

**THE TOPOGRAPHICAL
SECTION OF THE
GENERAL STAFF**

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The Topographical Section of the General Staff by G. R. Frith

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G. R. FRITH

**THE TOPOGRAPHICAL
SECTION OF THE
GENERAL STAFF**

THE
TOPOGRAPHICAL SECTION
OF THE
GENERAL STAFF:

WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SERVICES OF THE
AUSTRIAN, FRENCH, GERMAN, AND RUSSIAN, ARMIES.

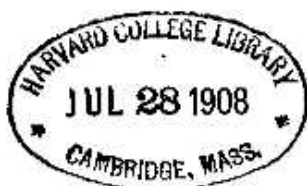
*Written by direction of Maj.-Gen. J. M. Grierson, C.V.O., C.B., C.M.G.,
Director of Military Operations.*

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GREAT BRITAIN.

Topographical Section of the General Staff.

In tracing the history of the origin and development of the Department, now designated the Topographical Section of the General Staff, it is necessary to follow somewhat closely that of the Ordnance Survey, especially in its earlier stages. One is the complement of the other; and the Topographical Section may be regarded as derived from the Ordnance Survey, though it was not formed directly from it, and in the first years of its existence had no connection with it. In continental armies the Topographical Sections of the Staff are responsible for the work, which in Great Britain is divided between the Ordnance Survey and the Topographical Section of the General Staff. The military side of the Ordnance Survey is apt to be lost sight of to-day, placed as it is under a civil Department of State, and a major portion of its work being cadastral, rather than military. Its establishment was due to the need felt for an accurate map of the country for purposes of defence; and for upwards of 70 years it remained under the War Department, at one period being actually combined with the Topographical Section. When by the establishment of the Ordnance Survey, the provision of an accurate military map of the British Isles had been assured, an extension of the existing department, or the formation of a new one, which should devote itself to the collection of geographical and topographical information about the Colonies and foreign countries, would seem a logical sequel in a country with such vast oversea interests as Great Britain. Logic, however, has an unfortunate faculty of appearing illogical when the conclusion to which it points necessitates the expenditure of money. A branch of the Quartermaster-General's department, formed in 1803, seemed to

promise to develop into such a department, but, either because it came into existence before the need of such a branch was fully recognized, or because the lines on which it was organized were defective, probably from both causes, it never developed, and, though lingering on as an appanage of the Quartermaster-General's Department till absorbed by the newly-formed Topographical and Statistical Department in 1857, it appears to have done little in the direction of collecting information, either topographical or otherwise. Not till 1855 was the department formed, of which the present Directorate of Military Operations is the outcome.

After the rebellion of 1745 had been finally crushed at Culloden, and military posts established throughout the Highlands, Lieut-General Watson, at that time (1747) Deputy Quartermaster-General in North Britain, recognizing the necessity of having a good map of a wild and rugged region, which had so lately been the scene of military operations, and might be so again, directed Maj.-General Roy, R.E., then Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General, to undertake the task.

This survey, which was afterwards extended to the Lowlands of Scotland, was not based on any great triangulation; but was more of the nature of a "magnificent military sketch" to quote General Roy's own description of his work. The map was never completed, or published, the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in 1756 necessitating the employment elsewhere of the Officers engaged upon it.

Although never completed, this survey is important as being the first large military survey undertaken in Great Britain and the forerunner of the Ordnance Survey. In that it marked an official recognition of the necessity of preparing maps of possible theatres of military operations, it may be regarded as the germ of an idea which more than a century later developed into a Military Topographical Department.

On the conclusion of peace in 1763 the question of undertaking a Topographical Survey of the whole of Great Britain came for the first time under the consideration of the Government. General Roy, who was to be placed in charge of the work, proposed to utilize the topographical work already executed in Scotland, for filling in

the detail of the trigonometrical survey in that part. Again war postponed the work, the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1776 turning the attention of the authorities in another direction.

