



Bikes at war

From Victorian rifleman to paratroopers with folders, the bicycle was often deployed when the world went to war. **Jeremy Archer** details some examples



In 1885, a number of Rifle Volunteer Corps across England established cyclist sections, equipped with high-wheelers. These were later expanded to form companies, used primarily for patrolling the English coastline. In 1888, the 26th Middlesex (Cyclist) Volunteer Rifle Corps formed the first cyclists' battalion. It remained the only one until Lord Haldane's reforms created the Territorial Forces in 1908.

In 1890, the British Army carried out unsuccessful trials on an eight-wheeled, eight-man, pedalled contraption, so demanding on the physiques of its crew that it was dubbed 'the Hernia Horror'. Fortunately, technological advances soon left this episode as a bad memory. In 1892, Armand Peugeot manufactured the first folding bicycle, for the French Army, while, in 1905, Italian manufacturer, Edoardo Bianchi, designed a military bicycle for alpine use, the forerunner of today's mountain bikes.

In 1897, members of the US 25th Infantry Regiment, formed in 1868 from Afro-American soldiers who had fought in the American Civil War, tested this new technology to the limit when a detachment rode from Fort Missoula, Montana to St. Louis, Missouri, a gruelling 41-day, 1,900-mile journey along wagon trails and Indian paths, using state-of-the-art Spalding bicycles. Such rigorous training proved itself the following year when those same cyclists gave a good account of themselves on riot control duty in Havana during the Spanish-American War.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-02, cyclists were used extensively: by the Boers for scouting and by British and Empire forces as despatch riders and for patrolling exposed railway lines. There was even a documented incident, at Hammanskraal in the Transvaal, in which 11 New Zealand cyclists chased – and apprehended – ten Boer horsemen. Commandant Danie Theron raised the bicycle-mounted 'Theron se Verkenningskorps', or Theron Reconnaissance Corps, described by the British Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts,



Pictures from The Imperial War Museum

(Opposite, L-R, top down) The 9th Canadian Infantry disembark at Sword Beach on D-Day. Cyclists ride past the Kaiser in 1899. The US 25th Infantry riding from Fort Missoula, Montana to St Louis, summer 1897. British soldiers cross a pontoon bridge over the Seine at Vernon, 27 August 1944. Officers of 120th Battery, Royal Artillery, playing bicycle polo, Woolwich 1911. The Cyclists' Memorial at Meriden. British folding bicycle used in airborne operations, 29 August 1942. The Meriden memorial inscription. (Above) Officer cadets cycling to a PT lesson, Royal Military College, Sandhurst 1938

as 'the hardest thorn in the flesh of the British advance'.

Cyclist battalions

In 1908, five British infantry battalions converted to cyclists' battalions, while three new battalions were formed. During the next eight years a further five 'wheelmen' or cyclists' battalions were raised, for the counties of Essex, Suffolk, Sussex, Hampshire and Huntingdon. According to the recruiting poster for the Huntingdonshire Cyclists' Battalion, the last to be formed prior to the outbreak of war: 'CYCLES provided practically FREE OF CHARGE. Money Allowance to men who provide their own. ANNUAL CAMP, Usually at the SEASIDE, at a time which does not interfere with harvest.'

After mobilisation, cyclists' battalions were either employed in home defence, acting as a cadre from which troops were sent to France, or they were split up into divisional companies and used in reconnaissance roles.

During the First World War, although Britain put more than 100,000 cyclists on the road, that was exceeded by both France and Germany, with 125,000 and 150,000 cyclists respectively. The standard British bicycle was the BSA Bicycle Mark IV, which incorporated, in typical Army fashion: 'Saddle, J. B. Brooks, Military No. 3; Clip, Rifle,

Bicycle, Butt Mk II; Clip, Rifle, Bicycle Fore-end Mk II; and Bag, Tool, Bicycle.' In May 1917, the final development of the Mark IV bicycle was the addition of carriers for a machine-gun.

