Lecture.

A LECTURE ON BILLETING.1

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The subject of billeting is threefold. There is billeting in peace, there is billeting in war, and there is a billeting scheme for the Territorials should it be necessary to mobilize them. I shall not touch again on this last part of the subject; it does not concern us to-night.

If anyone here is curious about etymology, he will find the history of the word “billet” interesting. The word is derived from the Latin “bulla,” later “billa,” a knob, anything rounded by art. It was applied to old-time leaden seals on account of their shape, and hence came the word “bull,” an edict of the Pope—the term for the seal on the document being applied to the document itself—and from thence a bull or a bill came to be applied to a variety of sealed papers, and after a while to papers of certain sorts not sealed at all. The English language kept the word to signify the many various things, accounts of money, drafts of laws, placards, and so forth that we know as bills, but adopted a French diminutive of similar origin, and anglicized the pronunciation of it for a word to express the lodging assigned to a soldier, or the act of quartering soldiers on persons compulsorily, according to the part of speech. A billeting order was originally a sealed paper. Though, as I have said, of the same origin, the French word “billet” is not used to imply a quarter or lodging, but the paper ordering persons to receive soldiers is “billet de logement.” The French have, however, a verb “biller,” to billet, which they have taken and adopted from English usage. We seem to have borrowed their “billet,” and called it “billet”; they have returned the compliment by taking our “to billet,” translating it by “biller” and transferring it to their own language. The word “bullet” is from the same root, and there is “bull’s eye,” a kind of sweet, flavoured with peppermint usually, that is really a diminution of “bull bullery,” a small rounded knob, the last relic of the oldest use handed down through generations of children.

That little sealed paper ordering householders to receive soldiers into their houses has made much history. So far as I understand the matter, it never has been legal to quarter soldiers upon private persons, nor was it legal even to quarter them in public houses till the Revolution of 1688. The right to do this was given when William III. was king. Kings before his time had usurped power to order their subjects to accept the quartering of soldiers upon them, and some kings ingeniously saved pension charges by the device of quartering disabled soldiers, and time-expired soldiers

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returned from the wars who could not find work, on various sorts of persons. Naturally the old soldier with free food and lodging provided in a private house did not go tramping the country seeking employment. The soldier was satisfied, the king was satisfied; the only people dissatisfied were those members of the public who had to find the free quarters.

As a matter of fact the Stuart kings had no choice but to billet their soldiers, because there were no barracks in those days. Aldershot was not born, nor Tidworth thought of. It is true those same kings had no right to keep a standing army. Their people used to retort this upon them. But a standing army was the sort of thing to justify itself and what its king did. That was why the people hated it. And at the bottom of her heart England still hates and fears a standing army so much that the Army exists only from year to year. Any year it may cease to exist if a sufficient number of members can be counted in the division lobbies against the re-enactment of the Army Act. Meanwhile, in times of peace, under certain conditions, this Army may exist, and may be quartered in England, Scotland, and Ireland, in "inns, livery stables, ale-houses, victualling houses, and all houses selling brandy, strong waters, cider, or metheglin by retail to be drunk in their houses."

"And in noe private houses whatsoever." I have no personal experience of metheglin; I do not think it is often drunk by the British soldier. It is, I believe, a fermented liquor made of honey. A gouty tipple, I should fancy, but George Borrow, in his account of the bee-minder in Romany Rye, describes it as most delicious. He describes it as "a brown-coloured liquor"; potent, too; "deliciously sweet and mellow, but appeared strong as brandy; my eyes reeled in my head, and my brain became slightly dizzy."

But, excepting in Romany Rye and in the Army Act, I do not remember other mention of this liquor. The abuse of the power of billeting, in all times, was restrained by the fact that the allotment of billets always rested with the civil authorities of the town or village in which soldiers were to be quartered. They, having local knowledge, and being naturally wishful to stand well with their fellow townsmen, made arrangements as little obnoxious as possible. Apparently, the civil authorities at times did use their powers to annoy persons with whom they had private quarrels, for in the reign of William III, when billeting was first made legal, oppressive billeting by the civil authorities was further checked by a clause in the Act holding the civil authorities liable to pay pecuniary damages to any persons wronged by the improper quartering of soldiers upon them.

The power to allot billets is still in the hands of the civil authorities, and it is especially laid down in the Army Act that "a person having or executing any military office or commission in any part of the United Kingdom shall not be directly or indirectly concerned in appointing quarters. And that all warrants, Acts, and things made, done or appointed
A Lecture on Billeting

by such person shall be void." The general officer commanding-in-chief, Southern Command, cannot order any person to provide a billet. The village constable can.

