

Allied Military Police of World War I on the Western Front

by

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## ALLIED MILITARY POLICE OF WORLD WAR I ON THE WESTERN FRONT

The cold November rain drizzled down from the leaden sky tink-tink-tinking on the steel helmet of the Soldier whose boots were soaked through as he stood puttee deep in the mud directing traffic on the main supply route that supported his division. The 81<sup>st</sup> had arrived in August, occupied St. Die and fought in the Meuse-Argonne offensive<sup>1,2</sup>. He had been picked to be a Military Police Soldier by his company commander and was sent to Autun to the new Military Police School. Now here he was – directing a steady flow of troops, horse carts and trucks as they slogged through the muddy roads on their way to the front. General Pershing had instituted many changes in the war, from pressing for maneuver warfare to authorizing his units the distinctive “Wildcat” shoulder insignia. Additionally he professionalized the Military Police duties that were so necessary to the prosecution of the war as well as the good order and discipline of the Army.

Pershing was not alone in his view that there was a need for MPs, but he was a maverick when it came to professionalizing the force. Not since the Civil War’s Provost Guards had there been a need for Military Police on the battlefield, and before then the

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown, "World War One," *81st Wildcat Association*, 2010, [http://81stwildcatassociation.com/?page\\_id=81/](http://81stwildcatassociation.com/?page_id=81/) (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Unknown, "81st Division: "wildcats"," *North Carolina State Archives*, 2005, <http://www.archives.ncdcr.gov/wwi/oldnorthstate/81stdivision.htm>. (accessed November 15, 2010).

only dedicated troops had been the Corps of the Marechaussee during the Revolution<sup>3</sup>. However, with the massive American Expeditionary Force increasing in size to the tune of 10,000 troops a day the immediate need for the policing of those troops became apparent<sup>4</sup>. Pershing was in good company as the British had professional military police for years, as had the French. These men would provide battlefield circulation, straggler control, prisoner of war escort, guard high value assets and investigate crimes, all while maintaining discipline in the ranks for the Allies would come into their own in World War I.

The Provost Marshal has been an integral part of the British Army since at least the English Civil War<sup>5</sup>. The mission had little combat application in the early days and was simply to police the troops. King Charles II established a Provost Marshal General as well as a Provost Marshal for each regiment. The Provost would insure good order and discipline in camp, police the settlers and camp followers, and set the watch at night. These duties remained much the same, although the need for a professionalized police force came to the fore front during Wellington's campaigns on the Iberian Peninsula<sup>6</sup>. This force, many still outfitted as light dragoons, were called the "Mounted Military Police" (MMP) as well as the "Military Foot Police" (MFP) started World War I with a

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Wright, *Army Lineage Series: Military Police* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1992), 4.

<sup>4</sup> David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War As Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 383.

<sup>5</sup> Mike Chappel, *Redcaps: Britain's Military Police* (London: Osprey, 1997), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 9,10.

paltry 761 men including 253 reservists. The exponential expansion of the British Army would soon change this<sup>7</sup>.

While the MFP and MMP maintained high standards of personal conduct, recruiting and probationary periods, the Corps of Military Police could not afford to be so picky as its numbers had to grow at the same pace as the rest of the British Army<sup>8</sup>. In order to fill the need, the corps was filled out with retirees, civilian police and others. However, soon the need would become great enough that whole cavalry and infantry units would be transitioned to Military Police duty. Even then, the numbers would not be great enough for the Redcaps (so named due to the red covers they wore over their service caps to distinguish them as MPs) to effectively police the entire battlefield and rear area. The regiments and divisions would have to supplement the Military police with “battle” or “trench” police to help keep battlefield circulation under control. However, the Redcaps were still primarily responsible, and were renowned for duty as straggler’s posts<sup>9</sup>.

Also known as “battle stops”, they were manned by MPs and were the primary battlefield circulation control points for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). These posts were strategically placed at major crossroads and were often exposed and under constant enemy fire. The MPs controlled, advised and logged the comings and goings of messengers, runners and units moving about in the rear areas. They directed the walking wounded to the field hospitals and civilians away from the battle lines. The mission that

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<sup>7</sup> Chappel, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

is most intriguing for the battle stops is that of straggler control. The MPs would not just direct stragglers to the front lines and/or their units; they would also re-equip and re-arm them, making them once more combat effective<sup>10</sup>.

