

# **British Army War Establishment Tables**

## **Campaign in Northwest Europe June 1944 to May 1945**

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**Notes on British Army War Establishment Tables and associated  
documentation**

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The British Army issued a multitude of organizational documents between 1938 and 1945, detailing the authorised strength of the units and formations that would serve during the Second World War. Primary among these were the War Establishment (WE) tables, which equated to the Tables of Organization and Equipment (T/O&E) of the United States Army or the *Kriegsstarkenachweisung* (KStN) of the German Army.

The purpose of such tables was to quantify the numbers of personnel, vehicles and weapons that each and every type of unit was entitled to. This in turn allowed armies to forecast the numbers of men, vehicles and weapons they would need to fill out their formations, in terms of men and machines. They also helped to determine how many men would require specialist training, to serve as signallers, medics, mechanics and so on.

In 1931 the British Army began publication of a new series of War Establishment tables, initially divided into five volumes, each of which covered a different aspect of organization; by 1945 there were a total of 16 such volumes.

### ***Volume I (first version)***

This originally covered the WE Tables of a Cavalry Division. By 1937 Volume I also included the WE of the Mobile Division, and from 1939 the Armoured Division. In 1942 the Armoured Division WE Tables issued under Volume I were migrated to Volume II, and Volume I was repurposed (see below).

### ***Volume I (second version)***

From September 1942, new and existing WE Tables for an Airborne Division were moved to Volume I, having previously been in Volume X (see below). Volume I continued to include the remaining handful of WE Tables for units of a Cavalry Division that had not been cancelled.

### ***Volume II***

The WE Tables for a Division (which would later become known as the Infantry Division) were originally in Volume II. From late 1942, the WE Tables for the units and headquarters of an Armoured Division, and of a Tank Brigade, were moved into Volume II.

### ***Volume III***

This covered units and headquarters of the Field Force above Divisional level and included Corps, Army and General Headquarters Troops.

Volume III also included the original WE Tables for a Tank Brigade. When Tank Brigades were incorporated into the Mixed Division during 1942, the relevant WE Tables were transferred to Volume II, and remained there after the Mixed Division experiment was abandoned during 1943.

### ***Volume IV***

Lines of Communication Troops.

**Volume V**

Home Forces, which included Reserve and Training units.

**Volume VI**

All WE Tables issued by Middle East Forces, which included Eighth Army.

**Volume VII**

Anti-aircraft Command, including Anti-aircraft Divisions, and Coastal Defence

**Volume VIII**

Special Establishments, including Field Force units such as Commandos, as well as Home based units and headquarters of a special nature. Also included certain Royal Artillery units of Assault formations.

**Volume IX**

Primarily overseas garrisons, including Malta and Gibraltar, Iceland and the Faroes, and also locations in the Far East and the Caribbean.

**Volume X**

Originally the units and headquarters of the Airborne Division, which became Volume I WE Tables in late 1942. Volume X subsequently covered Persia and Iraq Command.

**Volume XI**

India, which did NOT include WE Tables of the Indian Army, but did include the Chindits.

**Volume XII**

Originally all WE Tables issued by British North Africa Forces (First Army). The Volume went on to include WE Tables particular to Italy, and in early 1945 the Volume was retitled Central Mediterranean to better reflect the wider scope of operations from Italy to Greece.

**Volume XIII**

All WE Tables issued by South East Asia Command and Allied Land Forces, South East Asia.

**Volume XIV**

Europe, including all WE Tables issued by 21 Army Group.

**Volume XV**

These were the WE Tables produced in anticipation of British Army units and formations in Europe being redeployed to the Far East for the war against Imperial Japan.

**Volume XVI**

Control Commission, for the administration of post-war Germany.

There was a standard format for War Establishment tables, though this did evolve over the years.

The first section listed personnel by rank, divided into commissioned officers, warrant officers, non-commissioned officers (Serjeants and Staff-serjeants), and rank and file (Privates and Corporals, or the equivalent rank for the arm of service involved). Any attached personnel, such as Army Catering Corps, were detailed separately after unit personnel.

The rank and file personnel could then be further detailed under the heading of 'Distribution of rank and file by trades and duties', though this particular division was usually absent from tables of formation Headquarters. This listed all tradesmen and non-tradesmen, giving the specific role of each soldier, such as driver, rifleman or gun number. For WE Tables of Royal Artillery units, the trades and duties section could include certain tradesmen who might hold the rank of Serjeant or Staff-serjeant, which were additional to the total shown for these ranks in the personnel section.

The next section covered all means of transport, from bicycles, motorcycles, cars, trucks and lorries, to armoured fighting vehicles. The final section covered weapons, and this was subject to a major change during the mid-war period. WE Tables issued during 1937 and onward had included all individual weapons authorised for a unit, which initially meant rifles and pistols. Beginning in 1943 however, all detail concerning individual weapons was omitted from new WE Tables as they were produced. Support weapons, such as light and medium machine guns, mortars and artillery pieces, were always shown in WE Tables.

