THE BIRTH AND EARLY DAYS OF OUR AMBULANCE TRAINS IN FRANCE, AUGUST, 1914, TO APRIL, 1915.  

By "WAGON-LIT."

The possibility of the sudden outbreak of a great European War in which England would be engaged, had for many years been a living one in military minds. All the parts of our great war machine had been devised and fitted for this contingency and the closest attention had been paid to the details of the various organizations. Amongst these the Medical Service was not found behindhand. So on August 4, 1914, six detachments, each of two officers and forty-five non-commissioned officers and men, Royal Army Medical Corps, and each designed for handling an ambulance train of 500-600 patients, found themselves on a hillside at Aldershot. The next eight days saw the perfecting of plans, the collection of the necessary stores and the finishing touches to the training of officers and men. Early on August 13, the detachments entrained for a destination then unknown, and in the evening found themselves on the quay at Southampton. Next morning they were marching over the cobbled pavements of Boulogne. Two days later Amiens was reached, a large and prosperous Cathedral city sixty miles to the south-east of Boulogne.

On August 17, Colonel B—gave instructions as to the rôle our units would be called upon to play. He explained that owing to great stress of transportation of troops, munitions, supplies, etc., to France then going on, it would be impossible to have English ambulance trains brought over, nor indeed were they ready; that, therefore, our ambulance trains would be made up of carriages, vans, covered trucks and such rolling stock as the French railway system could most quickly furnish us with; that in

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1 This paper was written in 1916.
Early Days of our Ambulance Trains in France

these we were to place the various forms of apparatus for fixing cots and stretchers, and generally transforming carriages into miniature wards suitable for the reception of the different classes of injury and sickness, i.e., those for fractured limbs, those for medical ailments, infectious diseases, etc. He added that all must be done at top speed as matters pressed and news from the front was not too bright.

For transporting our sick cases we had brought from England many sets of an iron stretcher-supporting device, "The Bréchot Apparatus," suitable for installing in empty railway vans or trucks.

This consisted of a pair of light but strong iron uprights each bent into the shape of the inverted letter (n). Each upright was placed at a distance of some six feet from the other, bent end uppermost; strong connecting rods and stays passed from one to the other horizontally. Finally each upright stood on an expanded foot which was securely bolted to the floor of the wagon. The whole of the apparatus thus erected and secured could sustain the weight of three men lying on stretchers.

The stretchers were placed in tiers, their handles resting at either end on iron cross rails fixed horizontally in each n-shaped piece of the apparatus at levels sufficiently distant from each other to allow of a man lying between them without touching the stretcher above him.

This apparatus could be folded up when not in use and forty such sets could be carried in one wagon or van.

On the afternoon of August 17 at a large junction, a mile from Amiens, 100 merchandise wagons, with a few passenger coaches and luggage vans, were handed over to us by the French, as a beginning of a British ambulance train service. Then the work began and some 300 men fairly made things go, working night and day. The first step was to divide the carriages and wagons into three trains. These were scrubbed, disinfected and thoroughly cleaned. Next, sets of our "Bréchot Apparatus" were installed in the empty wagons, as a rule, four in each wagon, thus giving accommodation for twelve lying down cases.

These heavy wagons were far from being really ideal ambulance transport, built with springs which only came into play when carrying very heavy loads, they formed imperfect and somewhat jolting conveyance for the comparatively light weights of some ten to twelve men. This defect was, however, counteracted to a remarkable degree by the play and give of the iron frames of the "Bréchot Apparatus." The floors, too, were uneven and admitted draught. These and other shortcomings we at once set ourselves to remedy.

It was fully recognized that the time was very critical and not one to spend in sighing for what was impossible to obtain, but to be very thankful for getting anything at all.

So, the work went on apace. What had been dingy wagons, a few
days before, now took the form of clean, well-equipped wards, dispensaries, surgical dressing-rooms, stores for equipment, food, reserve stretchers, blankets; finally, through the roofs of wagons appeared iron chimneys, the conduits from the bright ovens and stoves of the train kitchens, each of which was capable of cooking for 700 patients. Barrels for the carriage of fresh water were fixed in, also disinfecting apparatus, filters and ice chests. Our travelling hospitals were born and numbered 1, 2 and 3.

