

FOR OFFICIAL USE

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THE  
ORIGIN AND HISTORY  
OF  
THE OBSERVER CORPS

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This pamphlet, written by MAJ.-GEN.  
E. B. ASHMORE, C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O.,  
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AIR MINISTRY,

1931.



# ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE OBSERVER CORPS

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1. **The Need for Information.**—During the Great War air attack and air defence both began on a small scale, but very soon the importance of knowing the movements of the hostile aircraft became evident. The information was required both for defence purposes and also for the system of air raid warnings.

The defences were at first in the hands of the Admiralty, who arranged with the police to telephone reports of any aircraft heard or seen within 60 miles of London. Early in 1915 this system was extended to include East Anglia, Northampton, Oxfordshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. In April, 1915, the War Office asked Chief Constables to send similar messages by telegram. There was naturally a great deal of overlapping.

The system was then extended to cover England and Wales—the reports to come to the Admiralty, who would inform the War Office. Warnings were issued by the Admiralty to railways and Scotland Yard only. Interchange of intelligence was also arranged between Chief Constables. The result of all this was a frightful congestion of telephone lines. A proposal was made to forbid private telephoning during raids, but the Home Secretary did not consider this possible.

In 1916 the War Office took over, and a more regular system of observers was introduced. Cordons were organized 30 miles outside vulnerable areas. London was provided with two cordons, and coastal posts were organized. Military personnel was used; this proved very unsatisfactory. Many of the men were of poor intelligence and of worse discipline. The police were again brought in to man the posts, and only two companies of the best military observers were retained at places where constant watch was necessary, and where supervision was possible.

There was also an observer system in the Metropolis, excellently organized but used principally for reporting the results of raiding, fires and so on, and not for operations.

2. **Later Intelligence Arrangements.**—These were the systems in force when I took over the defences in the autumn of 1917.



Although some of the police messages were received in London in as little time as three minutes, the average delay was much greater. The service was moreover very uncertain as regards negative information. The fact that there were no reports from an area could not be taken as a guarantee that there were no bombers there. I remember one particular raid night. Apparently all machines had been tracked out, and I had already given "all clear," when a plaintive message came in from Hertfordshire to say that the "all clear" had come through all right and bombs were still falling.

The aeroplane patrol work was improving at the end of 1917, but information from the cordons, etc., was not nearly quick or certain enough for the use of our pilots. Early in 1918, therefore, I set out on a new system. The German activity was then confined to London and the South and East of it; This area was pretty well covered with the various units of the defence; coastal posts—squadrons—guns—searchlights and aprons.

A system of reporting from all these units was arranged by which their information came through certain centres, and so on to a big map in my Headquarters, the point being that during operations the lines were always through, and so the actual observers had not to ring up. The centres also spoke direct to the plotters round my table.

The necessary telephone construction work was heavy, and the system, known as Lada, was not ready till after the 19th May. Unfortunately, the Germans would not come again, but the system worked very well in practice; we had instant knowledge of aeroplane courses on which orders and intelligence were sent by wireless to the patrols in the air.

**3. Beginnings of the Observer Corps.**—The reporting system was swept away with the rest of the defence after the Armistice. On the revival of Air Defence in the beginning of 1924, it was plain that unless special measures were taken, large areas would be blank so far as any aircraft intelligence was concerned.

The principle to be followed was simple—no hostile aircraft must be allowed to move over any part of the country without its movements being known constantly and instantly at the Headquarters of the Air Defences, from which the necessary orders and intelligence would issue to subordinates concerned. On this information also depends the system of civil warnings that is necessary. To obtain the information it was necessary to cover the country, within range of bombing, with a series of posts—six to eight miles apart—provided with suitable watchers, and a complete telephone organization for quick



reporting. The opportunity to begin this organization came on a certain committee of which I was a member, and which had representatives of the Air Ministry and Home Office. We at once co-opted a G.P.O. member. *This principle was accepted; "The civil population will be so vitally affected by air attacks, that the responsibility for observation and warning cannot be considered exclusively military."*

The Committee did not report until late in 1925, but we had been able to experiment in 1924. We organized a few posts at the required interval round Cranbrook, which was the reporting centre. The experiment went to show that the scheme was feasible and gave us valuable experience.

**4. Organization.**—In 1925, then, I could proceed to organize the system in two zones covering the whole of Kent and Sussex. Each zone consists of a network of observation posts connected to direct telephones to an observation centre. The centres are again connected up to the Headquarters of Air Defences. The posts and centres are manned by special constables, enrolled for this object by the Chief Constables of Counties and Boroughs.

The 1925 organization was well tested out by day and night work with the R.A.F.

After the 1925 work, the organization received the official sanction of the Home Office and the War Office, and the general terms of service for the special constables were fixed. They are as follows :—

- (i) The Observer Corps consists of volunteers, enrolled as Special Constables, who undertake to carry out observation work in the air defence of Great Britain, as part of their constabulary duties.
- (ii) In some cases enrolment may be for observation work only, and without acceptance of the general responsibilities of the Special Constabulary.
- (iii) On ceasing to be Special Constables members cease to belong to the Observer Corps.
- (iv) The duties are local, and members incur no liability to carry out the observation duties at a distance from their homes.
- (v) All officers and members of the Observer Corps will act under the directions of the Chief Constable and such Special Constabulary Officers as he may appoint, as regards attendance for duty at the various posts and centres and all matters of administration, but for matters of technical training and in operations they will act under the authority of the military authorities responsible for air defence.



