

THE MOBILIZATION AND EARLY CAREER OF NO. 3
GENERAL HOSPITAL, BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

By COLONEL S. F. CLARK, A.M.S.

IN the office of the Deputy Director Medical Service, Western Command, at Chester was a secret pad marked "Mobilization No. 3 General Hospital." It was a good pad, complete to the smallest detail, and much time, trouble, and correspondence had gone to the making of it. Those concerned used to study it from a sense of duty, but with only an academic interest, as a thing that might possibly be of use to their successors on some far-off day, but was of no particular concern to themselves. At the beginning of August, 1914, however, this pad suddenly assumed an importance that had seemed incredible, and it was conned over line by line with a new and personal feeling by those for whom it had been compiled. From a collection of dry and tedious documents it flashed at a bound into a living, palpitating volume of absorbing interest.

One memorable evening a buff slip containing the single word "mobilize," duly authenticated, was handed to the officer commanding this phantom unit, which so far existed only between the covers of the pad, but this word was the spark that started the materialization of No 3 General Hospital out of nothing, as it were. To watch the development of this process promised to be a matter of the deepest interest. At the word the dormant atoms scattered over the Kingdom that were to form the hospital, sprang to life, and next day onwards the men, women, horses, and stores, that were detailed in the pad began to converge from all over the country, from near and from far, to the little Lancashire village that was to witness the formation of the new unit. By the evening of the first day of mobilization the five regular officers and the serving soldiers, practically all from the Western Command, and the horses—provided locally—had arrived. The animals were stabled, and the officers and men took over the building which had been previously chosen for the purpose and occupied it. It was a working men's Institute with only the floors to sleep on.

The first shock was to find that the rations which had been wired for from Chester as per pad, were not forthcoming, and the commanding officer had to render himself liable for a large sum of money to feed his officers, men, and horses during the period of mobilization. The pad was not to blame for this, as the compiler of it had not been informed that the method of obtaining food for all had been changed.

Every day added to the strength of the unit. Regular Royal Army Medical Corps reservists, "infantry" reservists, and Royal Garrison Artillery batmen arrived in rapid succession, while temporary lieutenants came singly and in batches. The matron and nursing sisters were reported to have reached the nearest large town and to be at the hotels

that had been ear-marked for them. An officer was sent over and found them to be all present and correct. An unexpected arrival was a chaplain, whose *bâtman* came armed with carbine, sword and ammunition. All the time telegrams from the War Office, Record Office, Deputy Director Medical Service, etc., were constantly being received.

The medical, laboratory, and X-ray stores in 146 cases which the quartermaster had dispatched from Chester before his departure for Lancashire came to hand with celerity, and no time was lost in beginning the drawing of the Ordnance equipment. This was all ready in a large double-storeyed shed close to which a railway line had been brought, and early on the second morning a start was made in loading up the trucks by the soldiers who had arrived. The personnel now made its first acquaintance with a bulky and heavy equipment whose handling on many subsequent occasions caused much sweat to flow. At first, progress in this unaccustomed work was slow, but then all idlers of every rank were rounded up from the Institute, officers and N.C.O.'s were flung into the breach with coats off, all fresh arrivals were hurried up to the scene, and a senior officer put in charge, so that the place soon hummed like a hive of bees, and the goods came out of the shed in a flood. With reinforcements constantly arriving the men worked hard and well, and the shed was cleared and the trucks loaded in excellent time. So closely were they packed that five of the trucks allowed by the pad were not needed.

On August 5 the hospital existed only on paper; five days later it stood ready to move off, complete in officers, sisters, men and horses—all fully equipped—and with all its tons of stores loaded up in the railway trucks. Except for the food hitch, the pad had not failed in a single detail. As the temporary lieutenants had not even expressed their desire to serve when mobilization was ordered, as many of the reserve sisters were at their homes, and as the great bulk of the N.C.O.'s and men had to come back from civil life, this seemed to be quite a good piece of work.

The departure of the unit was postponed for three days, which caused some disappointment, but the extra time was profitably employed in polishing up details. The local people were most kind in entertaining all ranks at their homes and by concerts, etc., and in looking after the nursing sisters who joined up on the last afternoon. On the Sunday the unit marched to the Parish Church, when the rector gave a most inspiriting sermon, and "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was sung with a swing and a verve unknown in peace time.

On the last morning, August 13, all ranks paraded for the issue of brassards and clasp knives, after which the commanding officer addressed his fully-equipped command, and told it that it must play its part well in the great drama that was being enacted on the stage of Europe. Eight months afterwards, in France, in bidding farewell to his unit, the

commanding officer recalled these words to his men, and said that the hospital could look back with pride upon what it had done since that sunny morning in England.

