A SANITARY SECTION AT THE FRONT.

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The war establishment of a sanitary section consists of a Commandant, either Captain or Lieutenant, two Sergeants, one of whom is a Staff-Sergeant, two Corporals, one Lance-Corporal, and twenty men, all drawn from the Royal Army Medical Corps, Territorial Force, and attached to the section are two drivers from the Army Service Corps. The equipment includes two box sterilizers (current steam), one water clarifier and sterilizer, numerous brooms, watercans, pails and flagpoles (to mark the position of latrines), with some Mackenzie sprays, spades, pickaxes, butchers' and carpenters' tool boxes and three circular tents; for transport and forming part of the equipment either a motor lorry or general service wagon, according to the terrain in which the section is going to operate. Concerning the general service wagon it may be remarked that its carrying capacity is insufficient and that the addition of a maltese cart is indispensable, and the number of horses or mules and of drivers must be correspondingly increased.

With reference to the personnel, as stated above, all belong to the Royal Army Medical Corps, Territorial Force, but the Commandant need not necessarily be a member of the medical profession, provided he has some sanitary qualification, e.g., sanitary engineer or architect. Nevertheless, a medical qualification is very desirable for many reasons, not least being that the Commandant is then able to treat the minor ailments and casualties of his men and thereby keep his ranks intact, a desideratum difficult of attainment when the sick have to report to the medical officer of some other unit.

The rank and file are selected as far as possible from employees of sanitary authorities and firms, and should include one laboratory assistant. The composition of my own section might serve well as a model. It includes four qualified sanitary inspectors, three Borough Council employees, skilled in road and drainage works, one builder, one skilled disinfecter and one carpenter. The remainder had no special pre-war sanitary experience, but are intelligent young fellows, who speedily acquired knowledge of the work required of them. As far as military considerations allow non-commissioned rank should be given to the sanitary inspectors.
Two men should be trained before going abroad as cooks, another as orderly clerk, and another as quartermaster. The laboratory assistant, if obtainable, will be of most service if he has been trained in an analytical laboratory.

The Commandant has a difficult and arduous post to fill, as he combines in himself the functions of commanding officer, adjutant, medical officer, quartermaster, orderly officer, paymaster and censor, and is, therefore, never off duty. My experience shows that it would be advantageous, under the conditions of active service, for the Commandant to have a junior officer, who would relieve his senior of much of the routine sectional work. Again, the Commandant may find his job a very solitary one, if he is so situated that he cannot join a mess, as was my position for nearly three months.

Outside his own section the Commandant, as may be surmised from the junior rank assigned to him, has no executive power, but is solely advisory and critical. It is even doubtful whether he is a “sanitary officer” in the sense in which the Army uses the term, the point having been left ambiguous, possibly purposely, as the formation of sanitary sections is quite recent, and the test of war is required to demonstrate the justification for their existence. Again, a section may find itself under the control of a D.A.D.M.S., an officer of field rank, who may be appointed as a specialist sanitary officer to the base in which the section is working.

In pre-war days it was laid down that sanitary sections are lines of communication units, but after the various bases and intermediate bases had been supplied with sanitary sections the idea was conceived of allotting a section to each division. But my own section, though originally a divisional unit, has also acted as an intermediate base and advanced base unit within a period of five months, and this has militated against its proving itself, but of course has widely extended its experience. The constant changes have so far never allowed it to complete its work in any one sphere, and with each change has come a different set of conditions to which the section has had to accommodate itself, and a different personnel with whom to make itself acquainted. No doubt a section which has been definitely allotted either as a line of communication or divisional unit, is better able to show good results than one which, like my own, is placed under a new set of circumstances every two months. At present the section is stationed at an advanced base in the Mediterranean within a mile of the firing trenches, and there I trust it will be allowed to remain.
Certain of the sections have developed special functions, others work on a broader basis. These differences depend mainly upon the proximity of the district occupied to the firing line or upon special local conditions, and to a less degree upon the training or aptitude or proclivities of the Commandant. For example, some sections have specialized on provision of bathing facilities or water purification, whilst others seem to be hardly more than scavenging squads. The theory underlying the formation of a sanitary section is that it is a skeleton to be filled out with unskilled labour to form a large body of workers either (1) in a district which is occupied by successive bodies of troops or where sanitary works are entirely lacking or very crude and require to be developed, or (2) in the case of a divisional section, as a body of overseers or inspectors.

At the advanced base I was given command of a second section, much reduced in numbers when I took over, the Commandant of which had gone sick. I found a foul area closely packed by men and stores, etc., the men living in dug-outs; the uncovered ten feet deep latrine trench system in use, water supply restricted, much diarrhoea amongst the troops, lax sanitary supervision; clothes disinfection though urgently required being carried on quite spasmodically, and the whole area under occasional shell fire, with stray bullets wandering overhead at all hours; but sea bathing was possible and contagious diseases practically negligible. At the time of our arrival the considerable task of removing men and stores from the crowded to a more spacious area had been taken in hand and was being prosecuted with energy. Transport was naturally limited but was being improved. Almost everything requisite for sanitation had to be imported or improvised. Here naturally was scope for wide and strenuous activity and we became veritable artists in improvization.

