THE WORK OF FIELD AMBULANCES.

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In a note published in the British Medical Journal last winter it was indicated that while no adequate reason had yet presented itself for departing from accepted methods of conducting the training of field ambulance units, it was clear that the work of those then in process of formation or awaiting orders for the Front might not be quite what they at present expected.

At the time this statement was made there were already circumstances which justified it, and the accuracy of the forecast has been borne out in all particulars by the events of the past six months. That period has seen the arrival in France of troops who were then only in training, and it was being brought into touch with the work of certain field ambulances connected with these reinforcements that reminded the writer of what he had read in the Journal as to the diversity of offices that field ambulances as a whole might find themselves expected to fulfil.

The first of these units, which may be entitled A, was engaged in work in no wise resembling that which the term "field ambulance suggests." Instead of being more or less constantly on the move, and occupied in the collection of the wounded from the regimental aid posts, in doing emergency operations, and in passing on its cases to a casualty clearing station, it was an entirely stationary unit, filling a triple function of a much less exciting kind. Its vehicles had been parked for the time being and its personnel were divided up to run a clearing station for infectious cases; a bathing establishment, and an institution somewhat misleadingly termed a "convalescent hospital."

Its occupation, it is to be noted, was not in the least due to the fact that it was a newly arrived unit. The primary cause was that a need for the work in question had been created by the circumstances of the War and that the need was not directly anticipated by the ante bellum textbooks or assigned by Army regulations to any unit created ad hoc. The secondary cause was that A was free to undertake it. It was free to undertake it because, thanks to the siege-like character of the military operations then and now in progress, to the plenitude of motor ambulance convoys, and to the proximity of the casualty clearing stations, two of the three field
ambulances belonging to the division served by unit A fully sufficed for all the field work required.

The occupation of other field ambulances, which may be called B and C and D, also illustrated the same point, though not perhaps quite so completely.

B like A was a territorial unit but serving a different division, and also like A had at least three jobs in hand. It was running simultaneously a rest station, a laundry, an advanced dressing station, and a respirator factory. At the latter native labour was employed, but the whole work was in charge of an officer of unit B, with a file or two to assist him in its supervision.

The headquarters of units A and B were in a town of some size, but unit C was more or less under canvas. It was running a rest station and small bathing and laundry establishment, and was bivouacked around the farm buildings taken over for the purpose. C was a unit of long standing—it had, in fact, arrived in France with the first detachment of the expeditionary force—but just as in the case of units A and B, its services in its usual capacity were not required for the moment by the division to which it belonged.

As for D, this letter relates not to a single unit but to all three field ambulances of one particular division. On paper they preserved their independence, but otherwise they had practically conglomerated. Their headquarters were in a village of some size, and between them they were running a large rest camp, which included a bathing station, a "convalescent hospital"—established in a permanent building of some size—and two dressing stations, one in an advanced, the other in an intermediate position. Their various officers were taking turns of duty at regular intervals in connexion with all the different enterprises conjointly carried on, and in this way all shared fairly whatever was to be had in the way of dull work or exciting work, risky posts or safe posts, soft jobs or hard jobs.

The same idea of sharing all forms of work also underlay, I understood, the arrangements of the divisions to which units A, B and C belonged. At intervals the different field ambulances of each of the divisions concerned were to exchange position and occupation. Whether the plan was ever put into effect I do not know, for the next time I was in the same area I found that units A, B and C, together with the divisions to which they belonged, had all moved to a distant part of the line, and the work they had been doing was now in other hands.

The occupations described do not, as a whole, sound perhaps
particularly interesting, or likely to appeal to men so mentally and physically constituted as to have been led—as far as concerns the officers of units A and B—to select a field ambulance unit when joining the Territorial Force. Nevertheless there did not seem to be any disposition to grumble at their existing employment. They did not expect to be engaged for any very long period, and meantime they were anything but mere machines. The work demanded not only industry and energy, but also ingenuity and organizing power. In addition its utility was obvious.

Rest Camps and Bath-houses.

It will have been observed that in the case of only one of the units mentioned in the foregoing note do the duties described include no field work whatever. They were, in short, not exceptionally situated units, but engaged in a fashion which made them as a whole a very fair sample of their class. The needs of all divisions in the matter of baths, cleansing operations, rest camps, and their like are much the same, and unless they are met by some arrangement available to a large number of divisions it is to its A.D.M.S. and the field ambulances under his command that a division looks for assistance in the matter. Obviously rest camp and convalescent work is medical, and baths and clean underclothes are such powerful adjuncts to directly medical measures for keeping the men in good health, that all A.D.M.S.'s, I believe, regard it as part of their ordinary duty to see that they are somehow or other made available.

