

# ROYAL MARINES TRANSPORT - By Chris Davies (Ex R.M.)

## (FORMATION SIGNS AND UNIFORM INSIGNIA, 1939-46)

A letter from a Dutch M.V.C.G. member, Bert Van Puffelen, started an enquiry at RMB Eastney which showed a distinct lack of vehicle photos in the Corps archives. However, a letter in the Corps magazine produced a number of interesting replies and photographs which I reproduce here in the hope that they may assist others with various projects. Another reason for my enquiry was to elicit information on Royal Marines vehicle and uniform insignia during the Second World War. Although markings are subjected to strict rules, I should warn students of this fascinating aspect of heraldry that these rules are frequently bent, if not disregarded altogether. One thing I have learnt above all is that I must not be dogmatic. My letter also produced a number of reminiscences which I found quite absorbing and which made me realise just how robust war-time vehicles had to be. For example, John Dodgeson was with 1 RM Coast Regt., part of MNBDO 1 (Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation) equipped with 4 and 6 inch guns. John remembers that early in 1944 he had occasion to ride a BSA M20 motorcycle from Bombay to Kalapur, a return journey of 721 miles. He carried extra petrol on the panniers and the journey was mainly on un-madeup roads. He said, 'The vibration was unbelievable. Both petrol tanks split, the headlamp and front mud-guard brackets broke and, finally, 100 miles from home, the fork head race collapsed. The steering seized solid and every corner I could not lean into meant stopping and lifting the bike round. The whole of that 100 miles was in darkness. Only the strength of the BSA kept me moving and a 16H Norton would not have made it.'

MNBDO 1 comprised some 5,000 men and was formed in 1939. It contained mainly coast artillery batterys, anti-aircraft batterys, a searchlight regiment, a landing and maintenance unit and a land defence force, 11th RM Battalion. The unit served mainly in the Middle East and Far East and was disbanded in 1944. Whilst in Egypt John was photographed astride a BSA No. C4388466 (photo A). Note the locally-made air filter on the right pannier which was a toolbox stuffed with wire wool. Apparently, 'a very large number of BSAs were so equipped, but not the Nortons.' All vehicles were painted in Light Stone and very few had unit markings. On bikes, the number was repeated on the petrol tank with a large C circling the first digit, and the headlamp mask was simply 'a disc of metal with two horizontal slots.'

Photo B was taken in Singapore in 1945 and shows POX 118316(D) Mne Bill Laker on an Ariel of MONAB 1X (Mobile Naval Advanced Base). Note the 'desert type' air filter on the petrol tank, the Royal Navy number plate (53060 RN) on the tailboard in the garage and the RAF type roundel on the Bedford QL, together with the number 118785 RN painted on the front panel. It is interesting to see the plate for gas paint still fitted in front of the QL's driving window even at this late date.



Photo A

(Photo C is on Page 29)



Photo B

Continuing on the MONAB theme, Sgt PO/X 102085 Bob Kent served at HMS Grebe, the Royal Naval Air Station, Dekhelia (see photos C and D). All Corps transport had RN number plates together with a dark blue shield

with diagonal Corps colours of yellow, green and red stripes on it, on the offside wing. After discussion, we now think that this was an unofficial marking. HMS Grebe was used as a final training phase for young Fleet Air Arm pilots who not infrequently, when practising dive-bombing techniques in the desert area, left pulling up a bit too late. The wrecker was then used to winch out planes and pilots. A grisly job best left to bootnecks! Bob also served with the driver training wing of MNBDO II at Fort Cumberland, Portsmouth, where the unit marking was a circle with Corps colours similar to the shield already described, but with a white Polar Bear in the centre, inherited, he believes, from MNBDO I as they came out of Norway. In fact, Fortress Unit 1 went to Norway in 1940. Although independent of the MNBDOs, this unit was administered from Fort Cumberland and when it returned in October its 200 members were absorbed into MNBDO II, so Bob's theory bears (no pun intended) some weight (see photo E). Together with C/Sgt Jim Twigger, Bob went on to form the first RM Motorcycle display team at Hayling Island, using stripped down service Matchless bikes. They gave many displays in the Portsmouth area before moving to Alexandria where the famous Bar None motorcycle club was formed.