The procedure is as follows: Troops are to move through England, and to be billeted on their way. They are moved on the authority of a route which is signed by the Secretary of State for War, under the authority of His Majesty the King. On this document it is stated through what places the troops will move. This route must be produced, and a demand for billets made to the constable in charge, and he must then find the billets. If a document purporting to be a properly signed route is produced by an officer or soldier to a constable, he must act on it. That it purports to be a legal route is enough; he cannot question it. He must act until he has evidence that it is a forgery, or otherwise illegal. This provision is to prevent delays on pretence of doubt as to the legality of the document. It prevents a town unfriendly to the military keeping a regiment standing in the streets all night whilst it takes advice as to the legality of the demand for billets. There are, of course, heavy penalties for offences such as forging routes or illegally demanding quarters.

But peace billeting is a simple matter. It only means that the keepers of public-houses have to provide reasonable accommodation at a very cheap rate to soldiers on duty. The exact scale of charges is laid down in an appendix to the Army Act.

It is in time of war that billeting becomes interesting. When an army is marching through an enemy's country there is no law for it but martial law. The civil authorities of the enemy's country will provide billets if they are afraid of what the invading force may do to them if they do not provide them. If therefore the local civil authorities refuse to take steps to provide billets, the general officer commanding will take steps to make them do so. In practice the chance of being shot off-hand if they play the fool will make the local authorities civil on receipt of Army Form F. 788. A copy of this form is in Field Service Regulations, Part I. It says "As an Officer in the British Army, I, acting under powers conferred on me, hereby direct the Local Authorities of [such and such a place] to supply billets for:—" Here ensues a space for details of numbers and of the number of meals if subsistence is required. It goes on to say that in the event of subsistence being demanded and required, the question of payment will be considered at the nearest British garrison. It does not say payment will be made.

The billeting demand goes on with a veiled threat or a broad hint to the inhabitants, for it orders the local authorities to apply to the undersigned without loss of time in case of any disobedience on the part of the inhabitants, so that military force may be applied if necessary. There is no "hesitation" about that Army Form. The tenor is—find board and lodging for so many officers, men, and horses, or we will make you! At the same time a supply of Army Forms F. 789, billeting orders
on inhabitants, is given to the head of the community, and he has to make one out to each inhabitant. This is a council of perfection; of course it could not always be carried out for want of time.

These demands for billets can be made either with subsistence or without subsistence. The subsistence can be paid for in cash or by requisition. Usually, no doubt, subsistence would be demanded with the billets because the more the army can live on the country, the less become the difficulties of transport. And as a rule such supplies will be paid for, not out of good-will but from principles of policy. The inhabitants of the enemy's country are more likely to reveal the existence of supplies if they get cash for them, than if they only have the pleasure of seeing the invading army eat them. Though it is not necessary always to pay for supplies in an enemy's country, one has to be a little careful about miscellaneous and unauthorized appropriations, because there are sections of the Army Act that make it uncomfortable for you if you are found out.

I have told you that a billeting demand is made on the civil authorities, and a billeting order is passed on by them to the inhabitants. But this is only half way through the proceeding. I must go back to the beginning. The regulations for billeting are all common sense. If anyone of you should be told to march a party of men to London from Tidworth, what would you do if you had no regulations to guide you? You would find out, as far as you could, what places there were at convenient day's marches apart to billet in, how far you would be able to trust to local supplies; if there were any special reason for avoiding any particular place; and, if you were liable to be attacked on the way, how best at each place to meet attack. When you got near a place you would send on someone to tell the inhabitants to make ready for your party, and that someone would make arrangements, find out the geography of the place, come back to guide you in and show you to your quarters. And that is what the staff work in billeting an army comes to. And the rules and the regulations—are they not written in the books of the Field Service Regulations? I do not propose to read you extracts from Part I.

Our special duty would be to give expert advice on the sanitation of the billets. Obviously in an enemy's country it would often not be possible to go thoroughly into the sanitary condition of the town or village in which a force was billeted. The head of the community would be asked as to the presence of any infectious disease in the town, and infected houses would be avoided. If after occupation of a house it was found that infected inhabitants were in it, it would be necessary to take steps to avoid the spread of the infection throughout the army. No rules can be laid down. The only good rule is "use your brains." Say ten men are found to be billeted in a house that has half a dozen children peeling after scarlet fever. Some of these men are very likely to have been
infected. They will not show the disease for a few days. I should report the circumstance to the commanding officer of the regiment and arrange for these ten men to march apart from the others as much as possible, and that they should be associated in future billets and not allowed to share billets with other men. Then if any developed the disease they could be drafted out and put in hospital.