Militarily speaking, however, the bicycle's finest hour was still a quarter of a century away. For the invasion of Malaya, which began on 8 December 1941, Japanese planners relied on bicycles as a cheap and effective way of moving troops swiftly south through the Malay Peninsula. The Japanese took 18,000 bicycles to Malaya and their assault troops – with rifle, personal equipment and rations strapped to their two-wheelers – were able to move swiftly and noiselessly down the roads, or outflank British positions by riding through rubber estates.

Colonel Tsuji Masanobu, Chief of Operations and Planning Staff, Japanese 25th Army, later wrote: 'Thanks to the excellent paved roads, and to the cheap Japanese bicycles, the assault on Malaya was easy... even the long-legged Englishmen could not escape our troops on bicycles.' The Japanese would routinely ride their bicycles for up to 20 hours a day, repairing them when necessary with spare parts taken from the large numbers of Japanese bicycles imported into Malaya before the war, and riding on bare wheel rims when the tyres finally gave out. A blown bridge

was no obstacle to a cyclist: simply sling your trusty mount on your shoulders and ford the river. During the campaign, more than 130,000 British and Commonwealth troops surrendered to a force of not many more than 50,000 – admittedly battle-hardened – Japanese.

From D-Day to yesterday

As the various photos show, the British Army also made extensive use of bicycles during the Second World War, but not always with conspicuous success. Private Walter Scott, Royal Army Medical Corps, described his experiences on D-Day: 'I had to get my bike up to my unit's meeting place on the promenade. The bike proved horribly awkward. Eventually it packed up altogether and fell over, blocking the progress of the tank which was disembarking behind me... Then a tank chappie (bless all tank men) jumped down, picked up the bike and threw it – and me – on top of the tank. So we drove up to the promenade... My colleagues set about trying to repair the bike – which was now immobile with one wheel seized up completely – but each had a different solution. Suddenly there was a "whoosh" and instantly we all dropped to the ground. A couple of seconds or so later, we sheepishly rose – the "shell" had been the sound of somebody letting a tyre down.'

Despite their mountainous terrain, the Swiss were quick to take advantage of the opportunities presented by bicycles: as early as 1891, Swiss Army cyclists were used for delivering messages. A hundred years later the Swiss Army still maintained three cycling regiments, one serving with each Field Army Corps. Out of a total of 2,800 men serving with each regiment, 1,300 were equipped with bicycles. Until 1993, the Swiss Army was still using single-speed bicycles originally introduced into service in 1905. Fortunately for the riders, the Swiss Army was running out of spare parts for the old model, so a new, seven-gear mountain bike with hydraulic brakes was brought into service.

These regiments proved extremely popular with those who had to do military service –



"We can be very discreet, we're well armed, and we perform well against tanks"

Members of the Home Guard improvise a stretcher between two bicycles during an exercise in North Wales, 1 November 1943

receiving over five applicants for every vacancy – with many of the country's top athletes serving with them. The cycling regiment was by no means a soft option since recruits had to take part in 120-mile forced 'marches', starting at two in the morning, carrying up to 120 pounds of weaponry, ammunition and food. In 2001, the decision was taken to re-equip the Swiss cycling regiments with armoured vehicles, with the result that no European front-line troops still use bicycles as a standard means of transport. One young Swiss recruit said: 'It is stupid. Over short distances we are very fast, much faster than the motorised units. We can be very discreet, we are well armed and we perform well against tanks.'

Not forgotten

The military bicycling tradition is still upheld today by the Fanfare

Band of the Royal Netherlands Army. Formed in 1917, the Bicycle Music Corps became part of the volunteer force ten years later, before being disbanded in 1940, when Holland was over-run by Nazi Germany. The Bicycle Music Corps originally comprised 24 musicians, equipped with horns, drums and cymbals. The Fanfare Band, or 'Fanfarekorps Koninklijke Landmacht', performs regularly at international tattoos: it is a big attraction at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, where the steep slope of the exit road can prove rather challenging at the end of the performance!

There is a splendid memorial on the green at Meriden in Warwickshire that commemorates the very considerable contribution that cyclists made to the British Army during both World Wars (see Cycle April-May issue, p24). A commemorative service takes place there every May. The inscription reads: 'To the Lasting Memory of those Cyclists who Died in the Great War 1914-1918.'

In 1963, a bronze plaque was added so that those cyclists who had died during the Second World War should not be forgotten.