

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTACT PATROLS

A Short History of Appendix B of SS135



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Our contact patrols saved us from the world of those most distressing of casualties, the losses inflicted on troops by their own guns (Sir Walter Raleigh: *The Official History of the War in the Air*, Vol 1, p9)

Introduction

One of those lesser-known aspects of the air war part during the First World War is the Contact Patrol; basically this was a means to find out where your own troops were during an advance and was performed by the Corps Wings of the RFC, along with their short distance reconnaissance, bombing, photography, counter battery and trench work. Consequently there is considerable overlapping of not only personnel and aircraft involved in these roles but also methods and devices used, which readers interested in air and artillery co-operation may wish to note.

The Contact Patrol is not a small subject, as I have found looking through the documentation in The National Archives, and this article does not cover all of its aspects. There is more on the Infantry Contact Patrol as well as the Cavalry and Tank versions, which I am working on. This text is based on a talk I gave at the Military History Circle at the Royal United Services Institute in 2007 and the feedback I received from that, particularly from Geoff Spring (a First World War artillery expert) who read an earlier draft and made many useful comments, for which I am very thankful.

This article concerns development of *Appendix 'B' (The Co-operation between Aircraft and Infantry)* of S.S. 135 (*The Training and Employment of Divisions*) and the documentation and ideas behind it. Many of the Stationary Service Documents (a large number are held in the Imperial War Museum) are what we would now call SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures); others are of 'lessons learned' from various battles; some are translations of German documents, which were distributed throughout the BEF.

An example of the latter is S.S. 563 *Communication between Infantry and Aeroplanes or Captive Balloons*. German contact patrols in other words; this was printed in Berlin in 1917 and

in full distribution amongst British units that would need the information by the end of June 1917! The British Army of 1914-1918 was a very large organization and it did have a brain: information and ideas did not just flow downwards; ideas came from below as well, and were asked for by the 'Chateau Generals'!

Appendix 'B' was published from December 1916 onwards with amendments made as the war progressed and lessons were learned. This document also had a prehistory of trials and battle experience from 1915 onward, which I have endeavoured to explain here. I hope to show at least some of the thinking that went into trying to solve the problems that arose in attempting to locate the position of advancing troops, and getting that information back where it was needed, using the then new medium of the aeroplane. This went on right to the end of the war and had to try to overcome the limits of the technology of the day as well as a difficult operational environment, which, by 1918, was changing rapidly.

It should be noted that many 'failed' devices mentioned lack a detailed description. This is due to absence of information in the AIR 1 documents consulted, due either to 'they knew what they were talking about', so no description was needed, or sometimes to the relevant 'annex' being missing (weeded at a later date, probably). I apologise for this, as the information may be 'out there' but I have not yet found it. Photographs of the ground equipment used, and aircraft 'marked up' for contact patrols also appear rare; this may be due to them not being recognized for what they are, rather than to non-existence. For example, does any reader know how the 'Klaxon' was fitted to aircraft? Publications just mention 'operated by a button switch', but it must have been fitted internally or it would be visible on many 'Corps' aircraft.