Meanwhile great difficulty was experienced in obtaining the hundreds of medical articles, blankets, reserve stretchers, pails, jugs, basins, camp stoves, etc., essential for the requirements of large numbers of patients. Recognizing that these could not possibly be supplied by the Royal Army Ordnance Department at once as required by us, authority was obtained from an officer of high rank to purchase or take whatever was necessary for our service where we could, and debit the account to our Government.

This wise measure ensured the success of the enterprise. Within four hours of this permission being granted, three train commanders had scoured the shops of the town and brought back to our train depot, articles necessary for the fitting up of the trains, which were to prove in the near future a blessing to thousands of our sick and wounded men.

Another train commander at the same time left for Paris with orders to purchase articles unobtainable in Amiens and to bring them back at once. This mission was performed in a most admirable manner, and in spite of the fact that during his absence and unknown to him, we had suddenly to vacate Amiens, owing to the approach of the Germans, Major B---after many difficulties brought his trucks of equipment safely back to our next point of concentration at Rouen.

While the formation of these three ambulance trains was approaching completion a system of medical aid was provided on the food supply trains which left daily for the front. In one of the vans of each of these trains were placed twelve folded up sets of "Bréchot Apparatus" with medical and surgical panniers, appliances, etc., all under a non-commissioned officer, Royal Army Medical Corps, and three trained orderlies. On the return journey, when the train had delivered its supplies up above, some of its carriages and vans were scoured out, disinfected, "Bréchot Apparatus" set up, and in this way thirty-six lying down cases and some eighty sitting cases could be carried back to Amiens.

Splendidly the work got on and great was the delight of all, when, on August 26, complete as we could make them, Nos. 1, 2 and 3 ambulance trains steamed out on their first trip to the front.

A fourth train was at once put in hand to be made up of third-class carriages from which the seats had been removed. Suddenly on August 27, a whisper began to go round, "evacuate Amiens at once," and it was added, "the Germans are close by." Accordingly No. 4 ambulance train with detachments of No. 4 and 5 personnel steamed off, leaving the one remaining ambulance train detachment at Amiens. Next morning this too
left by rail for Rouen, arriving at 10 p.m. Shortly after this the Germans entered Amiens.

The principal work at this period was to keep asking anyone and everyone in authority for carriages and vans to make further trains. In this, fortunately, a certain knowledge of the French language and the rules governing their railway services proved very useful to our director.

On arrival at Rouen on August 27, every means was tried to obtain suitable and sufficient carriages to convert into further ambulance trains. Our efforts, however, were of little avail, requests being passed on from one official to another without any action being taken. One officer finally suggested that it was possible that the French Government, if approached, might hand us over one of their complete temporary ambulance trains.

It must be pointed out that at this period, the retreat of Mons, there was the greatest pressure on the French Army and the needs of its own sick transport were as great as our own, also that their arrangements for coping with such stress was by no means complete or sufficient. Matters came to a head when on August 30 news reached us that owing to proximity of the Germans Rouen was to be evacuated at once by British troops. Our position was not a satisfactory one, the train service heavily engaged with the transport of troops might be interrupted at any moment and our detachment stranded at Rouen in consequence. Also the matter of our rationing would be likely to cause difficulty as the ration supply stores would at once be moved elsewhere. Our luck was well in that day, for seeing a French ambulance train come in, I introduced myself to its commandant and explained to him in confidence the position of affairs: the evacuation of the city which had already commenced, and the isolated position of anyone left behind, such as his train or our detachment.