In the evening the unit departed in two trains for an unknown destination, amid the cheers and good wishes of the kindly villagers.

Early on the morning of the 14th the trains arrived at Southampton Docks prompt to the minute recorded in the pad, and were rapidly cleared of their loads. The only weak point of the preparations now showed itself, for the officers and sisters had been slumped together as "officers" in the train-table in the pad, and the embarkation staff was aghast when it found forty-three women to be provided for, as the ship detailed was impossible for them. However, certain good Samaritans took charge of the sisters, and they were eventually consigned to Havre in a mail boat, and so scored over the officers, most of whom had only deck accommodation through a wet and dismal night.

The ship "Seven Seas" was waiting for the hospital and a few details of other corps, so the unit conveyed its ninety-five tons of stores across the shed and loaded them into the vessel. She was not designed for passenger traffic, but as she is now at the bottom of one of the seas from which she took her name, *de mortuis*, etc., is her due. At 1 a.m., on the 14th, she cast off her hawsers, and there were few on board who did not wonder what the future had in store for them, now that they were really leaving England to take their allotted place in the greatest war of history. Later on, as our armies grew in size, they all remembered with pride that they were of the original Expeditionary Force that went so swiftly and so quietly over the sea.

The voyage across was wet and miserable; in the morning the tiny saloon was almost impassable on account of the officers who were lying asleep all over the floor in the strangest attitudes, having been driven in for shelter from the inhospitable deck. Two destroyers were passed, policing the seas, and late in the afternoon the ship entered the Seine and had a triumphant journey up it as long as daylight lasted. The scenery was beautiful and the inhabitants of every township, hamlet, and cottage on the banks turned out to see "les anglais." They welcomed the vessel with the utmost heartiness, flags were flying everywhere, the women and girls waved handkerchiefs, while cheers and cries of "Vive l'Angleterre" came constantly over the water. The ladies of one place came out in boats and presented a huge bouquet bound and bedecked with the red, white and blue ribbons which are the colours of both France and England. For a long time the troops were quiet, but later on the cheers were returned, and "Vive la France" was shouted with vigour and enthusiasm, interspersed with "Tipperary" and inquiries as to the downheartedness of those on board. About 11 p.m. the ship reached Rouen, her destination, and tied up at the quay amid pouring rain. Centuries must have passed since British troops went up the Seine, and

they were then the enemies of France and not her allies against a common foe.

Next morning the unit was ordered to establish itself in the building and grounds of the *Maison de Repos*, in the Bois de Guillaume (the Conqueror), about three miles from the river, and again handled all its equipment—out of the ship into motor lorries and out of them again. Patients could have been taken that evening if necessary, but there was no immediate pressure for beds and cases were not received till the 20th. A large number of marquees were pitched, and numerous alterations made in the interior of the building. The nursing sisters reappeared, by rail from Havre, and were accommodated in a convent close by which had certain disabilities both animate and inanimate.

It was thought that a General Hospital sat tight once it was started, so the unit laid itself out to spend the winter in Rouen and much work of a permanent nature was put in hand by the Royal Engineers. But the Director Medical Service visited the place one day, seemed a bit worried, said everything was very nice but how long would it take to pack up and move off? It was confessed that this question had not been considered, but plans for a hurried departure were at once taken in hand as a plain hint was given that this was more than a possibility. It was soon evident that all was not well at the Front, so when midnight orders were received to clear out the patients and to re-embark everything that could be saved, the hospital was a bit shocked but not altogether surprised. The story of this retreat from Rouen has been written as a separate article, so it must suffice now to say that by prolonged working under great pressure in the sultry heat, the patients were cleared to a hospital ship, and the equipment (no longer nicely baled) was once more put into motor lorries, taken to the riverside, and loaded into a ship, the "Lord Charlemont." All the stretchers were kept on the over-loaded hospital ship as beds, but everything else was got away except 400 screwed-up bedside tables and the Thresh disinfecter. The last named started off in good style at the tail of a slow-moving lorry, but it was not built to travel far, foundered about half a mile from the ship, and is said to have remained for days an obstruction to the traffic of the busiest street in Rouen. The hospital rear guard, trundling down the diet carts, slop receptacles, and wheels for the wheeled stretchers, passed it at 2 a.m. on September 1. It was then a hopeless wreck, abandoned to its fate, with wheels buckled to a figure of eight, and gendarmes engaged in fastening a red light to it.

