

Introduction

At the beginning of the First World War, thanks to the flooding of the Yser at the end of October 1915, the advance of German troops was stopped in Belgium. The extreme southwest corner of the Belgian coast, the “Westhoek” was not invaded.

Very few people – except the people of this town themselves – know that another piece of our cramped territory escaped the occupation. This was Baarle-Hertog, a Belgian village which includes 22 enclaves entirely surrounded by Dutch territory (except the hamlet of Zondereigen).

It was not until 27 October 1914 that the region of Turnhout was definitely occupied. Colonel Drimborn held the position of “Kreischef”.² From 4 November, border crossings were guarded by the Germans. On 3 November 1914 they summoned Henri van Gilse, Mayor of Baarle-Hertog, to hand over his town which, of course, he refused to do.³ An amusing illustration in colour, decorated with a text written by a daughter of the mayor, alludes to this incident. We see the mayor, sitting in his office, listening to a conversation conducted between a constable and a “Feldwebel” German (Fig. 1).

Wireless Telegraphy (TSF)

In February 1915, King Albert I appointed the first Captain – Commandant AEM (adjoint d'état-major) Albert Wibier (Fig. 2) to arrange, for the Belgian Army, a full wireless telegraphy service. Even before the war, the king was very interested in experiments in the field of radio. He supported the creation of a transmitting station in the Royal Palace of Laeken (1911–1914) by Robert Benedict Goldschmidt (not to be confused with Paul Goldschmidt, who will be discussed later) and Maurice Philippson. On 28 March 1914 the first concert transmitted by radiotelephony was realized.⁴

Captain – Commandant Albert Wibier was no stranger to the King. In 1911–1912 he was responsible for establishing in the Belgian Congo, a network of radio communications between the capital Boma and Elizabethville, which he achieved brilliantly. In early 1911 the King had asked Robert Goldschmidt to study the problem of installing wireless telegraphy in The Congo.⁵

On 3 February 1915 A. Wibier became responsible for organizing the TSF service of the Belgian Army and on 24 March 1915 was named “director of the Belgian military TSF”.⁶

In 1916, A. Wibier also organized the TSF military service in The Congo (the Lake Tanganyika campaign), of which he also became the technical director.⁷

The new wireless telegraphy service was part of Engineering. In addition to the Engineers' badges on their collars, engineering staff wore on their caps and epaulettes the insignia “TSF” in interlaced letters (Fig. 3).