I spoke of the urgent need of ambulance train transport for our men falling round Paris; the proximity of the Germans to Rouen, etc., and finally proposed that as the necessary high official sanction could not be applied for and obtained in time, he and I should nevertheless join forces and as a composite "Entente Cordiale" train speed off at once to the scene of the fighting around Paris. I added that I, of course, would be responsible for the action taken. He agreed. I hurried off, saw my chief, who had not yet quitted the city, explained all to him and got his consent. I ran back to my siding. Within an hour all was fixed up. My 45 men and 4 trucks of valuable stores were all merged into the French train with its officer and 25 men. The station master was persuaded to give us a "Marche," or right of railroad at once, and the danger of being stranded and probably taken prisoners with the consequent loss of valuable stores was averted. German patrols were only fifteen miles away at the time.

At 1 a.m. on August 31, we started off, bound for Attiche. On the way we pulled up at Creil where we met our sister trains Nos. 2, 3 and 4, which had just arrived after many vicissitudes. That day we had a great share-
out among the three trains of the Paris and other equipment saved from Rouen. These were of all kinds, lamps, crockery, cooking appliances, oil, carbide, and the hundreds of articles required for the care of sick and wounded men. The next day, the "Franco-British," for such with fitting ceremony we had christened our train, left Creil, and arrived at Le Bourget. Here I saw my first hostile aeroplane being bombarded, and several German "Taubes" making for Paris. The enemy was now in Compiègne and things generally looked nasty.

On the evening of September 5, the "Franco-British" reached Noisyle-Sec, and later Verneuil l'Étang. Here we took over from field ambulances Nos. 1 and 2 and a Cavalry field ambulance, many sick and wounded, including some German prisoners and captured spies. Later we pulled up at St. Pierre de Corps. September 6 saw the "Franco-British" speeding down toward the sea to St. Nazaire, a long journey of some sixty-four hours at least, in those early days of the war.

Nantes was reached in the evening of September 7. Here we handed over all our sick and wounded, and turning round started again for the scene of the fighting. On the evening of the 8th, passing Villeneuve, we pulled up at Coulommiers, which had been evacuated by the Germans two days before. By this time the "Franco-British" had been transformed into a very suitable hospital; groups of carriages had been portioned off as wards for the various surgical and medical cases; store-rooms and offices installed, and the well-equipped kitchens were in full swing. Harmony too, in a special degree, existed between our French fellow-workers and ourselves. Our composite train was proving a great success.

At Coulommiers we took on our train eighty badly wounded cases, which had been brought to the railhead by the Royal Army Service Corps motor supply wagons returning empty from victualling the Divisions, rough conveyances, but the best obtainable under the existing conditions. (There were no motor ambulances in France in those days.) The eighty cases soon became 230, and with these we left again (via Le Mans) for St. Nazaire, the only port then open for the embarkation of our sick from France.

There was no means of inter-communication between the carriages on this train, and this rendered the attention to be given by us to these badly wounded men, a difficult and dangerous matter, involving trips along the footboards while the train was speeding along on its sixty-four hour journey. Our orderlies were splendid, and their devotion to their wounded comrades was just wonderful.

The splendid hospital ship "Asturias" awaited the arrival of our train, and soon after dawn on September 10, we placed 250 patients in her comfortable cots. This fine ship was torpedoed and sunk by the enemy later on, a great loss to our medical service.

On returning to the "Franco-British," which for convenience of our service was now termed "No. 6 Ambulance train," I found to my regret
orders to hand over the train and proceed to Le Mans to endeavour to obtain more trains for our ambulance service. With my faithful orderly-clerk-cook-friend Cpl. C., of the London Telephone Service, a start was made at once, and Le Mans reached on September 12.

At Le Mans, after very considerable difficulty, I obtained interviews with local chiefs of the Railway Services, French and British. I represented the very urgent need of more ambulance trains for the evacuation of the wounded from our forces fighting for their lives around Paris.

After many disappointments and delays, I left a certain “great man’s” office with a promise that two trains would arrive at the main station, Le Mans, the following morning and be at my disposal. In great delight I hurried off to earmark in the local shops some hundreds of pounds’ worth of stores, utensils, etc., necessary for the equipment of the expected trains. By great good fortune I met the Matron-in-Chief of our Armies, who helped me to choose what was required. The weather was very hot (no Ford cars or conveyances were available in those days), and the brace of “Ambulance Carriage Seekers” were dog-tired men when billets were reached at midnight, but very happy, nevertheless, at the success of their day’s work.

