

History of Intelligence Activities in Queensland from September 1939 to September 1945

PART VIII MILITARY REPORTING OFFICERS

The Military Reporting Officers Organisation was formed in 1934 by direction of Army Headquarters to initiate the systematic collection of Intelligence information on a larger scale than had been in existence previously.

Duties of MROs

MROs were to be stationed throughout Queensland, and were to report direct to this Headquarters. Their main duties were to report on:-

- (a) Local matters of economic, topographic and military importance,
- (b) Attempts at sabotage, or information about intended attempts,
- (c) Any local incident which, in the opinion of the MRO, should be made known to the Defence Authorities,
- (d) Undue interest of any person in military projects which might be undertaken within the MRO's district.

Consequent upon the appointment of the Military Intelligence Officers at selected towns along the coast of Queensland in September, 1939, the State was divided into areas, the MROs in the respective areas reporting directly to the Intelligence Officers concerned (see Part I). In general, however, the whole organisation was under the supervision and direction of I(a) Sub-Section of General Staff (Intelligence) at this Headquarters.

Policy

MROs were appointed at places affording the best coverage of the State, and in localities where information of a special nature was desired.

In the event of invasion by an enemy, it was the intention that MROs should not withdraw, but that they should remain in communication with this Headquarters, if possible, even within enemy occupied areas.

The large expansion of the VDC created a problem, and the policy adopted in this State was to suggest that MROs who joined the VDC should remain members of the rank and file only, so that when their services as MROs were specially required, no dislocation would be felt by their VDC unit.

Appointment of MROs

MROs were selected after an exhaustive security check, and each agreed to accept appointment on a voluntary basis, signing a certificate to this effect. Instructions stating the information required, security precautions to be observed and methods of reporting, were then issued to each MRO, together with maps of his district where such maps existed.

One principle observed in the selection of personnel was that, by reason of age or for other issues, they should not be liable for military service. This ensured continuity of service.

Another principle was that they should have a good knowledge of their district, and their civil association should be such as normally would require them to travel about their district.

It is interesting to note that many of the personnel selected were former militia officers or members of Rifle Clubs, and a great number had had previous military experience in the A.I.F. during 1914-1918.

At the outset MROs were appointed in 20 country centres, and the numbers increased from time to time until members of the organisation totalled 374 in October 1941, the number in September, 1945, being 382.

In order to widen the field of observation in the obtaining of information, in a number of cases a MRO was permitted to appoint one sub-MRO in his district.

Security and Methods of Reporting

The activities and existence of the organisation was in the TOP SECRET category, and, on appointment, the MRO certified his willingness not to disclose or cause to be disclosed his activities in this direction.

MROs were unknown to each other.

Where appointed, a sub-MRO reported direct to the MRO and remained in ignorance of methods of reporting used by the MRO.

All written correspondence was sent to a fictitious firm which operated a Post Office Box number, and for telegraphic communication a telegraphic address was registered with the P.M.G. Department. The name of the firm and the telegraphic address were changed from time to time. In addition, a telephone, registered in the name of a fictitious firm, but not shown in the Telephone Directory, was installed at Headquarters.

Monthly report forms were issued to MROs, and each MRO was allotted a number which was shown on his report in lieu of a signature.

To ensure security of messages sent by telegram, MROs were instructed in the use of the Playfair cipher, key word being changed at irregular intervals.

Where personal contact by an officer of I(a) with a MRO was necessary, the former was in plain clothes if the fact of his being in uniform was in the least way likely to attract attention.

Activities

Throughout the period of hostilities, the services of this organisation proved to be of great value, and it is not an exaggeration to state that General Staff (Intelligence) could not have functioned efficiently without such an organisation.

MROs were considered observers, both coastal and aerial, and received special warning when raiders might be active.

A mass of topographical and economic information was obtained and subsequently incorporated in the Military Directory (see Pt 3) and MROs were ready to act as guides to our own and Allied forces operating in their areas.

Owing to the great numbers of aliens resident in Queensland, in the initial stages of the war, the work of the MROs expanded more along security lines that was usual with the organisation in other States. A great deal of original information concerning subversive and anti-British activities was supplied, and it is safe to say that of the 3,409 internments effected by General Staff (Intelligence) in Queensland, more than 50 per cent originated from reports by MROs. Enquiries concerning land transfers to other than British born subjects and questions of applications for licences to own homing pigeons, are also amongst the subjects which were referred to MROs for reports.

Cost of Organisation

With a view to assisting MROs who used their private cars in the execution of their duties, General Staff (Intelligence) was able for some time to arrange through the Main Roads Commission for priorities in the provision of new tyres to be granted to persons recommended, although General Staff (Intelligence) did not bear the cost. In addition, by arrangement with Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport, petrol ration tickets were supplied to MROs commensurate to the mileage travelled on business for General Staff (Intelligence), which again bore no part of the cost.

Apart from money spent on postage, expenses incurred on behalf of the organisation were purely nominal, for MROs in most cases asked for no reimbursement of expenses. In all cases, MROs were most willing to pay for petrol used in the course of their duties.

Recommendation

The MRO organisation is a very live one, composed entirely of men who from purely patriotic motives and who are anxious and willing to help their country, and who realised the value of their services through Intelligence to the Nation.

The standard of integrity and reliability of MROs is high, and, it is considered that in the event of operations in Australia, the existence of such an active organisation would provide a most useful source of information. It is therefore recommended that the MRO organisation be maintained at full strength in time of peace.

Owing to limitations of staff and the size of the State of Queensland, personal contact with MROs has been difficult to maintain. During war years, the goal was obvious, but constant liaison will be necessary in peacetime to ensure that the same keenness and enthusiasm is always in evidence. It is, therefore, recommended that the Peace Establishment of General Staff (Intelligence) in Queensland be sufficient to enable one officer to devote the major portion of his time to liaison with MROs, either by correspondence or personal visit as may best suit individual cases.