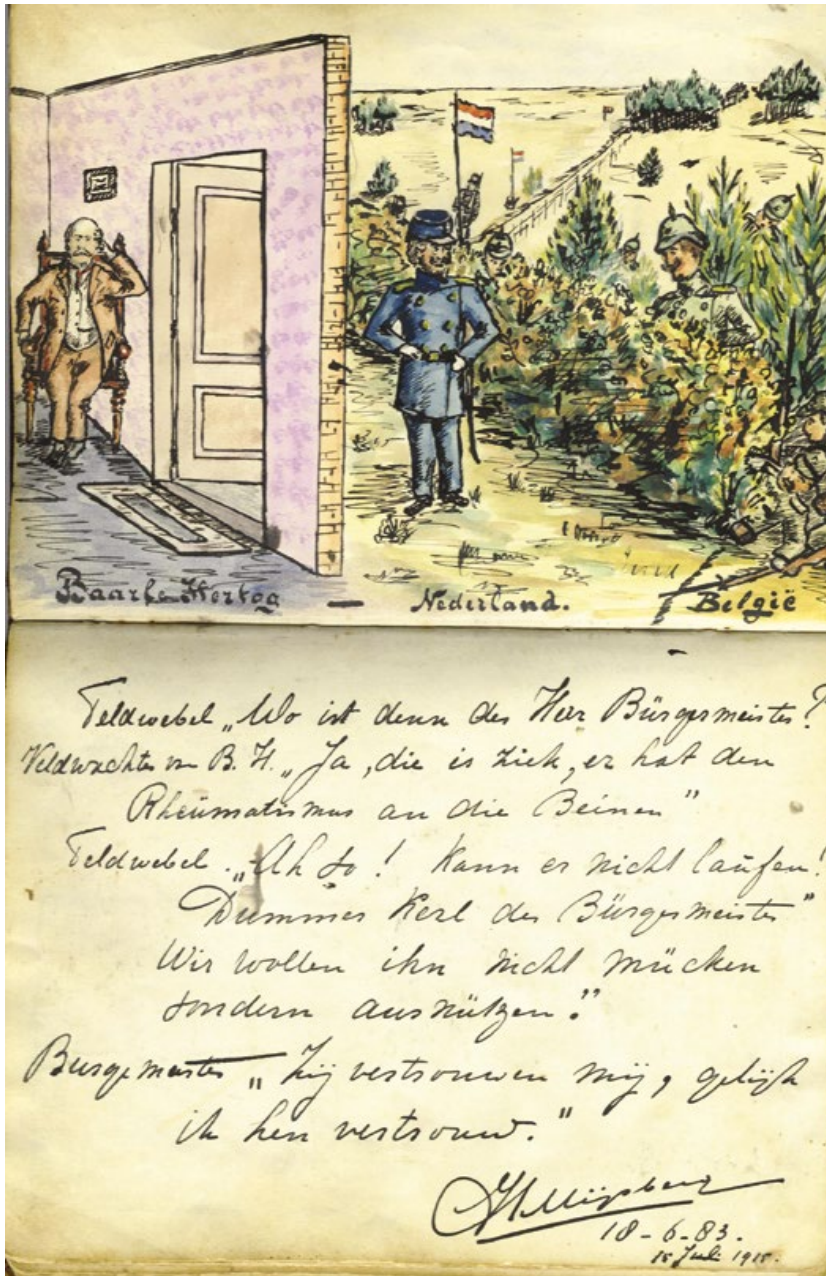


Figure 1: Watercolour from Annie van Gilse's album of poems



Figure 2: Senior Captain Albert Wibier



Figure 3: Badge of TSF.
(wireless telegraphy) troops

Engineer J. Pierrard, Honorary Staff Engineer, described how Cdt. AEM A. Wibier (promoted Lieutenant-General after the First World War) accomplished his mission near the front in Belgium.⁸ It was particularly difficult. His task was not only to create the service of the TSF as a great unit, but also to ensure that it was organized and fully equipped. So he had to equip a laboratory, workshop and schools and ensure the recruitment and training of qualified personnel.

With the support of the Minister of War, Charles de Broqueville, he had complete freedom in the constitution of his team. He tried to hire young engineers, telegraph and workforce specialists as well as young people who had received average training. Skilled technicians were

responsible for the efficient operation of the equipment, while the telegraph “operator” ensured the continuous monitoring.

Laboratory, workshop and demonstration schools were established in the base at Calais.⁹ Research and tests were performed in the laboratory. Belgian TSF equipment was designed in the workshop. Lieutenant R. Braillard,¹⁰ 8^{ème} Génie of the French army, established the connection with Commandant, later General, G. Ferrié, the famous commander of the French TSF military service.

It was in the workshop that the wireless equipment used at the front by the Belgian army, “the TSF B. sets”, were built. The engineer Pierrard only describes devices for ground troops and aircraft.¹¹ It was not until the end of his note on page 4 that he refers to the “illegal erection in 1915 of a 5 kW transmitter in the enclave of “Baer le Duc” (sic) by Lieutenant Paul Goldschmidt and Gérard de Buyl.” He did not give details.

Lt. George Devillez, deputy head of the laboratory, led the instruction. This was done, in part, in the technical school for electricity and TSF. The transmission and reception of Morse code up to speeds of 18 or 25 words per minute were taught in the Morse school. Finally, there was a school for field service.

The wireless listening and radiotelegraph transmission station at Baarle-Hertog (Baarle-Duc)

Almost simultaneously with the creation of the TSF military service, Paul Segers, Minister of Railways, Marine, Post and Telegraphs, had the idea to install a radiotelegraph receiver at Baarle-Duc to listen to enemy messages. This is what he proposed on 29 January 1915 to his colleague Charles de Broqueville, Prime Minister and Minister of War. He supported the project. The French High Command was heading in the same direction.¹²

PART ONE: Origin and Commissioning of “MN 7” the Belgian Military TSF Station at Baarle-Duc (March 1915–17 October 1915)

1.1. Paul Goldschmidt, “Clermont”, linchpin of the project

Paul Goldschmidt-Clermont, 2nd Lieutenant serving in the TSF (Fig. 4, 5, 6), Engineer Brussels and Liège Universities, was born on 28 March 1890 in St-Joost-ten-Node and died in Brussels on 27 February 1969. On 4 June 1914 he went to The Congo on behalf of the colony’s “*Service de la Télégraphie sans Fil*”, “Wireless Telegraphy Service”. Although at the beginning of the First World War he had intended to enlist, as a volunteer, in the motherland, he had to stay in The Congo for the implementation of the radio communications with the active colonial troops in the east. In January 1915 he returned to Belgium, where the Minister of War instructed him to organize the radiotelegraph station at Baarle-Duc, under the command of Cdt. AEM A. Wibier. He was appointed “*Sous-Lieutenant de reserve du Génie*” (2nd Lieutenant Reserve Engineering). He asked to be dispatched to the front.

From May 1917 until the end of hostilities he commanded the 4th platoon, TSF. According to a letter dated 1 December 1915 to the Consul General of Belgium in Vlissingen (Flushing, the Netherlands) by Cdt. A. Wibier, Paul Goldschmidt was “an engineer of great value and very straight and honest character” and Cdt. Wibier had “great confidence in his ability”. He was very well paid for the mission he had fulfilled in The Congo. As a TSF platoon leader “he has great qualities (...). He successfully completed the delicate and difficult task of establishing the wireless station at Baarle-Hertog” and had made “the same success in command of his platoon, in many different situations he performed with great success.”¹³ His merits in this war earned him many honours, including the Belgian Croix de Guerre with two bronze palms, the Croix de Feu, six front stripes with bronze palms and the British Military Cross.



Figure 4:
Paul Goldschmidt



Figure 5:
Paul Goldschmidt