

RALEIGH-ING TO THE CAUSE – Bicycles in Wartime

Tony Hadland – Writer and Historian

At our Speaker Meeting in May, writer and historian Tony Hadland (see <http://hadland.wordpress.com/>) gave an utterly enthralling account of bicycles and bicycle factories in wartime; intriguingly titled “Raleigh-ing to the Cause” .

Back at the beginning of the 19th century, when balancing on two wheels still seemed inconceivable, there were already proposals to use push-along bikes (no cranks or pedals or chains or gears...) as troop transporters, but that didn’t come to anything. However, in the 1870s, armies were adopting bicycles in large numbers for messenger and scouting duties.

Just before the turn of the century, cycle manufacturers were arguing that folding bikes would be particularly useful in war, claiming that the rider would be able carry the bike on his back over difficult terrain, but the military weren’t having any of it. Nonetheless, by the time of WW1, most major armies including the British, had opted for a rich mix of standard and folding bicycles.

Nowadays we think of BSA as a bicycle manufacturer, but the initials in fact originally meant “Birmingham Small Arms Company”. In WW2, BSA’s famous “Parabike” (to be carried by paratroopers!) was made in large numbers, although in reality it was never used by paratroopers in wartime. They already had enough to carry, and couldn’t possibly have managed a 20kg bicycle as well.

The most successful strategic use of bicycles has involved very ordinary machines: the Japanese invasion of Singapore and the Viet Minh defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu.

The Raleigh cycle company made considerable numbers of military bikes, but in both world wars most of its capacity was in fact re-tooled for munitions work, with mostly women and teenagers (too young to fight) producing vast quantities of artillery fuses and shells. In WW2, Raleigh was the UK’s largest supplier of small shells and fuses. Frank Bowden, founder of Raleigh, was given a knighthood for his efforts, and the family became very rich on war profits.