After these sections came a series of notes, providing additional information on matters such as ranks and duties, authorised substitutions of equipment, and any changes to be made when, for example, units were serving in an Armoured Division. Next came the 'Note on First Reinforcements'; these were personnel to be immediately available to replace losses in the unit but did not form part of its fighting strength. Lastly were notes on any attachments, such as maintenance or signal units.

Each War Establishment table carried a reference, the format of which changed during the course of the war. The system introduced in 1931 used a reference that was divided into four parts: the first part was the Volume number, the second was always 1931, the third part was the table identifier and the fourth the version number. During 1941, the repetitious and archaic 1931 element was dropped from new tables, and by 1942 all WE references consisted of three parts, the Volume, the identifier and the version.

There was an attempt with the early Volume I and Volume II WE Tables to issue reference numbers that reflected the order of precedence of the arms of service. As the number and type of units began to multiply alpha-numeric references were used. A case in point was the Infantry Battalion, which originally had the table identifier 12. The identifier numbers either side of this were allotted to other arms of service (Signals 11 and Supply and Transport 13), so when new types of Infantry units were formed it became necessary to identify them using 12A, 12B and so on.

A renumbering exercise occurred during 1942, which affected tables in Volume I and Volume II. For Volume I (Airborne), it was simply a matter of giving all WE Tables issued under Volume X a new Volume I reference. The change to Volume II had a similar objective, as it aimed to unify the WE Tables issued for the Armoured Division (previously in Volume I) with those of the Infantry Division and the Mixed Division, both issued under Volume II.

As part of the same exercise, all WE Tables in Volume I and II adopted a three-digit table identifier (which could still be supplemented by a letter) that replaced the hodgepodge of one, two and three digit identifiers that had evolved over the preceding years. This meant a complete renumbering of all the WE Tables in Volume II, firstly to meet the three-digit standard, and secondly to provide each arm of service with a more flexible 'block' of numbers that allowed room for new unit types to be accommodated. Even so, the Royal Artillery still effectively ran out of space by 1944.

To give an example, the reference for the WE Table of a Divisional Reconnaissance Battalion in late 1940 was II/1931/12/1. This actually recycled the original identifier of 12 that had been reserved for an Infantry Battalion back in 1931 and became redundant when Infantry Battalions moved on to 12A and 12B. In April 1942, the new WE Table for a Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment was issued under II/12/2, which deleted the 1931 component, kept the identifier of 12, and showed it as version 2. A few months later, in August 1942, the successor table was issued as II/251/1. This incorporated the adoption of the three-digit identifier, which also saw the Reconnaissance Corps allocated the block 251 to 260 within Volume II. When II/251/1 was superseded in December 1943, it was by II/251/2, which simply updated the version number.

There were also two dates on the table, the first of which stated when the table was notified in Army Council Instructions, or ACIs. The second date, the effective date, was more important. This was the date from which the organization listed could be implemented by units, dependent of course upon the availability of the necessary numbers of personnel and types of equipment. It only began though to appear on WE Tables issued from around the second half of 1941.

Some, but not all War Establishments also included an organization table that gave a guide as to which personnel should travel in what vehicle, and what wireless set, stores or weapons may be carried in each vehicle. These details were normally found in the War Establishments for Infantry, Armoured, Artillery and Signals units. They first appeared during 1939 and some were issued as separate documents to be appended to the WE Table. In all cases they were prefixed with the following standard qualification:

*"This table is intended merely as a guide to officers commanding units, and may be varied, within the number of ranks, tradesmen and vehicles provided, according to tactical or administrative requirements."*

### **Amendments to War Establishment Tables**

Once issued, War Establishment Tables were likely to be subject to some degree of amendment. While the WE Tables themselves were retained and catalogued for storage in the UK National Archives, it does not appear that the same process was undertaken for the amendments.

Amendments could be quite minor, changing a title of a tradesman or adding a lance-corporal stripe for example. Other amendments though could be quite substantial (that for the Divisional Bridging Troop or Platoon, RE, being effectively a full rewrite) and their absence does impede a project such as this. Certain WE Tables were reissued, incorporating all amendments made to date, however this did not detail when the individual changes were made

I have found a few amendments over the years, mostly in foreign archives, and these are available they will be included after the War Establishment table they pertain to.

### **Associated documentation produced regarding unit organization and equipment**

The War Establishment Tables represent the key element of this study, as they did when I wrote the series of books I am revising and reconstructing with this project. Over the intervening years though I have become aware of other documents that detail British Army organization and equipment.

#### ***Army Form G1098***

This I did know about when I started work on the books, what I did not know was where to find them, and sadly that remains the case more than 15 years later. I have obtained a copy of one, singular, such document, though the saving grace is that it is the one I most wanted.

The Army Form G1098, also referred to as the War Equipment Table, was issued in parallel to the War Establishment. It had its own unique identifier, which bore no relation to the WE Table reference. Using the example above, that for a Reconnaissance Regiment on II/251/1 was AFG.1098-707.

