

Scouting in World War I

The call to action...

During the First World War, Scouts helped in many areas in support of the war effort.

By 1914 The Boy Scout Movement had been in existence for six years. Its popularity had spread not only in Britain but across the world. Wide spread membership meant many boys and young men had gained a range of useful skills from field-craft and camp cooking to signalling and sailing.

The fine prospects of a grand Scouting year in 1914 were darkened by the outbreak of war in August. What would happen to this young movement? Many thought it would collapse, but it was not so. Our Scouts were used to guard railway lines and tunnels. They acted as messengers, and "all-clear" buglers in air raids, as well as doing countless other jobs in hospitals, canteens and out on the farms.



At the outbreak of war the Founder of Scouting, Baden-Powell, with his military background, put himself at the disposal of the War Office. No command was offered. Lord Kitchener said that he "could lay his hand on several competent divisional generals but could find no one who could carry on the invaluable work of the Boy Scouts."

Mobilisation of Boy Scouts

Baden-Powell issued the call to action...

"In this time of national emergency comes the opportunity for the Scouts to show that they can be of material service to the country. Just as the boys of Mafeking were utilised to take the lighter work of men in order that these might be released for the more arduous duties of war, so can the Scouts now give valuable assistance to the State at home"

The Scouts played an active role on the home front. Their duties were non-military, and came within the scope of police, and were carried out under the general direction of the Chief Constable in each county.

Their duties included:

- guarding and patrolling bridges, culverts and telegraph lines against damage by spies
- establishing first-aid, dressing or nursing stations, refuges, dispensaries and soup-kitchens in their clubrooms
- collecting information about available supplies and transport
- handing out notices, billeting, commandeering and warning
- carrying out organised relief measures
- carrying out communications by means of despatch riders and signallers
- helping families of men employed in defence duties, sick or wounded
- acting as guides and orderlies



One of the first roles that Scouts undertook was supporting the Coastguard. The fear of invasion by Germany was a very real threat so watching the coast, ports and estuaries, guiding vessels in unbuoyed channels, or showing lights to friendly vessels was crucial work.

Scouts were supervised by the coastguard but under the orders of their Patrol Leaders and were responsible for their own activities and actions. This was a very practical example of one of Scouting's core practices, giving youth independence.