The Redcap mission continued to grow and expand as the war went on. They established Military Field Prisons for British lawbreakers and were charged with executing sentences handed down by the Courts Martial and supervised by the Provost Marshal. They were instrumental in putting down mutinies, rounding up deserters and maintaining the cohesiveness of the force in the combat zones. For the average Tommy, much of the MP mission seemed to be aimed at keeping him in check. This would lead to an overall hatred amongst the rank and file for the Redcaps, although largely the MPs acted in a professional and appropriate manner. The one major mutiny that occurred in the British lines of three to four thousand men had to be put down by MPs with the assistance of cavalry and machine gunners; unfortunately the catalyst to this riotous mutiny was a poorly handled arrest by camp police<sup>11</sup>. At the end of the war, it was an MP who first crossed the Rhine to occupy Cologne, possibly as a nod by the British high command who had recognized the value and dangerous occupation of the British Military Police<sup>12</sup>.

The British MMP and MFP continued to serve as an active component of the British Army and does to this day, although now recognized as the Corps of Royal Military Police. The Corps manpower levels peaked in 1918 at 25,000 effectives in

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<sup>10</sup> Chappel, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 24.

various positions<sup>13</sup>. Their work and professionalism in the Great War was not immediately recognized as their reputation had been somewhat tarnished by the idea that the Redcaps were evil and thuggish in enforcing their orders and mandate, especially in straggler control. However, their continued professionalism was evident and appreciated in the post war occupational duties that the MPs performed and by the outbreak of World War II.

The Gendarmerie Nationale of France were also long time players in the role of Military Police<sup>14</sup>. They had evolved over the centuries from the Privots de Marechaux<sup>15</sup> of the medieval era to the later Marechaussee on which the original American Provost forces were modeled<sup>16</sup>. The Gendarmerie were not simply the Provost Guards or Military Police; they were in effect the national police responsible for not only military, but also civilian issues as well<sup>17</sup>. They had become adept at the protection of supply lines in the rear battle area; however the French army had severe morale problems and by 1917 were on the verge of collapsing under waves of mutiny that threatened to wash away the underpinnings of discipline.

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<sup>13</sup> Chappel, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Unknown, "French Military Police "Gendarmerie Nationale"," *SA Corps Of Military Police*, 2010, <http://home.mweb.co.za/re/redcap/france.htm>. (accessed November 15, 2010) - Stemming from "Gens d'armes" or Gentlemen under Arms.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Ward, *George Washington's Enforcers: Policing the Continental Army* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 241.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Wright, *Army Lineage Series: Military Police* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1992), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Renee Zauberman, "The French Gendarmerie : Crossing Sociological And Historical Perspectives," *Crime History And Societies*, 2003, <http://chs.revues.org/index743.html>. (accessed November 20, 2010).

The Gendarmerie could not hope to stem the tide of the mass mutinies that plagued the French Army. Whole divisions refused to go “over the top” or tried to actively march on Paris. They were tired of the killing and wanted the war to end and over 100,000 troops mutinied in one way or another in 1917. The bulk of this work would have to be done in a political manner and involve the officer corps as opposed to the Provost or Gendarmerie. General Petain would take over on 15 May 1917, and would stop offensive actions in order to coax the Soldiers into quitting their rebellions, as well as granting a liberal leave policy. However, Petain was not a pushover either. His next step was the stick that went with the carrot. He had his officer corps along with his provost and Gendarmerie sort out the mutiny leaders (often at random or erroneously), Court Martial and execute them. Sometimes this so random that was a specific number of troops and sometimes every tenth man in line was chosen, either way without regard to actual culpability– but a percentage would face a firing squad<sup>18</sup>.

The Gendarmerie Nationale remains the national police of France, not unlike Italy’s Carabinieri, and fulfill a role of both MP and national police<sup>19</sup>. They served admirably in the Western Theater during the war but were far less the “combat” MPs that served in the British and American Expeditionary Forces. These roles were filled by Regimental Police, similar to the Battle or Trench Police of the BEF.