Photo D



Photo E

PL/X2296 Sgt A.E. Williams sent a lot of useful uniform information, together with the photograph of Mne Belcher on a BSA of HQ Signals Coy, 117 RM Infantry Brigade, taken at Birchington, Kent, in 1945 (see photo F). This shows the bike number as C 4351763 and the serial 29 in red/white on a white/blue square. This brigade was very short-lived. Formed on 16th January, 1945, its three battalions were 31st RM, 32nd RM and 33rd RM. The brigade formation sign was a yellow fouled anchor on a red circle inside a yellow eight-pointed star. It is reported as being not generally issued and worn after mid-May, 1945. Whether it appeared on vehicles is not known. Mne Belcher also appears to be wearing 'RM' shoulder brasses in addition to the 'Royal Marines' shoulder title in red on blue. 117 Bde took some casualties in Germany at the end of the war, serving mainly in the Keil area. It was disbanded in August, 1945.



Photo F

Equally short-lived was 116 Infantry Brigade RM which used the formation sign of a yellow trident on an inverted, elongated red triangle. This was the old RM Division sign which was 9" x 14" when painted on vehicles. The Battalions were 27th RM, 28th RM and 30th RM and we know that Brigade HQ tac sign was a white figure 1 on a black square, while the Signals Co was a red figure 3 on a blue/white square. This brigade formed in January, 1945, was in action in NW Europe during the last three months of the war and was disbanded in June, 1945. It is interesting to note that the 28th RM Battalion, which served as infantry, was largely made up of crews from the disbanded 1st Armoured Support Regiment which had used Centaur

95mm Gun-Howitzers and Sherman Command tanks during the D-Day landings (see photo G.) Although not apparent in this photo, the unit's tac sign was a dark blue square with the Corps colours striped across horizontally with a superimposed battery number, 1 to 5. Although designed originally to be engine-less tanks firing from landing craft, it was decided to refit the engines and RAC maintenance crews and RA drivers were hurriedly drafted into the regiment, together with one Sherman OP tank per four Centaurs. Altogether, 80 Centaurs and 20 Shermans landed and as they were only expected to be ashore for one day,



Photo G

HQ was a Jeep and in one case a 'borrowed' Canadian bren carrier. In fact, the unit was ashore for several weeks and carried out useful fire-support missions supporting 4 (Army) Commando and 48 Commando RM as well as the Canadian units. On being withdrawn on 24th June, it was found that 50% of the Centaurs had suffered mechanical failures.