With the advent of peace in 1783, General Roy thought the time favourable to bring forward once more the question of a national survey. Finding himself detained in London during the summer of that year he conceived the idea of making a small trigonometrical survey of the immediate neighbourhood of the capital; such a survey would not only be of scientific value by connecting the several observatories in and around London, but would, he hoped, arouse public interest, and lead to a revival of the scheme of 1763.

As the foundation for his proposed survey General Roy measured a base of 7744·3 feet across the fields between the Jews Harp near Marylebone, and Black Lane near Pancras.

This instance of individual effort towards the commencement of a national survey was paralleled many years later when Major Jervis, in furtherance of his scheme for the establishment of a Topographical Department, reproduced, at his own expense, maps of the Crimea for use in the war which had just broken out.

General Roy's efforts were to be seconded from a totally unexpected quarter. In October 1783 Comte d'Adhemar, then French Ambassador to the Court of St. James, transmitted to Mr. Fox, at that time Foreign Secretary, a memoir by M. Cassini de Thury, in which the latter showed the great benefit which would accrue to astronomy, by carrying a series of triangles from London to Dover, and connecting them with those already executed in France, thus determining accurately the relative positions of the observatories of Greenwich and Paris. This proposal was communicated to the Royal Society, and, being warmly taken up by them, with the approval and financial assistance of the King, the task was entrusted to General Roy to carry out.

On the 16th of April, 1784, General Roy, accompanied by Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, Mr. Cavendish, and Dr. Blagden, began operations for measuring a base on Hounslow Heath. The measurement of this base line may be called the

commencement of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain ; though not till 1791, on the initiative of the Duke of Richmond, then Master General of the Ordnance, was the order given for a survey of the whole country to be commenced, for the purpose of producing a military map of the United Kingdom.

The establishment of a national survey having ensured the provision, both for military and civil purposes, of accurate maps of the United Kingdom, an extension of the geographical service to include the Colonies and foreign countries was the next requirement. In 1803 the value of a department which should collect information, both topographical and statistical, not only about Great Britain and her Colonies, but about foreign countries, appears to have been realized by the authorities. With whom the idea for the formation of such a department originated is difficult to trace, nor are the functions which it was intended to fulfil, or the work which it actually did, quite clear.

The department which enjoyed the quaint title of *Depôt* (or *Deposit*) of Military Knowledge was a branch of the Quartermaster-General's department. In a letter from the Duke of York, then Commander-in-Chief, dated 3rd August, 1805, it is stated that the formation of such a department was authorized by the Government in April, 1803.

The general principles on which the establishment was formed were detailed in a memorandum sent to Mr. Pitt by the Commander-in-Chief in 1804, this unfortunately is not obtainable, but the covering letter gives a general idea of the proposed organization of the department, and is as follows:—

" Horse Guards,
28th June, 1804.

SIR,

I request to call your attention to some circumstances which are essential to the formation of a deposit for military knowledge, which was last year authorized to be formed under the Q.M.G. by His Majesty's Government.

It was proposed that this establishment should be classed under three heads:—

1. A military library.
2. A drawing room for copying plans and containing a collection of the best plans and maps.
3. A deposit of all military information which could be collected from the manuscripts of Officers who now occupy, or may formerly have held staff situations; or who may have been employed upon foreign service.

* * * * *

I am further to recommend the propriety of two additional clerks, and also two regular draftsmen, being granted solely for the duties of this branch of the department, it having been found (from the great pressure of business) impossible to apply the clerks now in the office to any purpose beyond the daily correspondence and detail.

The circumstances of this undertaking having been entered upon at the beginning of a war has retarded its progress, the more urgent claim of public service having called for the attention of the Officers intended to conduct it.

A beginning has however been made, and books and maps to the value of betwixt £400 and £500 collected:—

* * * * *

I am, Sir,

Yours,

(Sd.) FREDERICK."

From a letter of the Duke's dated August 3rd, 1805, to Viscount Castlereagh, it appears that the office was divided into two branches, each under an "Officer of approved knowledge," one to have charge of the plans and maps and direct the drawing room, the other to have the direction of the manuscripts and library.

In addition two D.A.Q.M.G's. were to be appointed to aid these Officers.