

The Bicycle in War and Peace

With the help of some notable miniatures, James H. Hillestad pedals his way along a colorful path in history

Text: James H. Hillestad Photos: James H. Hillestad and Makers

In 1817, Capt. Karl von Drais made a two-wheeled machine with a steerable front wheel. Named after the German aristocrat, the “draisienne” was heavy, uncomfortable, and inefficient. A rider pushed the machine with his feet on the ground while steering with the handlebars.

Almost 50 years later, in 1863 in France, pedals were fitted to the solid rubber front wheel and the machine became known as the “velocipede.” This incarnation proved to be very uncomfortable on rough surfaces and was nicknamed as the “boneshaker.”

To increase speed and provide for a smoother ride, modifications soon followed, including an increase in the diameter of the front wheel. The machine was now known as the “penny-farthing” in reference to the British penny and farthing coins, with one much larger than the other. From a side view, the contraption resembled a large penny leading a much smaller farthing.

An undesirable attribute of the penny-farthing was that the rider sat high over the front axle. When the front wheel struck a rock or a rut, the rider would pitch forward, headfirst off the bicycle, which was called “taking a header.”

Improvements came with the introduction of gearing systems and hollow (cushion) rubber tires, coupled with reducing the front wheel’s size. This led to the advent of the “safety bicycle” as we now know it.

WHEELS OF CHANCE

In the late 1880s, this technological marvel caused a social upheaval on par with the later development of the motor vehicle.



ABOVE: German army cyclists, 1908, by Heyde.

BOTTOM LEFT: British CIV scout, Boer War, by Hocker Toy Soldiers.

BOTTOM RIGHT: British Black Watch cyclist, 1892, by Blenheim.

BELOW: British dispatch riders, Boer War, by Potsdammer Tin Soldiers.



In 1898, the imaginative H.G. Wells wrote of this in his story "The Wheels of Chance." He described men and women of various classes cycling beyond their normal social haunts, unconstrained by chaperones and usual patterns of behavior.

The visionary Wells wrote "The Land of Ironclads" in 1903. It foretold the coming of the armored tank and, along with it, the supporting role of cyclists. He foresaw a defeated enemy being taken prisoner by bicycle troops following behind tanks.

SPEED & STRENGTH

The two things that most caught the attention of civilians and military men alike were the speed and strength of the bicycle.

The effort formerly required to walk 20 miles could now get a cyclist up to 100 miles with the rider's possessions, which could be strapped on the machine, instead of being carried on his back.

The bicycle also offered unique flexibility in that when sand, mud, obstacles, high winds or a steep incline made pedaling difficult, a rider could get off and walk. A bicycle can be pushed, carried, lifted over fences and even



floated on rivers.

The corollary is that a military bicyclist is not a soldier on wheels, but a soldier with wheels.

To quote one field commander, "Think of a force of infantry going in almost any direction without the assistance of rail or boat, 40 or 50 miles in one morning and appearing on a battlefield fresh and ready to fight all afternoon!"

As for enemy scouts, they would not be able to tell from bicycle tracks which way opposing troops were headed.

TOP RIGHT: Racing cyclist by W. Britain.

ABOVE: Chinese three-wheeled pedicab by K&C.

RIGHT: British 25th Middlesex Volunteer Rifle Corps, 1914, with Maxim machine gun, by Soldier Centre Miniatures.





ABOVE: Penny-farthing by Mignot.

CYCLE FENCE

Several armies had experimented with bicycles by the mid-1880s. France, Austria, Germany, Britain and Italy were early participants. The United States delved into the military applications of bicycles 10 years later.

There were doubters, however, who thought of the cyclist as a less effective form of cavalryman.

An American officer concluded that a military cyclist was “nothing more than an infantryman who must get off his steel horse to fight.”

The British commander in chief, Lord Wolseley, commented in 1896 that, as long as he could ride a horse, he would not learn to ride a bicycle. Critics such as Wolseley cited the vulnerability of bicycle troops to cavalry charges.

Bicycle advocates’ response was that riders could employ a “zariba,” an Arabic word describing an enclosure of thorns. In action, a group of cyclists could dismount, upend their bicycles and form a square or circle with the machines slightly overlapping one another. The soldiers could lie or kneel inside, then balance their rifles on the bicycle frames to steady their aim.

As enemy horsemen approached, the cyclists could set their wheels spinning and the reflected sunlight would frighten off the animals. This “cycle fence” formed an obstacle which few horses would face. Then, in perfect security, the soldiers could pick off the advancing cavalry with deadly effect.

An American soldier noted, “From personal experience, I can assert that



ABOVE “Steady My Dear!” by Trophy.

TOP: Circus unicyclist by W. Britain.

BOTTOM LEFT: WWI medals awarded to Pvt. W.H. Evers, British Army Cyclist Corps (Author’s Collection).

BOTTOM RIGHT: “A Bicycle Built for Two” by Soldier Centre Miniatures.