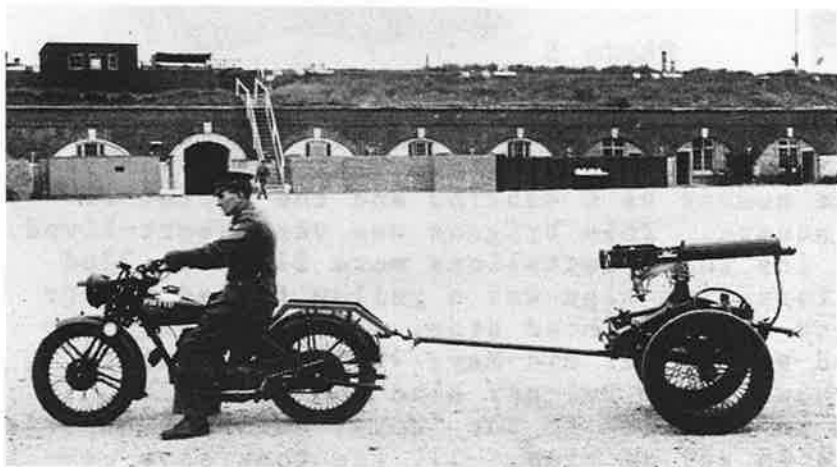


Photo H

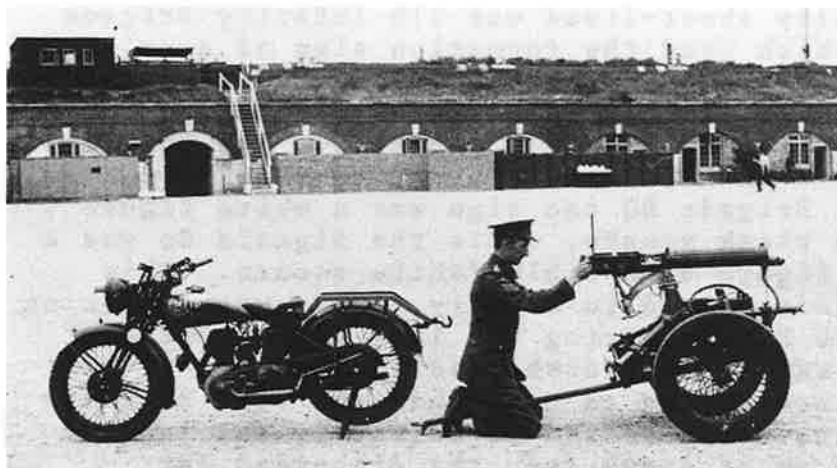


Photo I

Fred Self wrote from Canada and described himself as a 'Dispatch rider of pre-war vintage'. Apparently, the marines had very little transport pre-war and the first bikes acquired at Fort Cumberland were BSA 650cc V-twins, simply painted green with RN number plates. Dress in the early war years was the old khaki uniform and high puttees with soft field service caps (see photos H and I). Fred had the 'rather alarming and honoured' job of riding with dispatches from H.M. The King from London to Chatham, then along the old coast road to Portsmouth - and on to Plymouth! With only a cape on top, needles to say, it rained for the whole journey. Us young bikers don't know we're born! Later, motorcyclists were issued with the dome helmets which were painted green and decorated either with a white band or one in Corps colours, together

with the white/blue DonRs flash on either side.

Mrs. N. Whaley sent a photograph of her late Father, Colonel T.B.W. Sandall, R.M., who was the C.O. of Dalditch Camp, Woodbury, Devon, where the 7th Battalion were in residence. The early Norton shown was painted khaki dark earth with no markings, but note the unpainted engine block and the unusual headlamp mask cutaway (see photo J).

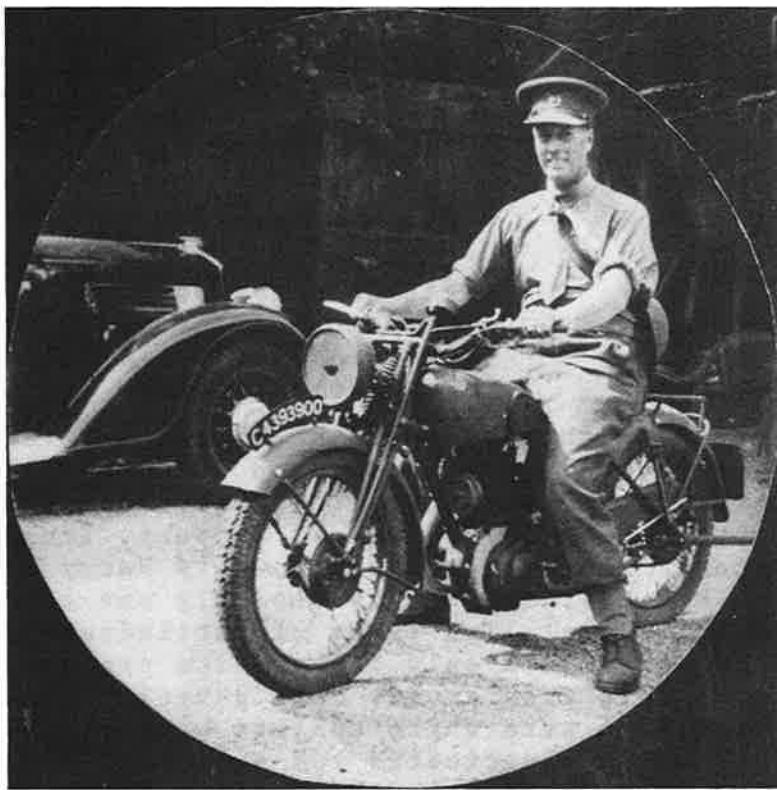


Photo J

The next four photographs show Royal Marines Provost personnel and machines. The first, photo K, shows members of the Portsmouth Detachment outside their HQ in Southsea during 1943, together with a Bedford 15cwt and, I believe, yet another BSA M20. The staff are wearing blues



Photo K  
Portsmouth Detachment Royal Marines  
Provost 1943



Photo L  
Boliver, Singapore

with the pre-war leather belt equipment and .38 revolvers on a green lanyard. Although not apparent, a blue armband was worn on the upper right arm with RMP in red. Marines had a red cap band which would have clashed with the red MP cap cover, so a blue naval cap was worn instead by Provost staff. Unfortunately no tac markings are visible, but of note is the red MP on a white ground on the motorcycle's mudguard. This is repeated in the next photo taken in Singapore in November, 1945, by Mr. W. Bolivers showing Corporal 'Scouse' Threlfall, hopefully, off duty (see photo L). Also taken in Singapore, the next photo shows Cpl. Len



Photo M  
Boliver, Singapore;  
Len Johnson, November '45



Photo N  
Group of RM Provost Section at HMS  
Commonwealth, Kure, Japan, Feb. 1946.  
Detached for 35 Royal Marines Provost  
Company, Singapore. (Harry Playford, RM  
Corps Archivist, standing, front row  
2nd from right).

