ashanti campaign of 1895-1896. It was during this campaign that the men of the Telegraph Battalion hacked a path for the overhead cable route from the Cape coast to Prahsu, covering 72 miles through jungle. It was men of the Telegraph Company that staggered out of the jungle and confronted King Prempeh and accepted the surrender of the enemy. King Prempeh's chair is now in the Corps Museum at Blandford.

In 1899 to 1901, in South Africa came the major test of the 3-pronged organisation. All 3, the RE Telegraphs, the Army Signalling Service (visual signalling) and the despatch carriers (mounted orderlies) maintained and enhanced the high standards which already had been set for them. It was during this war that the Wheatstone Automatic Telegraph was used to work heavy traffic and proved to be a success. Also, for the first time, telephones were used for the control of guns (by General Sir George White in Ladysmith).

During the period 1895-1898 Marconi's experiments in the field of wireless communications were closely watched by a Royal Engineer Committee and in 1899 a Wireless System, complete with operators, was hired by the War Office for use in South Africa. The equipment at the time was heavy and clumsy and due to this the system was never taken into active service use during the war.

Although it was very slow in developing, wireless, as it was then called, now began to exert an influence and in 1907 the first Wireless Telegraph Companies were formed. In 1908 there followed the birth of the RE Signal Service, which was now to become responsible for all forms of inter-communication. The RE Signal; Service had been formed just in time for the first World War' (1914-18). It was during this conflict that the Despatch Rider came into prominence and the importance of wireless was also appreciated and developed with the introduction of wireless sets into the service. By the end of the war communications had expanded beyond expectation and the RE Signals Service was providing a comparatively lavish scale of communications based on a balanced system of telegraph, telephone, and signal despatch services.

Communications were provided not only in France and Flanders but also in the campaigns in Salonika, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Great reliance was justifiably placed on wireless. Without it, the ranges involved could not have been spanned. The record of signal units in the First World War was one of unremitting devotion to duty, ennobled by many acts of personal gallantry. At the end of the war the prestige of the Signal Service was very high and the Army now recognised the extent to which it depended upon efficient signal communications.

The official agreement to form a separate Signal Corps was made in 1918 before the end of World War 1, but due to various policy delays the formation of the "Corps" was delayed until 28 June 1920. A Royal Warrant was signed by the Secretary of State for War, Rt Hon Winston S Churchill, giving the Sovereign's approval to the formation of the Corps of Signals. On 5 August 1920, His Majesty King George V conferred on the new Corps the high honour of the title "Royal". The Royal Corps of Signals was accorded precedence next below the Corps of Royal Engineers. Thus was born Royal Signals.

During the 1920s and 1930s the Corps increased its strength and had personnel serving in many overseas stations such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, Egypt, Jamaica and many other "outposts of the Empire". The largest portion of the Corps overseas was concentrated in India where one third of the Corps were serving at any one time. This also gave good grounding for active service as during the peacetime years there were frequent campaigns on the North West Frontier of India.

The Royal Corps of Signals was to expand during the Second World War from a permanent regular strength of 541 officers and 9,837 other ranks in September 1939, to a total strength of 8,518 officers and 142,472 other ranks by the end of the War and to suffer the loss of some 4,631 officers and other ranks, killed or wounded in action. During the post-war campaigns, the Corps has played a full and active part and has, regrettably, suffered casualties. The Corps has been involved in Palestine (1945-1948), the long campaign in Malaya which lasted from 1949 until 1960, the Korean War, the various "troubles" in Cyprus, Borneo, Aden, Arabian Peninsula, Kenya and Belize and, in addition to taking their toll in human lives, this has added to the active service expertise of the Corps.

The importance of command and control communications, and the emergence of Information Systems, has been clearly demonstrated in operations which have taken place during the 1990s and now into the 21st Century. The Royal Corps of Signals was, and still is, at the forefront of all operations, providing the communications and information systems that enable the commander on the ground to effectively command his forces.

Since 1990, members of the Corps have taken part in operations in NI, the Balkans, Sierra Leone, East Timor and, more recently, have formed a major part of the British contribution to Afghanistan and The Gulf It has been due to this type of service that the Corps has gained an excel1ent reputation for providing communications no matter what the difficulties or circumstances, ranging from active operations to civil disasters.

Blandford is the home of the Royal Signals. The Signal Officer in Chief, Headquarters Royal Signals and the Regimental Headquarters are all located in Blandford alongside the Royal School of Signals and 11th Signal Regiment. The Corps is currently undertaking a major, exciting and capability-enhancing equipment upgrading programme that is designed to take advantage of the latest commercial CIS techniques. By the end of the decade the British Army should be at the forefront of military communications world-wide and the Corps can continue to live up to its motto 'Certa Cito' which freely translated means 'Swift and Sure'.