

Raising Kitchener's armies

On August 4th 1914, the day war was declared, the strength of Britain's army, including the special reserve and the Territorial Force, was 733,514. However, between August 1914 and November 1918, 5,704,416 men passed through the ranks of the British Army. The overall total of those who served was just over 22% of the male population.

By the end of 1915 Britain's army comprised of three elements, *Regular Army*, *Territorial Force* and Kitchener's *New Army*. Unlike these three distinct elements, the conscripts who followed in 1916 were raised for general service and posted to units as required. There were two main types of reserve in 1914; The *Army Reserve* and the *Special Reserve*. The Army Reserve in 1914 was just over its establishment of 145,000. The Special Reserve was created out of Haldane's reforms of 1906-08 and arose out of the 'old militia,' a body which provided the army with a partially trained reserve force.

The Territorial Force was raised and administered by local County Associations. In 1914 it could raise fourteen infantry divisions and fourteen mounted yeomanry divisions. However it was consistently below establishment before the war and in July 1914 it numbered 268,777 officers and men.

Although the BEF was committed to fight in a continental war the implications for that commitment had not been fully prepared for. There were no definite plans for raising a mass army, or for a corresponding growth in munitions production. There was a huge chasm between Britain's chosen commitment and her military organisation or long-term planning. The pre-war regular army required an annual intake of 35,000 men, yet from 1908-1913 only achieved, or exceeded this figure twice. The average intake during these years being 29,626. In May 1914 it was 11,000 men (6%) below its peacetime establishment.

Kitchener and Haig both correctly recognised that the war would be a long conflict and would require a huge military force to fight it. Kitchener foresaw that Britain's full military might would not be deployed until 1917. On 7th August 1914, after securing parliamentary approval for an increase in the army to 500,000 men, he published his first appeal for 100,000 men, aged between 19 and 30, who were to enlist for three years or the duration of the war.

Despite the perceived ideas of the Great War, voluntary enlistment got off to a moderately slow start. Between 4th and 8th August the total number of men attested over the whole country was 8,193, an average daily intake of 1,640. On Sunday 9th August 2,433 enlisted nationally, of those, half enlisted in London. However, these figures may not be true reflection of the men who wished to volunteer and were kept waiting, fruitlessly outside recruiting centres. The number of recruits rose steadily to 7,020 on 11th August and 9,699 a week later. Even these modest numbers clogged up the recruiting system, which was geared up to an annual pre-war intake of 35,000 men. In the weeks after 11th August enlistment totals began to exceed 10,000 a day and climbed steeply to 33,204 on 3rd September, the highest number attested on a single day. The peak in recruiting occurred in September when 462,901 men enlisted. In the first eight weeks 761,000 had joined the army, but by 30th September daily returns had fallen to below 4,000. Factors can be attributed to the increase in recruiting. Firstly, the news surrounding the battle and retreat from Mons. Secondly, the appeal from Kitchener on 28th August which raised the upper age limit to 35. Thirdly, the increase in civilian participation in the recruiting process that relieved pressure on the military authorities and fourthly the raising of the Pals battalions.

The famous Kitchener poster, which bore his pointing finger with the words "*Your Country Needs You*" was designed by Alfred Leete and first appeared on the cover of the magazine *London Opinion* on 5th

September 1915. The following week the magazine offered postcard size copies at 1s 4d per hundred. It began to be issued by the end of September 1914 and is arguably one of the most famous posters of the period, associated with the recruitment drive. Ironically, by the time it was circulated recruitment was declining and it had no effect on overall recruitment numbers.

Voluntary recruiting began to decline by October 1914. In October 136,811 men enlisted. There was a slight increase in November to 169,862 enlistments, but in December the figure fell again to 117,860. Another brief rise in January 1915 of 156,290, but in February the monthly figure fell below the 100,000 mark for the first time since August 1914 with only 87,896 men volunteering. The downward trend was also reflected in local recruitment numbers in towns and cities. There were a number of reasons for the decline. Some can be attributed to the widespread circulation of stories concerning the problems new recruits were experiencing in terms of overcrowding in regimental depots and barracks, old and those also newly built. Plus the lack of uniforms and equipment. Another factor was the inefficiency of the military administrative machine in failing to pay the separation allowances to the wives of married men. Within two weeks of the declaration of war the number of wives eligible for separation allowance rose from 1,500 to 250,000 and continued to climb.

The most visible and remembered element of the recruitment drive was the forming of the Pals Battalions. Raised by local authorities, industrialists, or committees of private citizens and composed of men from particular districts, towns or cities who shared a common social or occupational background. In terms of infantry battalions alone the Pals units contributed a substantial proportion to Kitchener's Army. 250 Service battalions and 82 reserve battalions were raised by the normal machinery, 145 and 70 reserve battalions were locally raised.

Very few *New Army* units had sufficient re-enlisted NCOs or soldiers to fill the NCO vacancies; it was therefore left to battalion commanders to make up the numbers by finding suitable recruits. This process was extremely subjective and led to all manner of quirky selection processes. In the 15th and 16th Battalions of the Cheshire Regiment (1st, 2nd Birkenhead Bantams) any man who had been a Boy Scout was made an NCO. The CO of the 6th Northamptonshire Regiment also gave preference to former Boy Scouts, Boys Brigade, or Church Lads' Brigade members. The CO of the 10th Essex Regiment opted for the smartly dressed, *"A straw hat or a bowler determined the choice of the lance-corporal, while a really clean white collar in addition to a decent hat was the surest passport to the rank of corporal."* Second Lieutenant Harold Hemmings of the 12th West Yorkshire Regiment picked only those men who had moustaches.

Officers were also required. At the outbreak of war there were 28,060 officers available, including 12,738 Regulars and 9,563 Territorials. 3,202 in the Reserve of Officers and 1,557 in the Special Reserve Units. Some 500 Indian Army officers on leave in the UK in 1914 were held back from returning to their regiments. Retired officers were also called upon to serve; known as 'dug-outs.'

Despite all the problems with recruiting and manpower, the New Armies performed remarkably well against the well-trained and experienced German Army facing them.