The sisters disappeared again, going off by rail this time, and succeeded in losing their heavy baggage for some weeks. The voyage to St. Nazaire, the new British base, at the mouth of the Loire, was a welcome rest to all ranks, for the physical exertion which had been undergone was tremendous and the mental strain of the fight against time, to get the hospital away intact, tried the senior officers greatly. The procession of transports was not cheered this time for the people knew that the allies

were retreating, and it was a subdued, silent, and apparently depopulated countryside that wistfully watched the British ships hurrying down the Seine.

All was bustle and animation at St. Nazaire and No. 3 was started to work at once. It was the first General Hospital to arrive with its personnel and equipment in the same ship, and its luck was still in, for it was the only hospital to have a building assigned to it—this time a "College de Garçons." The ship's derricks began to work at 6 a.m. and as the need for immediate hospital accommodation was very great, and as the school was not available at once, some marquees and things absolutely essential were sent up to a field adjoining it, where a temporary hospital was hurriedly got ready. Once more the weary unloading from the ship, loading up vehicles, and unloading them a mile away, began. Owing to bad work by the French stevedores in the holds, every now and again a slingful of bedsteads became loose and they either fell into the water or crashed on to the stone quay and were battered into uselessness. Tents were also occasionally precipitated into the sea and were fished out with difficulty. There were no motor lorries here, only half a dozen carts each drawn by one more or less indifferent horse, so the second in command who was sent up to form the temporary hospital did well to take cases into the marquees the same night.

In a day or two the building became available, and after unscrewing the forms and desks which were fastened to the floor of nearly every room, the hospital fell back into it from the field, which was handed over to a stationary hospital. Owing to the lack of efficient transport and to interruptions to the unloading of the ship, it was several days before all the equipment was got up to the college. As soon as the building was available, the nursing sisters, who had arrived by train long before the officers and men in the "Lord Charlemont," and who were temporarily housed in the neighbouring watering place of Pornichet, where they wisely spent most of their time in the sea, were sent for in parties as fast as they could be accommodated, and were soon hard at work getting beds made and preparing for casualties.

After overcoming the passive resistance of the bewildered Director of the college who brought up the Mayor and the French Commandant to his assistance, marquees for patients were pitched in the school grounds. Tents for the personnel of all grades were put up in a field across the road, no questions being asked of anybody as there was no other solution of the matter. The owner of the ground watched the proceedings in silence and was amicably squared later on.

As No. 3 was the first hospital to get to work, and as casualties from the heavy fighting of the end of August and of September came pouring in, life was very strenuous indeed, and the unit became practically a clearing station for the hospital ships.

The pressure for beds was so great that every case that could possibly

be moved had to be sent on. Terrible shell wounds came in, dead bodies were sent up for burial from the ambulance trains, sick and wounded German prisoners of all ranks were admitted in large numbers, enteric cases arrived, and tetanus became a nightmare. For several weeks the unit was constantly taking in and sending out—sometimes the two proceedings were carried on simultaneously—to hospital ships, base depots, and convalescent camp. A certain number of slight cases succeeded in “stowing away” in the ships, until efficient steps were taken to stop this movement, whose existence had not been suspected at first. Altogether the personnel of No. 3 will never forget the sustained pressure under which it worked during its first few weeks at St. Nazaire.

After the German advance had been stopped, the Line of Communications gradually reverted to the North and St. Nazaire was abandoned by the British troops. The staff, the base depots, the other hospitals and the Convalescent Camp departed, and it seems to be worthy of record that at one time the Commandant of the British Base at St. Nazaire was a Royal Army Medical Corps officer, for the Officer Commandant of No. 3 was formally appointed to that position by the departing Commandant, although some combatant officers (below field rank) were still left.

Finally No. 3 was left by itself with over 400 patients, and minus several officers, its matron, twenty-seven sisters and some rank and file, all of whom had been sent to other units. Orders were received for the hospital to go to Rouen, after clearing itself of its patients, for which purpose the “Asturias” was sent down, but bad weather forced her to retreat from the harbour mouth to the shelter of Belleisle. When she *did* get in the first walking party of patients was at the quay as soon as she was. The evacuation of the sitting and lying down cases was a memorable sight, for local transport only was available, and a collection of vehicles less suited for the conveyance of stretchers never was seen—cabs, governess carts, chars-à-bancs, etc. However, stretchers were lashed “athwart-ships,” the wheeled stretchers were used to their fullest extent, walking parties were made as strong as possible, and the hospital was cleared very quickly.