ABOVE : French gendarme by PIXI of Paris.

there is nothing that will tie up a horse's feet so effectively as the steel spokes of a bicycle."

WHEELED WARFARE

While still retaining animal-mounted infantry in the regular Army, Britain holds the distinction of raising the world's first bicycle battalion. This was the 26th Middlesex (Cyclist) Volunteer Rifle Corps, formed in 1888. At the onset of World War I, the 26th (then designated the 25th) was augmented with a machine gun battery. The guns were drawn by teams of cyclists.

Another innovator was Lt. Henry

Gerard, who introduced cycling to the French Army. He invented a bicycle that could be folded. This was a great benefit to troops when they had to manhandle or pack their machines. The folding bicycle was later widely used by paratroops in World War II.

In 1896, bicycles were modified for laying down and picking up telegraph lines by incorporating a drum capable of holding about a mile of wire. The drum unwound the line as the bicycle rolled along. A bell rang before the telegraph wire was completely played out.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War, 13,000 British soldiers were deployed on

bicycles. They pedaled as scouts, dispatch riders and mobile infantry.

Prominent among them were the City of London Imperial Volunteers. The CIV, as they were known, wore distinctive slouch hats called "smashers." The Boers put the bicycle to use in the Transvaal Cyclist Corps.

By 1914, the British has some 14,000 men in bicycle regiments and

BELOW: Bill the Butcher by Trophy.



BELOW: "On Patrol" by Trophy.



BELOW : British 13th Middlesex Volunteers by Mark Time.





LEFT: "Off Duty" by Hocker Toy Soldiers.

BELOW: "Read All About It" by Mignot.

BELOW: Indian Army wireman by Kingcast.

battalions. There were more than 20,000 by the end of the Great War. When the Americans sailed to Europe in 1917, they brought 29,000 bicycles with them.

FALL OF SINGAPORE

During World War II, the fall of British-held Singapore in 1941 can largely be attributed to Japanese forces' employment of bicycles. Their 600-mile advance through Malaya was expected to take 100 days. In reality, the Japanese "blitzkrieg on bicycles" required only 70 days.

Using bicycles, Japanese troops were able to move faster than withdrawing British forces, often successfully cutting off their retreat. The fall of Singapore



LEFT: "A Ride in the Park" by Mignot.

RIGHT: "The Baker" by Marlborough.



has been regarded as the greatest land victory in Japanese history and the most catastrophic defeat in British annals.

In conjunction with the Allies' 1944 D-Day invasion of French Normandy, bicycles were prominent among the British force. They were used by both infantrymen and Royal Marine Commandos.

In the last half of the 20th century, bicycles saw extensive use in guerrilla conflicts, where their ability to carry large loads of supplies (up to 400 pounds) made them vastly useful for supporting insurgents.

That was the case along the Ho Chi Minh trail during the Vietnam War. Heavily loaded with supplies such as rice, the bicycles were pushed by porters walking alongside. Western estimates suggest that at least 200,000 porters were employed in this way.



ABOVE: Writer Jim Hillestad pedals alongside a fjord in Norway.

TOP RIGHT: Private, British 26th Cyclist Rifle Volunteers, by Kingcast.

BOTTOM LEFT: British airborne cyclist by K&C.

BOTTOM RIGHT: British beach master and troops, Normandy, 1944, by K&C.



COLLECTING CYCLES

Given the widespread popularity of bicycles, it is not surprising that virtually every toy soldier manufacturer has produced at least one cyclist model. Heyde of Germany and CBG Mignot of France were most likely the first.

W. Britain offered a nicely sculpted plastic figure of a racing cyclist in the 1960s. Painted metal figures followed from Blenheim Military Models and Mark Time in the 1970s.

Others joined in such as Kingcast, Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd., Soldier Centre Miniatures, Marlborough Military Models, Dorset Soldiers, and The Toy Soldiers of Wm. Hocker, Proprietor.

King & Country, Beau Geste, and Figarti Miniatures, each in their own styles, have taken bicyclist figures to another dimension.

For me, it is a pleasure to look back at the imagination and talent involved in producing these nostalgic reminders of days gone by. Pedal on!

about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.



MOVING MONTY

In August 1944, U.S. Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr.'s 3rd Army was rushing "hell for leather" to the Rhine River. The Germans were being routed. Patton's tanks were 100 miles nearer to the river than the British, and the Rhine bridges had not been prepared for demolition.

To Patton's utter dismay, Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower diverted the available gas supply to the U.S. 1st Army, which was supporting British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery. Monty did not share Patton's sense of urgency. The opportunity for a quick victory evaporated.

While meeting with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Eisenhower asked him "to persuade Montgomery to get on his bicycle and start moving!"

--James H. Hillestad



TOP: WWII British Women's Royal Air Force member with a bicycle by W. Britain.

LEFT: WWI period Dutch bicycle band by Beau Geste.

BOTTOM: Dorset Soldiers Figures depicting the "Trompetterkorps Bereden Wapens," a unique Dutch band that performs on bicycles.