The American Army was young, brash and strong as it poured into France in 1918. They hoped to end the war quickly and cleanly and get back to the USA straight

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<sup>18</sup> Unknown, "The French Army Mutinies Of World War I," *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, 2001, <http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-17-3-a.html>. (accessed November 20, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Unknown, "French Military Police "Gendarmerie Nationale"

away. While there was no permanent branch of the US Army for Military Police, during wartime, as the need would arise, the Provost Marshal and his Provost Guard would inevitably be reconstituted. General Pershing had foresight and clarity enough to establish the office of the Provost Marshal General in summer of 1917 with Lt. Col. Hanson E. Ely as the PMG incarnate for the American Expeditionary Force (AEF)<sup>20,21</sup>. The AEF Military Police were organized initially in two companies per division and various separate companies to support policing the rear areas, but as more forces arrived and the AEF ballooned in size it was apparent that many more MPs would be needed.

Pershing authorized the formation of a separate regiment of MPs to be formed to provide general military police support in the rear. Recognizing the need for investigative expertise, he also ordered the formation of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) who would act as the major crimes unit for the PMG<sup>22</sup>. As the troop ranks swelled, it was apparent to the high command that these Soldiers, who were not all prior police officers, would need at least some basic training to become proficient cops. Thus, the first MP school was formed at Autun<sup>23</sup>. Additionally, Pershing pressed for and Congress approved the formation of the “Military Police Corps” by the end of the war<sup>24</sup>. These MPs would perform all of the traditional battlefield functions associated with the Provost from

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<sup>20</sup> Wright, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob Lishchiner, "Origin of the Military Police: Provost Marshal General's Department, A. E. F., World War I," *Military Affairs* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1947).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 6.



battlefield circulation control to prisoner of war operations and maintaining good order and discipline<sup>25</sup>.

The 82<sup>nd</sup> Infantry division provides an example of how the AEF forces dealt with the need for Military Police. When the division arrived in France in spring of 1918, they immediately formed two companies and a battalion headquarters of MPs to support the fight<sup>26</sup>. They trained with the MMP and MFP of the British Army to learn how traffic management was handled in the rear areas. Soon one of the companies was detached and became part of the MP units supporting 1<sup>st</sup> Army, while the other adopted the moniker of 82<sup>nd</sup> MP Company<sup>27</sup>. This company would handle hundreds of stragglers and deserters each day, and would liaise with and jointly operate with other military police from adjacent units, including the British MMP<sup>28</sup>.

To keep units moving and supplies flowing the MPs had to stay focused and work long hours. Their often misunderstood and ill-appreciated mission kept the roads clear for the infantry in the fight. The 82<sup>nd</sup> MP company was doubly stressed during the Argonne campaign as a shortage of MPs in the Corps rear areas necessitated the Division MPs to cover the Corps areas to their rear as well. All of these actions were performed

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<sup>25</sup> Wright, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Kenton Falerios, *Give Me Something I Can't Do: The History of the 82nd Military Police Company from WWI to the Iraq War* (Bloomington, Indiana: Authorhouse, 2007), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 9.

flawlessly, and the feeling among the Soldiers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> MP Company was that they were instrumental in winning the war for the allies<sup>29</sup>.

The US Army Military police were not maintained as a whole corps after the Great War, but Congress did authorize the formation of MP units to support parent units below the Corps level. Their colors (green and gold) and Reserve Officer's branch was established along with their insignia of crossed pistols. However, it would not be until the looming threat of WWII that the US Army would formally establish the Military Police Corps as a permanent regular army branch<sup>30</sup>.

At war's end, the allied Military Police on the Western Front became the stars of the show. While the front line troops were packing up, celebrating and heading home, the MPs continued to work. They policed the massive numbers of troops who cared little for army discipline now that the war was over and thousands went AWOL (Absent With Out Leave) for short times to see the sights of Europe. The ongoing problem of repatriating prisoners and the occupation of Germany was to be dealt with as well, not to mention simply performing the traditional civilian police role in war-torn Europe until civil authority was restored.

Respected, feared, hated, envied – the Allied Military Police were a critical part of the war effort. The Western Front was a challenge in so many ways that without a system to keep good order and discipline there would have been chaos. Whether the Gendarmerie National executing sentence on mutineers, the MMP and MFP sending stragglers to the front, or Pershing's MPs keeping the flow of supplies and men to the

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<sup>29</sup> Falerios, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Wright, 6.

front smooth and steady, these men were instrumental in the successful prosecution of the Great War on the Western Front. Their hardships and challenges are not often remembered relative to the artillery, infantry, tanks and aircraft that epitomize the war in the mind's eye of most people, but they were crucial nonetheless.

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