But of course, they always bear in mind the possibility of a general advance, or of a heavy local offensive or defensive operation, suddenly and greatly increasing the need for field work, and hence take care that it should be possible instantly to release their personnel of their field ambulance units for this purpose. Given the occasion, rest camps and convalescent hospitals must be temporarily evacuated, baths and washhouses closed, unless the D.D.M.S. of the Army Corps involved prefers to fill the vacated posts by drawing M.O.'s temporarily from some other division, or by asking the D.M.S. of the Army to which his corps belongs to get up additional medical officers from the base. But in this matter there can rarely be any great difficulty. Divisions which are heavily engaged have no time for baths, and heavy fighting seems itself a sovereign remedy for most of the ills that help to fill the rest camps and convalescent hospitals. A glance at the
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sickness and casualty chart of almost any division will show that as the red line rises the black line usually falls.

The infectious case clearing station mentioned at the beginning of the previous note was not specially for the benefit of the division to which belonged the field ambulance in charge of it. Like an ordinary casualty clearing station it was an army headquarters unit and part of the general machinery—some prearranged, some improvised to meet new needs—for keeping down the wastage due to zymotic disorders. All cases of illness, diagnosed at a regimental aid post or an advanced dressing station, or elsewhere in the area, as being probably of an infectious order, were sent there for final diagnosis and disposal instead of to the nearest casualty clearing station. The necessary accommodation was provided by some modern farm buildings and a number of marquees, and it allowed of six different classes of cases being separately isolated. The patients remained as a rule only a very few days. The diagnosis assured—with the help of a mobile laboratory if need be—the patient was sent on to a base either in the isolation coach of a hospital train or by a special ambulance, usually the latter.

The scope and status of the other enterprises varied a little. The rest camps and convalescent hospitals confined their work to men of their own respective divisions, but one of the bathing establishments seemed prepared for work on a still larger scale.

The means at the disposal of these bathing establishments were in some cases primitive, but their scheme of work was identical and they all attained their primary aim. This was to provide each entrant with a bath of hot water and plenty of soap, and to substitute for the underclothing that he was then wearing a set which was both clean and in good repair.

At the larger establishment that has been mentioned they went a good deal further that this; they turned a man out not only completely re-equipped in the matter of under-garments, but attended to his external clothing as well. As it had been dealing on these lines with an average of just under one thousand men a day for many successive weeks, it is natural to surmise that its arrangements were elaborate and its premises especially suited to the end in view.

This was in fact the case. The work was done in a very large building, which being in peace times a linen weaving and dyeing factory, possessed fitments readily adaptable to the requirements of a combined bathing, clothes washing and clothes repairing establishment on a very extensive scale—boilers, hot-water pipes, drying
rooms and racks; huge vats, in each of which half-a-dozen men could bathe simultaneously.

The men, as they arrived, commonly in companies, made their outer clothing into bundles (all except their boots), which were then removed to a sterilizer. They then moved in sections into the vat room, where they stripped, throwing each separate garment into a separate receptacle—one for vests, one for pants, one for socks—then took their baths and dried themselves, the whole process being timed and lasting a given number of minutes. The re-dressing arrangements, which included the issue of fresh underclothing in good condition, was conducted at the same time in a separate hall. Meantime, and all day long, laundry and repairing work went on in different halls, all the various appliances required in the way of washing, wringing and sewing machines, being provided, and about one hundred women being employed to work them.

The term "convalescent hospital," which has been used in speaking of the work of two of the units mentioned in the previous note, is not strictly official. The institutions to which it is applied were two large well-fitted buildings which might be regarded as the tent sections of the ambulances concerned. Their accommodation was more elaborate, but their work was identical with that of the rest stations or camps. The patients were for the most part men suffering from slight ailments or trifling injuries; tired men, footsore men; men with slight bronchial attacks, stomachic troubles, passing skin complaints; men undergoing anti-typhoid inoculation; men suffering from pyrexia not deemed to be premonitory of serious disorder. If any patient failed to fulfil expectations by getting quite well within a few days, or if he developed symptoms suggesting the probability of prolonged illness he could always be sent to a base via a casualty clearing station, and meantime he was receiving all the attention he required.

These rest stations, in short, fulfilled a double purpose. They supplied a means (1) of bringing a possibly serious case under treatment when in an incipient stage; (2) of conforming to an accepted axiom of military medicine, namely, that cases likely to be fit to return to duty within a limited time should not be removed for treatment to a greater distance from their units than is inevitable.

Finally, it should be mentioned that it is not always under the title of rest station or convalescent hospital that work of this order is carried on. A good deal depends on local circumstances,
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including the proximity of the field ambulances to one another and to a casualty clearing, the character of the accommodation that a field ambulance can secure, the nature of the ground just behind the actual fighting line, and the distance between the opposing trenches.

In some cases ambulances may be so situated that they can carry on both rest station and ordinary tent section work simultaneously and in the same building. In other words, they can provide both for the seriously wounded and sick men, who after receiving a certain amount of attention will be sent on to a casualty clearing station, and for the light cases whose treatment will begin and end at the ambulance itself.

As for the field work of ambulances, its description or discussion was not one of the objects of this note. Since, however, so much stress has been laid herein on what may be described as the civil or institutional side of field ambulance life, it may be well also to accentuate the fact that it is for youngish, or at all events hardy men, that ambulance duty is best fitted. Taken as a whole, it involves a rough and comfortless life, combined with a considerable spice of danger.