



Back to the future:



Above: Colonel Gary Sullivan (centre) pictured in Helmand province, Afghanistan

Colonel Gary Sullivan OBE FCILT explains the enduring relevance of the Engineer and Logistic Staff Corps, a little-known, but hugely influential reserve unit with a structure unlike any other and a 150-year history that stems from an early recognition that the armed forces required high-level railway expertise. It has moved with the times and is now able to advise on a multiplicity of infrastructure and related issues.

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SECTOR HIGHLIGHTS



The army faces new challenges in the nature of modern warfare and responding to manpower constraints through the Army 2020 programme, and part of that challenge is increase the reliance on reservists and contractors. The Army's Whole Force Concept, requires the regular army to learn new skills whilst providing similar capability and capacity with 20,000 fewer full-time soldiers than in 2008.

Modern times call for innovative solutions, and that is just what the army has come up with in the creation of its new 77 Brigade. However, whilst our army is best known for going forward, military strategists will tell you that sometimes to succeed you have to go back before you can advance. Remember the principles of contraction and release. The journey is never a detour; it is just a way to build up your momentum and strength for the road that lies ahead, much like a catapult.



the Engineer and Logistic Staff Corps

The Engineer & Logistic Staff Corps, often referred to as the Staff Corps, was formed in 1865. Charles (later Lt Col) Manby, a former president of the Institute of Civil Engineers and erstwhile theatrical impresario, proposed the formation of a Corps of Volunteers drawn from Senior Executives of the Railway Companies (originally known as the Engineer and Railway Staff Corps), who would be commissioned into the army as officers.

General Sir William McMurdo, Inspector General of Volunteers, wrote: 'It is hoped that . . . the extreme importance of the Corps would become understood and its utility developed.' He also redefined the original aim of the corps: 'To secure unity of action throughout the Railway system of the United Kingdom in time of invasion to the end that troops and material may be transported in any required direction with certainty and the utmost rapidity. That works of construction and destruction in connection with railway communications which the exigencies of war may render necessary should be carried out with equal certainty and rapidity.'

The formation and development of the Staff Corps was a typically British solution, based on improvisation and pragmatism,

to a problem addressed in a totally different way on the continent of Europe. Prussia was acutely aware of the military importance of railways and much of its rail network was built with strategic considerations in mind. In 1858, Count Helmuth von Moltke had become the Chief of the Prussian General Staff and had set about making it a model of efficiency. The department of the General Staff responsible for mobilisation was also responsible for the efficient functioning of the railways in war and the plans for the deployment of the army. Von Moltke put theory into practice in the Seven Weeks War against Austria in 1866, during which he was not totally satisfied with the co-ordination of the movement of troops and supplies by rail, and immediately took steps to correct the few failings.

All the continental systems were conterminous and in their development and operation had to meet military requirements. A large part of the European network was state owned, and with varying degrees of success all the continental powers devised systems to regulate and control their entire wagon stock. In contrast, the railways of the UK were created in complete commercial freedom.

In the 1860s, France constructed strategic rail lines and also attempted to rebuild, train and re-equip a large army. The one crucial area the French ignored was the formation of an efficient General Staff. Their organisation for mobilisation and deployment, and for the movement of troops and supplies by rail, was minimal. When put to the test by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 it failed completely.

By 1890, all the major continental armies had adopted a General Staff system modelled on the Prussian/German Army, and every continental nation had a system for controlling railways in war. With widespread fears of invasion in the UK, the Staff Corps became more relevant to the defence of its shores and has quietly been used in support from then on. Initially a discrete unit that existed on paper, mention of it was restricted to just a few senior officers. Whilst today it is a recognised part of the British Army, sitting in the Army's 2 Star Support Division, Force Troops Command, it still remains unknown to the majority of serving officers.

Since 1865 to the present day, the Staff Corps has quietly been used to support defence. Indeed, to quote General Sir Kevin O'Donoghue: 'The perspective and



The Corps was very active during both Iraq wars



influence that [the Staff Corps] can bring to bear has served Defence well in almost every major campaign since its formation.'

That has gone well beyond its remit for efficient use of railways. Colonel Sir James Milne, who joined the Staff Corps in 1929, was Director General of aircraft production in the RAF. Colonel Sir William Halcrow, Commanding Officer of the Staff Corps 1948/9, used his knowledge of dam construction to assist Barnes Wallis and his Dambuster bomb. He also led the design of the Mulberry harbour.

The years 1970 to 1981 brought major changes to the Staff Corps and its operations, as it gradually moved towards the organisation that is recognisable today. Contact between Staff Corps members and their colleagues in the Royal Engineers and later the Royal Corps of Transport took on a more practical form after a meeting held in the Ministry of Defence in October 1971 to discuss how members could best help the regulars. In April 1972, the Engineer-in-Chief suggested to the Officer Commanding that expanding the expertise available in the Staff Corps to four new areas would benefit the work of his department. The Officer Commanding set up a committee, which recommended to the Council that the Staff Corps should aim to have six members, irrespective of rank, experienced in each of nine general disciplines, and that all new entrants should be selected accordingly. The disciplines were: roads and bridges; docks and harbours; railway civil engineering; railway electrical and mechanical engineering; water and sewage; petrol and oil engineering; mechanical and electrical engineering (other than railways); airfield design and construction; and geology and soil investigation.

In 1982, the Staff Corps was able to give valuable advice to the MOD about the Falkland Islands, as it still is today, with major defence rebuilding work underway. Support was given to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and the corps was very active during both Iraq wars, including sending subject matter experts to theatre to help re-establish power and telecoms, assist with port operations and advise on roads and bridges. The last 10 years have seen Staff Corps Officers supporting Operation Herrick in Afghanistan and work with defence to meet the changes required of the Whole Force Concept. The nature of the work done by the Staff Corps does not lend itself to recognisable military operations. It is often working in the background, a free and confidential consultancy service available across all parts of defence.

As the British Army has evolved, so has the Staff Corps. In addition to the obvious roles of engineering, construction and logistics, today you can add stabilisation, communications and business management to its ever-growing portfolio.

The army has to learn new skills quickly. It has to respond to the increasing pace of technological change and manage an integrated force of contractors and reservists whilst dealing with enemies

that are agile and intelligent in the exploitation of lumbering state machinery. Numbering just 30 majors, 20 lieutenant colonels and 10 colonels, you might think the impact of this unit may be limited. The very British approach of this unique unit, made up of chief executives and chairmen of blue-chip businesses, is, in fact, a significant force multiplier. The reach and knowledge that can be harnessed through its business network is possibly as beneficial as the subject matter experts that serve, and of course, the employees in those businesses may be reservists, too.

As those of us in the private sector know only too well, change management is a constant process that requires a difficult mix of retaining your brand integrity and using your history and experience whilst meeting the demand of tomorrow's markets. We have to look back at what we have done well, retain that corporate knowledge and step into the unknown: the future.

In his foreword to a book¹ on the history of the Staff Corps, General Sir Kevin O'Donoghue says: 'The Staff Corps was formed in the days of steam and sail; it is arguably even more relevant and valuable in the days of cyber space.'

About the author

Colonel Gary Sullivan OBE FCILT is Chairman, construction logistics company Wilson James Ltd, and Chairman, Active Essex. He is the co-author of *Managing Construction Logistics*.



Above: The Corps provide experts to assist with port operations and advise on development of roads and bridges

REFERENCE

1. With acknowledgement to Colonel David Hindle and his book: *The History of the Engineer and Logistic Staff Corps*