The giving of expert advice is but a part of our work. Our duties in connexion with billets are manifold and complex. We are doctors, medical officers of health, commanding officers of men, organizers of hospitals. Some of us will be doing one duty, some another, some all four at once. I shall not ask you to listen to me as I read out to you tables of the duties of a medical officer in every possible situation. I propose only to give a few hints. The medical officer's first duty will be to use his common sense. Use your hand and your horse. Get around and look at things. Say you are attached to a regiment:—Get around and find a good place for your inspection room and detention room. Very likely it is a good place for something else. Never mind, go to the commanding officer or the adjutant or both and point out the necessity of a central place for the seeing of the sick. Use tact to get your way. Imply that there is a regulation to the effect that after tactical considerations the care of the sick should have the first place. I do not say there is such a regulation. Nor should you; but use a little tact and you will get your way. Possession is nine-tenths of the law; so, as soon as you have got your way, occupy the place. Chalk a notice on the doors. Install an orderly to take charge and get a sick man or two well wrapped up in blankets into it. This will help to prevent other tactful persons ousting you from the desirable spot you have acquired and sending you on to settle elsewhere. Then go round the billets of the men of the regiment. Inspect them intelligently. See there is enough latrine accommodation. Take a look at the water supplies. As you move about amongst them cast your eyes over the men and make a note of any that look ill or knocked up. Arrange to examine them more fully later if you think it necessary. If you see a man going lame stop him, have his boots off and see what is the matter at once. Soldiers are often very stupid about rubbed feet. Do not forget yourself; you must also keep yourself fit as well as the men, so find out where and at what time you are to have your food. If you leave that to chance you may go hungry.

If you are commanding a field ambulance you will have to select a good place at which to establish a temporary hospital unless the assistant director of medical services has definitely named a spot to you. Some sick are sure to come in to your field ambulance. The medical officers with regiments will not keep anyone who cannot march if they can help it, but will pass them on if possible to a field ambulance. As the field ambulance will be moving on with the division to which it is attached, any sick soldiers who will not be fit for duty after a day's rest
in an ambulance wagon must be left behind. The assistant director of medical services probably will have given instructions, but if he has not, make arrangements and ask him to approve them.

In our official books there is much written on our duties with regard to the wounded after a battle. I have had much practice in that side of work, because it has been my fate many times to be just behind the fighting line in sanguinary battles with a horribly large proportion of wounded to troops engaged in the staff tours I have attended. But our duties with regard to the sick sent to a field ambulance on the line of march or in billets are much less defined. This is probably because the conditions must be so various. Suppose a field ambulance to be marching, day after day, for six days, fifteen miles each day, and billeting each night. What will it do each day with its sick? Obviously this question can only be answered each day after consideration of the conditions. Presumably a battle is imminent, or the troops would not be moving so rapidly; one would not desire, therefore, to detach any part of a field ambulance at any time for fear it should not catch up again. If I had no other orders I should consider the circumstances in which I was placed each day and act accordingly. If a railway station were available within short distance I should send my sick there perhaps; but my ambulance wagons have to go fifteen miles each day, so they should not go more than two or three miles out and back if I could help it. Supply wagons would take all or some for me back to some stationary hospital perhaps. Another day I might find it best to leave the sick collected in some house for a medical unit following behind me to take over. In fact the disposal of his sick will be a daily problem for the officer commanding a field ambulance. The chief points to bear in mind would be: Keep your field ambulance together; get on forward with your unit; send your sick back down the line; make quite certain that you have so arranged that the sick shall not be forgotten or left unattended, and let the assistant director of medical services know each day where any sick you have disposed of have gone. As commanding officers, medical officers will have men of our corps and men of other corps, attached, to command and to provide for. This will entail duties similar to those performed by regimental officers. You will have to send forward a billeting party just as a regiment does to take over your billets. Be careful to see that your allotted billets are all close together and not mixed up with the billets of other units. A certain amount of adjustment of billets after allotment is permissible. For instance if your billets are all down one side of a street and the billets of another unit are all down the other side you and the officer commanding the other unit may arrange so that you have both sides of half the street and he both sides of the other half. Keep your men all together if it is possible. Then you may have the horses of a field ambulance to provide for. Keep them together also if you can. But if you cannot, mind you know
A Lecture on Billeting

exactly where they are so that you can find them instantly at need. I
know from experience on manoeuvres that it is "the very deuce" on a
dark night if you are suddenly ordered to move on your field ambulance
and cannot find the places where your horses are.

