

**How much do you know about the cap badges of the Royal Marine Labour Corps during The Great War? The RMHS Honorary Secretary has discovered some controversy which nearly amounted to**

## **The Cap Badge ‘Mutiny’**

by John Rawlinson

**W**hen researching the badges worn by Royal Marine Engineers during the First World War, I found reference at The National Archives to a file that appeared to promise much, entitled “Provision of a distinctive badge for Royal Marine Engineers 1918” ADM1/8527/162. Unfortunately the file had been misplaced and it was to take over a year for it to re-appear. When I eventually read the file only the first page made reference to the cap badge worn by the RME, the rest of the file told a far more interesting story of the problems caused by the introduction of a new badge to be worn by the Royal Marine Labour Corps.



RMLC Private photographed at Deal wearing the controversial Cap letters

The Royal Marins Labour Corps was formed on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1917 to resolve the manpower needs created in French ports caused by the need to unload the vast amount of stores being shipped to support the British Expeditionary Force. The hub of the unit was created by transferring two companies of Army Service Corps personnel to it; however additional recruitment was soon opened in all the major English ports. The men had to be over 41, the maximum age for combat units at that time; many of those who did volunteer were over 50 and saw the RMLC as a way to do their bit for the war effort in France. Eventually almost 8,000 men attested into the RMLC for service in France.<sup>1</sup> As they were recruited to be dock workers there was no desire or need to train these men at drill, turnout or with weapons, therefore they received little military training. Although never involved at the front line, the ports were frequently shelled and the RMLC suffered 25 men killed by enemy action, 14 more were killed in accidents and a further 95 men died of disease or natural causes. During the war the RMLC were awarded three OBEs, one DSC, seven DSMs, eleven MSMs and 59 mentions in despatches for service in France.

<sup>1</sup> The ADM157 file series has attestation papers for 7,995 volunteers for the RMLC. However, Blumberg gives a figure of 4,908 deployed at French ports. Two factors effect these figures, firstly given the age of the men volunteering it may be that many who attested were unsuitable for the Service and secondly those who did serve were assessed regularly to see if their class had improved and many thus went on to join combat units.

At the end of 1917 a new Royal Marines unit, No1 (Home Service) Labour Company was raised from conscripts of lower health classes to assist with the handling of mines at the Royal Navy mining depots. These men were born on the strength of Chatham Division and were known as the RMLC (New).

The men of the RMLC in France wore the RMLI undress blue tunic with RMLC shoulder titles, blue trousers without the red stripe and Broderick caps and the Globe and Laurel badge without the bugle horn. At some point after their formation, as a mark of their good service, they were allowed to wear Globe and Laurel collar badges on their tunics. The Corps Journal carried a series of articles about these men. However it would seem that the RMLI took offence to the similar appearance between their own uniform and that worn by the "untrained and unsoldierlike" men of the Labour Corps. By 1918 the voices calling for some way to differentiate the men of the RMLC from their more military cousins in the RMLI were heard and, after consultation with the Principal Naval Transport Officer (PNTTO), the order was given for the men to wear the RMLC letters on their caps below the Globe and Laurel badge.

This order was to lead to a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst the volunteers of the RMLC in France, Captain James Paterson, OC RM Labour Camp, Rouen wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cator, OC RMLC on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1918 with the first reports of the problem:

Sir,

I have the honour to report that deputations of men from both the Rouen and Quevilly camps have interviewed me on wearing the letters RMLC in their caps. The latter has only now cropped up since the arrivals of the numerals and the issue of the same.

There is a very strong feeling amongst the men about the wearing of this distinctive emblem. On enquiry from the representatives of the men, I find they are of the opinion they are being stigmatised in some special way on account of them belonging to a Labour Company, and they feel hurt that they, as a body of volunteers who are doing effective work in France, should be so distinguished.

The feeling is that the order has been given to distinguish them from the RMLI, and they point out that they consider this unnecessary, as there is already distinction shown between the two Regiments, by the fact the letters RMLC are worn on the shoulders, no red stripes worn on the trousers, and no bugle on the cap ornament.

They also say that the RMLC working at Grangemouth wear their numerals, and point out that these men are conscripts whereas they are volunteers who, in many cases, have been out in France since the beginning of the war.

The general feeling is that this distinctive mark is uncalled for and unnecessary, and should it be considered otherwise, they would prefer to wear the ordinary Labour unit badge, that is, the Royal Coat of Arms in their cap in preference to the Globe and Laurel and these letters, or as they have also suggested the ordinary blue hat which they wore in the old Naval Labour Company.

The foregoing, Sir, is as far as I can give a concise summary of the situation. Many other reasons were put forward which I do not mention as I do not consider that they have bearing on the subject.