As the latrine areas were nearly used up and as the question was represented to me to be urgent, I at once set to work to provide for the new area a latrine system working on the destruction principle, and upon the public lavatory system, endeavouring to abolish the regimental latrine. To this end sites were selected where gullies converged, or where troops congregated, e.g., near pier heads, supply depots, etc. Upon each site seat latrines accommodating ten men and two officers were constructed, cresol drums, supplied with wire handles, utilized as pails; underground fly- and stench-proof urinals were constructed, triangular incinerators, having a sloping top and chimney of stones and mud, were built. For the grid of the latter, iron bars from wrecked lighters, Turkish
bayonets, etc., proved useful. Each latrine area was also provided with a large tub for reception of dry refuse from the nearest lines. This and the addition of damaged hay (which I commandeered) to the well-oiled pails formed an inflammable material easily consumed by the incinerators. Men were instructed to urinate before using the pails and quickly accustomed themselves to the system. Crude petroleum was used for cleansing the pails, and a liberal sprinkling of chloride of lime over the area diminished the fly-plague. One lesson I have learnt is that in dry climates, cresol or other aqueous solutions, except formaldehyde, are useless against flies. Upon the sloping top of the incinerators fire-plates were to be laid before the wet weather set in; this, with the addition of a cowl to the chimney it was hoped would permit incineration in the rainy season. Later, I intended to add two Serbian disinfector barrels to each latrine area. The whole site was placed in permanent charge of one man, whose duty it was to see that separate urination before defecation was observed, to cleanse and oil the pails and incinerate the contents. In carrying out these constructional works, the men, who had been Council employees, were most useful.

The next step was to divide the beach areas into districts, approximately equally peopled, and place a man of the sections in charge. His duty was to acquaint himself with the location of each dug-out, to inspect daily and to report irregularities to me. Officers commanding units were requested to see that night urine tubs and wet and dry refuse bins were established in their lines: the night urine tubs to be emptied every morning into the underground urinals and the contents of the dry refuse tins emptied into the large refuse barrels placed in the latrine areas.

The Thresh disinfector was started and kept in continuous action by appointing three squads of two men each from the sanitary sections. These squads worked eight-hour shifts; fortunately each section contained one man who was an expert disinfector.

Then the water problem was taken in hand. The water is brought mainly in lighters and pumped thence to tanks placed in various spots. From these tanks it is distributed in galvanized water vessels to the troops. Arrangements were made to allow each tank to be thrown out of action in rotation, so that it might be cleansed, and two men were detailed for this particular work. I was just taking up the question of cleansing the water-vessels and the men’s own water-bottles when I had to leave. I found that there had been no systematic cleansing of these articles and men were to be detailed for this duty.
Finally, there was the problem of flies and lice in various quarters, e.g., dug-outs, stores, staff-quarters, etc. Fortunately, I found a supply of vermorel sprayers and could spare one or two men for this work. In this way practically all the men of the two sections were appointed to some special duty and consequently each could go about his work without having to be specially detailed from day to day.

At all times there were certain other duties which fell to the lot of the sanitary sections to perform. Dead mules to be towed out to sea, by arrangement with the Naval Transport authorities, but we supplied the beach party and also the butcher, whose unpleasant task it was to rip open the animals at sea to ensure the carcase sinking. Generally, this duty had to be performed under cover of darkness. Then there were fatigue parties allotted to us to help clear up the mess which still littered the ground, much of it dating back to the original capture of the various gullies. For these parties the sections supplied the supervision. All that was inflammable and unusable was burnt.

One of the most difficult items to deal with is the enormous and ever-increasing number of empty tins, with which the British Army is always hampered. After incineration these were stamped flat and thrown into abandoned and disused dug-outs and saps, but as soon as all these are filled, the labour of digging pits will have to commence again, unless arrangements can be made to procure two false-bottomed lighters to convey the debris out to sea. Certainly the working of this system would present difficulties in heavy weather, but I do not think these difficulties insuperable, if the Naval Transport authorities cordially co-operate.

The last problem I had for solution was the provision of hot baths in winter. With restricted fresh water supplies and an area under shell-fire this is certainly a difficult matter. I put forward the suggestion that canvas baths similar in all respects to those which form part of an officer’s equipment should be procured in large numbers, flying column kitchens constructed for the heating of water in cresol drums, and I had hoped that the rainy season might present us with sufficient water in the wells dug by the sappers to allow from three to five gallons of water per man. Three would be sufficient, five ample to allow men to have a luxurious hot splash-bath and by the erection of shelters in the various gullies to which water from the wells could be taken in the water-carts, which are on the scene, I considered that the problem would be solved. So far, I have not heard what reception the suggestion has met with.
And now a few words of advice to Commandants who have not yet left home. Upon arriving at the scene of operations report to the superior officer under whom you will have to act. This will probably be the D.A.D.M.S. Also consult with the C.R.E., as it is essential to secure the co-operation of the Engineers. Get yourself, if possible, attached to a mess. Learn all that is known of water supplies, drainage, infectious diseases and other sanitary matters, and go over your district thoroughly. Having digested the information obtained, assign definite duties to the men of the section, and divide up the area into relatively equal subdivisions, using space or population as your basis of division, and place a man in charge of each sub-area.

One last word and I have done. I do not wish it to be thought that all the various sanitation works I had in hand were carried through to a successful conclusion, because I left owing to sickness, before that was possible. But all had been put in train and I trust that my successor will have found it easy to complete the works commenced. My task was lightened and rendered a pleasure by the very special favours extended to me by my chief, whose interest and kindness I can never requite.