

R.A.O.C. MEN ARE NOW COMBATANT

The Royal Army Ordnance Corps - the men who repair our tanks under heavy fire in the Libyan no-man's land - have been turned into a combatant army by the War Office.

This step is in accordance with the policy of training technicians to fight as infantry in emergency. At some large Ordnance depots, the men, formed into battalions, companies and platoons, are being taught by Infantry officers to attack and defend with machine guns, anti-tank rifles, Lee-Enfields and grenades. They are working overtime for now they must master tactics as well as their technical duties. They willingly forego their leisure hours to live up to the coveted title "combatant".

There is no change in uniform or badges except that Colonels and above now wear scarlet tabs on their lapels instead of the dark blue which previously denoted non-combatancy. But the psychological effect of the new colour has already made itself felt. All ranks of the R.A.O.C. now feel they are fighters no longer entirely dependent on nearby Infantry for protection in the field.

The Corps have done much to earn the new distinction. They are probably the first British troops of this war to see active service in Russia. A workshop detachment handles British supplies off-loaded at port for the Soviet Army, and puts tanks and other vehicles into train for the front line. Another Ordnance detachment, working in close co-operation with Russian technicians, give guidance on details and maintenance of British equipment.

In Cyrenaica, men of Ordnance recovery sections have crawled across the hot sands into No Man's Land with a few tools to repair tanks under heavy machine gun fire. They have whisked away damaged tanks in transporters under the noses of the enemy and made them fit for service again in a few hours at a field workshop. In desert fighting the Corps must often maintain tanks and armoured cars moving 70-140 miles ahead of the main Army.

Ordnance men must be masters of many crafts. They handle over 400,000 items of supply ranging from clothing to heavy tanks and howitzers. They deal with more than 350 different kinds of ammunition.

Recently the versatility of an Ordnance mechanical engineer stood a Russian-bound convoy in good stead. The de-Gaussing equipment of a ship carrying specialist suddenly failed. Thus the vessel became a target for magnetic mines and the rest of the convoy was endangered.

The ship, unable to return home or continue, was in a desperate plight until the Ordnance officer inspected the equipment with a small testing instrument. He righted the trouble in a few hours, and the ship, accompanied by a sloop which had been standing by, went full steam ahead to rejoin the convoy.

At home the Corps help the war effort in many varied and unexpected ways. This work is seldom mentioned as it is all part of their job. Here are two examples:-

Recently a large lorry and trailer were racing towards a north-east port with a 16-ton mounting carrying a nest of pom-poms for a vessel. Every minute counted as this ship was due to join an Atlantic supply convoy as soon as its armament had been fitted. But as the lorry reached the summit of a steep hill, the weld of the steering turntable fractured. Perched precariously on the crest, the trailer was in grave danger of plunging headlong down the hill into a river.

An Ordnance mechanical engineer passing by in his car immediately contacted an R.A.O.C. squad and recovery vehicle. They supported the trailer with railway sleepers. A new steering turntable was ordered and the squad worked through the night in the rain and cold until the new piece had been fitted by early dawn. The ship sailed on time, with its pom-poms.

WAR OFFICE

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