Next day began once more the handling of all the equipment, and loading it into a train, and about November 19 (no diary available) the personnel marched through the town to the station after dark, and entrained, the bugler playing his best and the inhabitants giving a cordial farewell to the last of their thousands of visitors. The handful of sisters left accompanied the unit this time, but were so unused to the experience that they nearly lost the train. At 7.30 p.m. the journey northwards began, and early on the morning of the 21st the train drew up in the goods yard of one of the Rouen stations. It was freezing and bitterly cold, and when the commanding officer was taken to a heath-covered moor, white with snow, and swept by a piercingly cold wind, and was directed to

pitch his hospital there, he returned and told his officer that No. 3's luck was out at last. But he was wrong, for after the personnel (less the sisters in billets) had moved up to its allotted place, and before the whole of the store had been removed from the train, instructions were received to stand fast and await orders to go to a brand new place that was more or less a secret. The spirits of all ranks rose with a bound, and the advisability of burning a really big candle before the shrine of St. Anthony of Padua in the Cathedral, so that the new place might be a good one, was seriously considered. Then a rumour went round that the unit was destined for Le Treport, and the other hospitals were thought to look upon No. 3 with jaundiced and jealous eyes.

On November 29 an advance party consisting of the commanding officer, adjutant, quarter-master, and interpreter, with twenty-seven other ranks, started by rail, spent the night at Abancourt and arrived at Le Treport on the 30th. They were the first British troops that had been seen there, and the station and its approaches were crowded by townspeople, who evinced the utmost interest in the newcomers and clapped their hands vigorously when the party marched off in fours. The route was through the town and up a steep road to the Trianon, the finest hotel in France, which was to be the new home of the hospital. It stood on the edge of the cliff some five hundred feet above the sea, was swept by invigorating breezes, offered magnificent views, and was visible for miles from both land and sea. The colossal proportions of the hotel, its huge entrance hall, spacious corridors and general completeness made the buildings which the unit had previously occupied seem very small indeed. It was so large that it took under its roof over 600 beds, all the officers and sisters (full strength) and one half of the other ranks—the remainder fitting into the garage.

The party set to work to store the furniture in some basement rooms—a laborious task as there were four other storeys and no available lift.

The main body arrived in a few days, all grades were brought up to strength, and the return of the matron gave universal satisfaction. The equipment was distributed over the hotel, making the fifteenth time in four months that each article of the ninety-five tons of stores had been moved by the personnel, but it now seems to have found rest.

Except for an Army Service Corps supply officer, No. 3 had Le Treport all to itself for several months, and had to make all its own arrangements of every kind, even to providing funeral parties for the dead. A most happy Christmas and New Year were spent, numerous distinguished visitors were received, convoys of sick and wounded came and went, everybody was proud of their splendid building, and it was generally felt that the hospital had undoubtedly found itself. It still flourishes at the Trianon; very few of those who embarked with it are now on its books, but all cherish the memory of No. 3.

The burial of the first British soldier (an R.C.) who died at

Le Treport, merits a description, as it shows how the local French people evinced their appreciation of their allies from over the Channel. The tricolour on the flagstaff of the local *mairie* hung all day at the half mast, and before the hour fixed for the funeral, all the local dignitaries mustered at the hospital, including the British Consul, the Mayor, Corporation and leading citizens, the Chief of Police, French Commandant and officers, Red Cross ladies, wounded soldiers from the French Hospital, including Zouaves and men from Algeria, Customs officials with rifles and fixed bayonets, a detachment of armed French infantry, a civilian band which headed the cortège and played appropriate music down the winding road to the cemetery, and large numbers of the general public. The town also kindly provided a hearse and tendered a magnificent wreath of bead flowers, as is the custom in France. No. 3 sent an officer and thirteen other ranks, while the commanding officer and the Church of England chaplain also followed. The local abbé, with choir boys and surpliced attendants also walked all the way in the long procession, and he conducted the service according to the rights of the dead soldier's faith. The coffin was covered with a purple cloth and a Union Jack which ordinarily flew in front of the building. At the graveside the mayor delivered an address eulogizing the British nation, and the band played the "Marseillaise" and "The King." The hospital bugler then sounded the last post over the grave, and the great concourse slowly dispersed.

ABLUTION WATER PURIFICATION.

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THE water supply in France and Flanders is so limited in many areas that during the dry months the Military Authorities had to face the possibility of a water famine both for men and horses. Only the dirtier pond water was allowed for ablution and this in very limited amount. It therefore became necessary to conserve what supply there was and to use it over and over again for ablution.

To precipitate the soap and purify the ablution water I introduced a simple system which has been working for about six months at the Divisional Rest Camp, and which has been so successful and so constant in its good results that I think the method is worth describing.

The Ablution Shelter shown in the plan is very practical, serves its purpose admirably, and stands a lot of hard wear and tear and is sufficient for a personnel of from four hundred to five hundred. The ablution benches are arranged in pairs close together as this is the most economical in space. Pieces of soap are prevented from falling into the mixing-pit by a piece of perforated tin fixed about one foot from end of trough.