Find out who is on each side of you, and find out the ways in and out
of wherever you may be. It is quite likely that you may not be able to
take your wagons and carts to your billeting area. In fact it is probable
that will be the case. If you have a dozen houses of sorts allotted to you
for your billets and for your arrangements for tending the sick they may
be in the middle of a town of small streets. You may not block those
streets with ambulance wagons and general service wagons. Your
transport will be parked outside the town, probably in a field near the
road you will take next day. Perhaps quite a long walk from your
billets. You must not forget to tell off a guard for those wagons, and be
absolutely certain that you yourself and many of those under you can find
those wagons again in daylight and in the dark.

The officer commanding a field ambulance must appoint an orderly
officer to go round the men's billets and inspect them at least once by
day and once by night. This is to make sure that your men are as well
fed and as comfortable as it is possible for them to be, and also to see
that they are behaving themselves. I put food and comfort first as our
men are very well behaved as a rule, and I wish to emphasize the great
importance of food and comfort in keeping men fit under strain.

In every billeted house a man must be put on duty to guard all
equipment in that house, or you may find the inhabitants have made free
of some of your men's belongings, for each house will have its own
proper inhabitants in a portion of it.

The only accommodation you are entitled to expect in a billet is a
room in which to shelter, and subsistence if subsistence is requisitioned.
Anything else is obtained by good luck or good management. You must
not take the private property of the inhabitants. That is prohibited by
the laws and customs of war, and also by the Army Act. So beds,
blankets, and so forth, the property of the people in whose houses you are
billeted may not be taken. This does not prevent the general officer
commanding an army requisitioning on the head of the community for
anything he likes to ask for for the use of his troops. He may do what
he chooses, but will of course have to defend his measures to his Gov-
ernment. But you personally cannot demand things as a right, and you may
not demand things with threats. However if you are tactful you may get
a good deal. To begin with the inhabitants very likely are not up in the
rules and customs of war. If you ask kindly for a bed no one can blame
you, and if the inhabitants provide it not knowing they need not, that is
no fault of yours; this applies also to fuel and cooking pots. It is wisdom
to ingratiate yourselves with the inhabitants. By the exercise of a little
tact probably you will be able to get a good deal out of the most
unfriendly inhabitants for yourself and for the men under you. It will
be always worth trying it on anyhow. As a last resource you can offer
to pay for things and services if you have any money. In an enemy's
country, however, I should never like to part with any of my hard-earned
pay to the advantage of my country's foes, and in a friendly land I should
not like to deprive our friends of chances to perform the duties of
hospitality, nor of opportunities to show their gratitude to the soldiery.

Though you are justified, in my opinion, in getting all you can out of
the inhabitants of the enemy's country for the benefit of your command
for as little cash as possible, you are bound to maintain strict discipline
over your men, and to see that the inhabitants are protected from wrongs.
Drunkenness, plundering, and offences against females are the most likely
crimes. Do not hesitate to deal with them. Have no mercy on active
service. It is of the utmost importance in an enemy's country to keep on
as good terms as possible with the inhabitants, and therefore the Army
Act prescribes heavy penalties, even death, for wrong done to private
persons. It is subversive of all discipline and ruinous to efficiency to
allow your men to loot, or to go consorting with the women of the country.
The reins of discipline must be tightened, not relaxed, in billets in an
unfriendly country.

Billeting will be close or open according to the accommodation, and
according to the nearness of the enemy. Obviously, if a commander
knows that he cannot be attacked for the next three days and accommoda-
tion is available he will give his men as much space as possible because
it is more comfortable and more healthy. But if the enemy is close at
hand and attack may come at any moment he will billet his men as closely
as possible so that he may get them all together, and into position as
rapidly as possible. Usually very close billeting will only be for a night
or two at a time. It will be right for you to see that the ventilation of
such close billets is as good as it is possible to make it. So see to that,
and do all you can to keep the air fresh; but do not write to superior
authority in such circumstances and point out that each man should
have 600 cubic feet of space in which to sleep.

I have told you to find the ways to and from your billets to the road
of march. Also remember to find out where the headquarters of the
brigades and of the division are, and how to get to them. Get the
address of the assistant director of medical services. But he cannot be
always in his quarters, since he will have a good many miles of billets
to supervise. He cannot, therefore, be always telling you what to do.
Do, therefore, what you think you ought to do, or what you think it
is best to do, and tell him where you are and what you have done
when you can. Take responsibility, and if necessary take the blame.
I imagine the man who does something not quite the best is less
exasperating than the man who does nothing because he could not find
anybody to tell him what to do.