Johnson wearing greens with a standard khaki cap and red cover (see photo M). Note the unusual door marking on the CMP cab door. The next photo was taken at HMS Commonwealth, Kure, Japan, in February, 1946, and shows a detachment from 35 RM Provost Company, Singapore (see photo N). Standing, second from right, front row, is Harry Playford, now the Photo Archivist at RMB Eastney, who is the only one correctly dressed, wearing a whistle and chain! Two types of battledress are worn, with Royal Marines' shoulder titles only. The white crossbelt is absent and pistols were worn in this fashion for Jeep patrol, with a single strand green lanyard. Also worn were white anklets with blackened straps. As a matter of interest, the elasticated red cap cover was dampened then spun round, throwing the creases to the front. After being placed on the cap, the creases were fanned out from the badge into a 'sunburst' of 13 creases, according to my old RMP instructor at Chichester. I hear cries of Bull and others, but we were there to set an example, after all. These men were the last RM Provost of the war years as the branch was disbanded in 1946, being reformed in 1962.



Photo P



Photo Q

Jim Brockbank (standing, centre) like a good Marine did as asked and sent in two photos showing a Bedford water bowser at Fan-Ling and an immaculate Jeep of B troop, 44 Commando at Tsun-Wan, New Territories, Kowloon, in January, 1946 (see photos P and Q). By this time, Royal had stopped wearing the badge over the left ear and appears to be wearing it correctly, over the left eye.

PO/X 112291 Mne Bill Crampin sent a picture of his 'home' during his time with A troop, E battery, 3rd RM Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment (see photo R). The photo was taken on the Scheldt on VE day, 1945, and shows a Morris Office type body containing early warning equipment linked to a



Photo R  
Bill Crampin

rotating roof aerial display. As part of 5 AA Brigade, this unit formed an anti-aircraft ring around Antwerp and the ops. room recorded 483 V1 and 313 V2 rocket incidents from 12 November to 12 December, 1944. Although not confirmed, it is likely that Royal Artillery tac marks were used and Bill wore the blue shield with red cross of 8th Infantry Division, so this is probably also the formation sign used on his vehicle.

Slightly more up to date is the photo sent in by RM 18876 Mne D. Whittaker of his Humber 1-ton, taken in Aden in 1961 (see photo S). The white figure 9 on a red/blue square is the tac mark of 45 Commando RM.

Returning to the war years, another known marking is that of 34th Amphibian Support Regiment which was a dark blue shield with an inverted red triangle, bordered in yellow, on which was a yellow fouled anchor. Formed in March, 1945, with 43 Officers and 726 other ranks, it was equipped with Alligator LVTs and carried out infantry internal security duties in SE Asia until disbandment in 1946. It is possible that this tac sign was used on LVTs at the time of the Walcheren landings in 1944, but not confirmed.



Photo S  
RM 18876 Mne. D. Whittaker, Aden 1960-1961

Not covered so far, and forming a large part of the Corps strength from 1943 onwards, are the Commando units. Numbered from 40 to 48, they came under the command of the Special Service Commando Group, together with Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9 Army Commandos. There were four SS Cdo Brigade HQs, each administering four Commandos, which, at this time, numbered about 450 men but with many attached sub units. The tactical signs for the SS Group were as follows, at the time of D-Day Landings.

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Arm of service coloured square</u>
HQ Special Service Group	40	Black (see note 1)
1 RM Engineer Commando	49	Blue
SS Group Signals	52	White over blue
Group Light Aid Detach.	40	Blue/yellow/red
1SS Brigade HQ	81	Red

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Arm of service coloured square</u>
3(Army) Commando	55	Red (see note 2)
4(Army) Commando	56	Red
6(Army) Commando	57	Red
45 RM Commando	58	Red
2 SS Brigade HQ	87	Green
2(Army) Commando	59	Green
9(Army) Commando	60	Green (see note 3)
40 RM Commando	61	Green
43 RM Commando	62	Green
3 SS Brigade HQ	94	Brown
1(Army) Commando	66	Brown
5(Army) Commando	67	Brown (see note 4)
42 RM Commando	68	Brown
44 RM Commando	69	Brown
4 SS Brigade HQ	100	Red over Black
41 RM Commando	92	Red over Black
46 RM Commando	93	Red over Black (see note 5)
47 RM Commando	95	Red over Black
48 RM Commando	96	Red over Black
Group Postal Unit	80	Black
Group Provost Section	79	Black
Group Field Security Sec.	40	Black
Special Boat Unit	41	Green over Blue
Holding Commando (Wrexham)	97	Black
Commando Depot (Achnacarry)	98	Black
Cdo. Mountain Warfare School (St. Ives)	99	Black
Second Echelon	2E	Black