The AFG.1098 included much additional information not shown on the WE Table, which makes their absence all the more annoying for the aims of this project. To be fair, there was a great deal of mundanity in the items covered, such as chalk, cloth, glue and carbolic soap, and similar consumables, as well as kitchen equipment. Among the more interesting entries were the following;

Anti-gas equipment

Camouflage equipment

Medical equipment

Weapons – when pistols, rifles and machine carbines vanished from WE Tables, they continued to be shown on the AFG.1098 table, as too were all support weapons. Also included was the number of magazines for light machine guns and machine carbines.

Ammunition – the scales of ammunition for each weapon, broken down by type (such as ball or tracer for rifle calibre rounds, high explosive and smoke for mortars, and armour-piercing and high explosive for guns). These were later shown in a different document (see below).

Hand grenades (by type) and explosives (where applicable)

Signal pistols (and rounds by type)

Compasses and watches

Stereoscopes, sights, rangefinders, telescopes and similar optical equipment

Mine detectors

Field telephones, switchboards and lengths of cable for line equipment

Visual equipment, such as signalling flags and heliographs

Wireless stations, which could have their own subsection showing the items authorised per set

There was also a recapitulation of transport as shown in the WE Table.

### ***Staff Equipment Tables***

As might be imagined, the AFG.1098 could become quite an unwieldy document, especially for units such as those of the Royal Signals, or others including a great deal of technical equipment. In early 1944 a new document appeared, the Staff Equipment Table (SET). This was something of a distilled AFG.1098 table, and covered just a fraction of the items found on the AFG.1098, namely those defined as Controlled Stores by the War Office, consisting of;

Wireless equipment

Line equipment

Small arms and support weapons (but not ammunition or grenades, etc.)

Watches, compasses, mine detectors

Transport (excluding bicycles but including trailers)

SETs were compiled on the basis of arms of service, with each SET covering anywhere from one to eight units of the arm of service involved.

### ***Personnel Staff Tables and Formation Staff Equipment Tables***

Having so many individual War Establishment tables issued made it difficult to assess the size and strength of the formations that these were used to construct. This information was initially compiled in Personnel Staff Tables, which listed each unit and Headquarters in a formation, along with its WE reference and personnel strength. Personnel figures were divided into officers and other ranks, with separate entries for unit personnel, attached personnel and First Reinforcements.

While Personnel Staff Tables provided a summary of how many officers and men were in a unit or formation, they offered nothing on the amount of transport or the types and numbers of weapons that were authorised for them. In late 1944, or so it would appear, a new type of document appeared, the Formation Staff Equipment Table. These may have been made possible as a result of the individual SETs outlined above, as they included much, but not all, of the same information.

A Formation SET could be a sprawling document; for each unit and Headquarters in the formation concerned it gave the number of officers and other ranks, plus those for any First Reinforcements, the reference of the governing WE Table, the SET and the AFG.1098. It also showed the War Office Controlled Stores authorised for each element in a formation, which included all types of weapons (but not ammunition), vehicles and optical equipment, and also signal equipment, in terms of wireless stations and telephones and switchboards, but not lengths of field cable.

### ***Availability of documents of the above types***

Regrettably, very few of the above types of supporting documentation remain available. At time of writing, I have one AFG.1098 document, an eclectic mix of SETs, mostly issued during the immediate post-war period, and a single wartime Formation SET for the Standard Armoured Division as of April 1945. I have tried to incorporate the information gleaned from all these into the Chapters on War Establishment tables but the absence of so many of these items does mean the project is not what it may have been.

### ***Contemporary spellings***

For the most part, I have retained the spellings used in the original War Establishment tables.

Serjeant, as opposed to Sergeant; Serjeant is used in all British Army WE Tables that I have seen for the 1930s and 1940s. New Zealand WE Tables opted for Serjeant, while Canadian and Australian War Establishments used Sergeant.

Quarter-master is hyphenated in all British WEs that I have seen issued for the 1930s and 1940s.

Motorcycle as opposed to motor-cycle or motor cycle; I admit I have found myself using the modern spelling here by default, though in WE Tables it was either hyphenated or broken into two words.

British Army documents of the 1930s and 1940s also used what are today regarded as Americanised spellings, such as organization, mechanized and motorized. Key amongst these for this series is undoubtedly organization, where I have kept the 'zed'.

### ***Abbreviations commonly used in War Establishment tables***

Driver, IC – IC stands for 'internal combustion' though some wartime sources also say 'in charge'.

AFV – stands for 'armoured fighting vehicle' and was added to driver-mechanic where appropriate.

GS – stands for 'general service', and in WE Tables was appended to 15-cwt trucks and 3-ton lorries that were not fitted for a particular role.

LMG – stands for 'light machine gun', as in the ubiquitous Bren.

MMG – stands for 'medium machine gun', and was particular to the .303-inch Vickers.

PIAT – stands for 'projector, infantry, anti-tank'.

-pdr – stands for 'pounder' when referring to the weight of shot or shell of a gun or howitzer. While in WE Tables it was usual to see '-pdr' used (as in 25-pdr or 6-pdr), in other documents it was equally common to use '-pr' instead (as in 25-pr or 6-pr).

Documents of the day would punctuate abbreviations, such as L.M.G. rather than LMG, or W.E. instead of WE. I did unthinkingly adopt the modern day approach of omitting the full stops and have continued to do so.