I interviewed the DNTTO on the question and he informed me that the opinion of the Base Commandant and other Officers at this base was that the RMLC is the smartest Labour Corps here. I spoke to them personally on parade and told them this and pointed out that as an efficient working unit that they had no cause to be ashamed of any emblem or badge which they wore, as their services were as necessary as any other unit in France. Notwithstanding this, I

gathered the impression that the feeling was not that their services were not appreciated, but that they, personally as a body, were looked down upon as a Labour unit, also as many remarked, that their age prohibited them from joining a fighting unit, and they volunteered for this work instead.

May I be allowed to express the opinion that although this is a small thing, it is one of those which irritate and does not tend to effectiveness. We are now in the fourth year of the war, and I speak from personal experience when I say that these small irritating things should if possible be avoided, so that the greatest amount of work can be obtained and friction avoided by keeping the men contented.

I have interviewed all my officers here regarding this matter and they consider with me, that it would be inadvisable to enforce this order against such active opposition.

Colonel Cator forwarded this letter to the Adjutant General Royal Marines (AGRM) seeking guidance on the matter. After further discussion between Cator and the AGRM, General David Mercer, they agreed the General would write to each RML Camp explaining that the wearing of letters in the cap was to distinguish them from the RMLI and was in no way meant to discredit the unit. This letter was posted at each camp early in May 1918 and as a result the men reluctantly began to wear the cap letters.

However the matter was not resolved, for on 20<sup>th</sup> May Captain T H Gill RM wrote to Colonel Cator detailing the men's continued dissatisfaction at the Boulogne camp;

- "(1) They know of no other Corps which wears numerals in their caps except one, which tried to evade service viz., the Conscientious Objectors.
- 2) That the decoration is so conspicuous as to make them the butt for ridicule from all other branches of the service.
- (3) That the change is unnecessary seeing their cap badge and numerals are quite different to the RMLI

With regard to (1) they claim practically every man in this Corps is a volunteer, and many are old and have long service abroad, this being a claim that can be advanced in few units in the Service. With regard to (2) it is stated that at Deal they were addressed as "Brasso" or "Monkey Brand" etc., both in and out of barracks owing to the numerals in their caps.

I have had several complaints from NCOs and Men at different times that other ranks of this Corps are treated contemptuously at Deal, and that they have been told the reason they have to wear RMLC in their caps is owing to their slackness in saluting and other matters in which they have had no practical training."

Meanwhile at Dunkirk the DNTO reported to PNTO France on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May that problems caused by the wearing of the badge existed, some men refused to wear the badge and many had voluntarily confined themselves to the camps, refusing to go out on ordinary leave wearing the letters in their caps. On further investigation the PNTO, Commodore Macgregor, discovered similar problems still existed at most RMLC Camps and he appears to have come to the crux of the matter in his report to the Secretary of the Admiralty on 1<sup>st</sup> June;

"The order is causing the greatest discontent and will continue to do so. So much so that very few of the men will go outside their camps on ordinary leave. Seeing that the only other body of men which has to wear the initials of their Corps in their caps are the Conscientious Objectors, this is not surprising."

However, as the Commodore was becoming aware of the problem General Mercer was taking further steps to resolve the matter and on the 6<sup>th</sup> June he reported to the Admiralty;

“The men of the RMLC wear the blue undress uniform of the RMLI, and it is almost impossible to distinguish it from the ordinary dress of Royal Marines from the Fleet or Headquarters.

“Every effort has been made, with considerable success, to foster esprit de corps amongst them and I am certain they are proud of their association with the Royal Marines. At the same time, they are mostly recruited from men over military age who are not well set up, and from the nature of things have had no or little military training in drill or smartness. It was therefore suggested that, to enable a distinction to be readily made between them and Royal Marines on leave from the Fleet, they should wear a distinctive additional badge. The then PNT0 (Admiral Hunt) was consulted and he suggested in lieu of a separate badge, they should have the letters RMLC (which they now wear on their shoulder straps instead of the normal RMLI), placed below the Globe and Laurel on their cap band. This was accordingly done but was taken exception to by the men. Lieut. Colonel Cator wrote to me on the matter, and on receiving a further report from him to the effect that he considered the general efficiency of the Corps might suffer, I directed that this badge should be withdrawn.

It is therefore hoped that no further trouble will arise.”

With this action the wearing of the RMLC letters (numerals) in caps was discontinued for the RMLC companies in France. It is not known if the conscripts of the home service labour company at Grangemouth continued to wear the letters in their caps. However, General Mercer seems to have been driven by a genuine desire to have a distinctive cap badge for the RMLC. On the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1918 he submitted a proposal to the Admiralty that the RMLC should be provided with a distinctive cap badge. After consultation with the Officers of the RMLC the Globe and Laurel surmounted by a sailing ship was approved for wear on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1918.<sup>2</sup>



#### References

Blumberg, HE - "Britain's Sea Soldiers, Vol III, 1914-1919

ADM1/8527/162 and ADM157 series files at The National Archive, Kew.

With thanks to John Atherton for the photograph of the RMLC private.

<sup>2</sup> Given the rarity of this cap badge and the fact many of the men were demobilised in January and February 1919 one must speculate as to whether this badge was ever issued.