#### Notes ref. above

1. In November 1944 the title SS was dropped and Commando Group substituted.
2. 1 SS Bde were withdrawn 83 days after D-Day and returned to NW Europe in January, 1945, with Nos 3(Army), 6(Army), 45 RM and 46 RM under command.
3. 2 SS Bde were under Army command in 1944 and served in Italy, the Dalmatian Islands, Albania and Greece.
4. 3 SS Bde served mainly in Egypt, India and the Far East.
5. For the Walcheren landings, 46 RM were replaced by 4(Army) Cdo. 4 SS Bde landed on Sword beach except 47 RM which landed on Gold beach, joining the Bde later.

#### COMMANDO BATTLE DRESS INSIGNIA

The shoulder title **differed from other regiments in that the Cdo number, 40, 41 etc., was worn above the title 'Royal Marines' and 'Commando'**. Below this was worn the red dagger on a blue felt segment (from late 1944) or, more probably, the 'Combined Ops' Eagle, Tommy gun and anchor. This was worn on either arm with the gun pointing forward. I must also mention the 104 RM (Training) Brigade, as its unit flash was a yellow seahorse over a blue circle on a red inverted segment. This badge is quite famous within the Corps and is known universally as the 'Pregnant Prawn'.

Finally, remember what I said about badges over the left ear? Marine Jack Grandfield had this excellent study taken with a captured German

box camera at Keil in May, 1945 (see photo T). He is wearing crossed flags (Signals SQ) and a long-service stripe on the left forearm and Royal Marines shoulder title. The ubiquitous BSA M20 has the C number painted on the petrol tank above 57 on black which was 117 RM Brigade's tac sign. The machine is in dark earth with a 'desert' air filter still fitted on the petrol tank. In the background can be seen the Z number of a small water bowser with a canvas cover, to make it resemble a G.S. truck.



Jack Grandfield must have the last word. He said in his letter that he completed *'Six years less a month in what I consider now, but perhaps didn't at the time, to be one of the finest Corps in the world.'*

Chris Davies

Photo T

Sources:

*The Royal Marines 1919-1980* by James Ladd, *Military Vehicle Markings* by Terence Wise. All those ex-Royals mentioned and Mr R W Clarke, Australia and Ex C/Sgt Malcolm Batten.

Photographs: K & N (Corps Museum Archives).

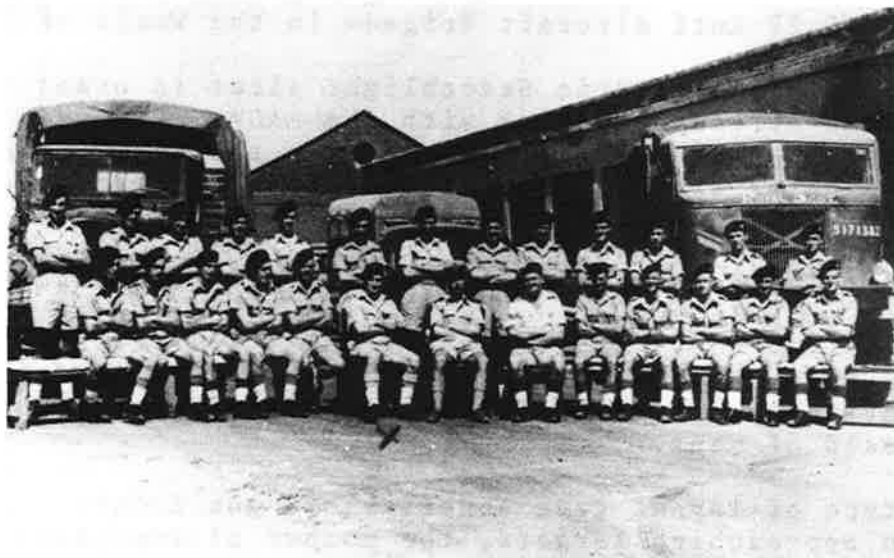


Photo C