

World War One: The Battle for Communications

Military communications

Military communications also evolved to meet new battlefield and military challenges during this period. Battles were won and lost on the strength of an army's ability to communicate on the battlefield. New and old systems of communications were used side-by-side.

On the Western Front, the British Army used **telegraph cables** and **telephones** to communicate between the front line soldiers and commanders. But heavy artillery (gun) bombardment meant these lines of communications were easily broken. These lines of communications were also easily intercepted by the German army, as were the very basic **wireless telegraph** sets used by the British Army. Despite this, the speed of telephone and telegraph communication meant they were the most commonly used telecommunications systems used by the British Army.

However, other systems of communications were also needed to be used in parallel with and as a backup to telegraph and telephones. The British Army was forced to adapt, using older forms of communication such as **carrier pigeons** and written messages delivered by **runners** and **messenger dogs** to keep the lines of communications open. Messenger runners had one of the most dangerous jobs in the war having to run across open ground and risk being shot by snipers in order to make sure a message was delivered. **Signalling flags** were also used but could be only used in the daytime but were easily visible to the enemy.

Ordinary soldiers in the trenches also used **letters and postcards** to communicate with their friends and family at home in Britain but these were heavily censored to avoid revealing important military information.

Away from the trenches, the Royal Navy was facing similar problems of reliable communication and interception of their signals. For short-distance communications, the navy relied on **semaphore flags** while using more modern but also more easily intercepted wireless telegraphy sets for long-distance communication.

During the war, aeroplanes developed rapidly from kite-like aeroplanes where pilots shot at each other with small guns to bombers and fighter planes. As the aeroplanes developed during the war, so did their means of communications. At the start of the war, pilots communicated using visual signalling such as rocking their wings and flags. By the end of the war, pilots were equipped with **radio telephony** (voice over radio) and were able to communicate over short distances with other aeroplanes and over longer distances with ground wireless stations. Aeroplanes mostly used wireless communications for artillery spotting: correcting the aims of British guns firing beyond the "line of sight" (what they could see) to German targets.

Many different systems of communications were used, developed, and adapted during the war. In 1918 when the stalemate ended with the German Spring Offensive followed by the Allied counter-offensive, more mobile systems of communication such as the **wireless telegraph** came to the fore and assisted in the Allied advance and success.

Wartime developments in **wireless communications** continued to be used after the war ended. Radio communication in aeroplanes became commonplace and continued to be used today. Wireless sets used in the air and the ground were brought home after the war and contributed to the popularity of amateur radio as well as the development of broadcast radio and the establishment of the BBC.



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