- (vi) Service in the Observer Corps will rank as approved Special Constabulary Service, and duties performed in connection with the training or work of the Corps will rank as police duties for the purposes of the award of the Special Constabulary Long Service Medal.

In 1926, two further zones were organized, so that the system is now in working order from the west of Hampshire, through Hampshire, Sussex, part of Surrey, Kent, Essex and half Suffolk.

The method of organizing tends to become stereotyped and is as follows :—

The Home Office writes to Chief Constables, giving the outline of the system. I draw up the tactically ideal lay-out ; this is modified after consulting the G.P.O. to make it fit with the existing telephone lay-out. I also consult the Chief Constables who are able to say whether the necessary men can be procured in any given place. We keep the zones as far as possible to County Police boundaries, but the telephone system does not always allow this.

Having thus settled the locality of each post, I go round with a G.P.O. representative and the local police authorities, and we choose the exact spot for the post. The G.P.O. can then erect the extension lines from the local post office to a pole at the observer post itself. The police authorities enrol the special constables, who must live close at hand.

I then make another tour with my Chief Signal Officer, meet all the Special Constables, distribute the apparatus and instructions, explain the work and orient the map. The C.S.O. explains the telephone which is the ordinary army type connected to the G.P.O. system at the special pole.

I have received the most ready help from the Chief Constables and the County and Borough Police, and also from the G.P.O. Engineers. The Special Constables show the greatest keenness and aptitude in the work. After a year's working each member of the Corps receives a certificate of qualification.

**5. Methods.**—Each group of twenty-five or so posts communicates direct to a centre ; during the exercises the G.P.O. and the local Post Office officials put the lines through direct, so that the observer is speaking without any ringing up to the plotter in the centre. The men for the centre—it takes about twenty including some spare men—are special constables raised in the town, generally by the Chief Constable of the Borough. The centre consists of a map on a table on to which the observer lines are laid. Plotters sit round the



table with head sets on—three posts to each plotter. As the reports come in they are plotted on the control map with counters, and an independent recorder keeps a record. It is possible, from the record sheets, to see exactly where an aeroplane was at any moment.

A teller overlooks the control map, and reports to Air Defence Headquarters the courses as they appear.

**6. The Corps in 1927.**—Periodical exercises are held during which a large number of Royal Air Force aeroplanes fly over the Observer areas.

In 1927, with the object of making the work between the centres and Headquarters more realistic, we began to employ bombers on straight courses, in addition to the fighting aeroplanes. These latter fly circular courses so as to give all posts as much reporting as possible. Observers find it easy to distinguish the double engined bombers; the single engined bombers when fairly high are sometimes mistaken for fighters.

During future Air Defence Manœuvres it is intended to begin a system of manning the posts and centres in reliefs; a further step towards the organization that may eventually be required. All posts are therefore being raised to at least eight members, and the centre crews are being duplicated.

The system now transmits courses with great certainty, and very little delay. The work was particularly successful during the Air Defence Manœuvres of 1927, when it was described by the Commander-in-Chief, in a congratulatory telegram to Chief Constables, as "invaluable to the Commander of the defending force."

E. B. ASHMORE,

*Major-General.*

*December, 1927.*



*Postscript*

Since the above was written, the responsibility for the technical administration of the Observer Corps has been transferred from the War Office to the Air Ministry.

The change took place with effect from 1st January, 1929, and on 1st March, 1929, a retired R.A.F. Officer was appointed as Commandant of the Observer Corps, and attached to Headquarters Air Defence of Great Britain at Hillingdon House, Uxbridge.

Up to the middle of 1931, no further Groups had been formed, but the number of Posts in the four existing Groups had gradually been raised from 99 in 1929 to 118 in 1931. This was chiefly due to the creation of Coastal Posts, which had previously been held up while certain experimental work was carried out.

As these Coastal Posts were in many cases established at Coastguard or Naval Shore Signal Stations, this brought new elements, viz. :—the Coastguard Service (under the Board of Trade) and Admiralty (Admiral Commanding Reserves) into the organization to a limited extent.

Attention has been given to improving the equipment of the Observer Corps, both at Posts and Centres, and new types of Observer Instrument and G.P.O. Telephone have been developed.

In order that "reliefs" may be worked satisfactorily, it has been found desirable to bring the strength of a Post up to an average of 12 men where possible, and that of a Centre up to 60 persons.

A method of height-finding using the Observer Instrument has been introduced.

A new Group (No. 17, Herts and Bucks) was formed in time to take part in the exercises of 1933, and another Group (No. 16 Norfolk and Suffolk) in time to take part in the exercises of 1935.

Further expansion of the system commences in May 1935, necessitating an increase and reorganization of the Commandant's Staff.