Next morning at 6 o’clock, I hurried off to the main station, interviewed the Station Master, only to find that the two promised French trains had indeed arrived at 3 a.m. and 4 a.m. respectively, but had each left after an hour’s stay. Imagine my rage and disappointment! Ever present was the thought of our hundreds of poor wounded men up North, whose one chance of being brought down to the sea and home was dependent entirely on our success in getting the necessary ambulance train transport. Then again, what had happened? Could an officer have broken his word to me? Impossible! Perhaps, in some way with my imperfect knowledge of the language, I had not made things sufficiently plain to him. I do not know. This was no time to give up, so another interview came about; a long and very unpleasant one. Later the same day, to my delight, I received from the “great man” orders “Go at once to Villeneuve, near Paris, and you will find what you have asked for.” Collecting Major D—and fifty men, Royal Army Medical Corps, the first train going north was boarded, and on the night of September 14 we pulled up at Villeneuve Triage, a veritable Crewe, some miles south of Paris. Hardly waiting for our train to stop I leapt out and to my joy on a neighbouring siding saw two French trains, very suitable for transformation into ambulance trains, waiting for me!

You should have seen our men working to get the new trains ready; there was little pausing even for meals or sleep. All knew well the urgent need of getting ambulance trains on the line at once; they knew that if we failed to do so, it would mean delay, and that delay would spell suffering to hundreds of our wounded up at the front anxiously awaiting removal to the base hospitals. Parties scoured the towns and villages for utensils, stores, kitchen ranges, etc., and on the evening of September 15, No. 5 ambulance train, fully equipped left for the front. Two days later
Major W—— and forty-five men arrived from down country and followed on No. 7 on the 18th inst—a really fine performance in speedy work.

It is hard to describe in cold print how we all felt about our train and carriages in those days. Well, they were just living things to us all; for example, a 2nd class carriage of five compartments meant more than just what that expresses in ordinary parlance; every such one we could get, borrow, or seek out, meant that at least two badly wounded men in each of its compartments, could be brought in comfort to the base, and home. Carriages, vans, vans and carriages, then were just everything to us, they meant for our splendid wounded men hopes of home restored, courage sustained, lives saved.

At this period of heavy fighting and casualties when England and France had almost miraculously stopped the rush of the advancing Hun, the strain on all services was almost overpowering; railway services were dislocated, communications with other branches of the service interrupted and so we found ourselves largely "on our own." This, however, is often no drawback when work has to be done quickly.

At the large railway station at Villeneuve Triage we had no hospital but only a slightly equipped medical aid post for the treatment of the local sick. Heavy fighting was now in progress on the River Aisne, and ambulance trains full of wounded kept continually passing through our station; 1,500 cases on September 18 alone. On the 17th, one such train stopped with imperative orders to us to unload it and return it at once to the front. The situation for us on that day was not a simple one: Over 150 stretcher cases alone required carrying by hand to our aid post, a distance of over half a mile in pelting rain. To transfer and attend to these patients we had only 3 medical officers, 6 orderlies and 2 cooks. Things looked black indeed, when out of the blue appeared 250 of the London Scottish just arrived, who had heard of our difficulties and offered their services. All through the day and night these splendid men worked for us and by 7 p.m. we had been able to get the worst of 150 cases under shelter and fed, and had begun to dress their wounds. Little headway could the three medical officers and six orderlies have made among such numbers had not again the marvellous happened. Up to the door of our aid post came an officer in Red Cross uniform. He explained that he was Dr. Braithwaite in charge of the American ambulance at Neuilly; that hearing of our difficulty he had motored from Paris with three other surgeons, instruments, ample dressings, etc., and that he wished to place himself at our service in every way, and finally that he had ordered his fleet of motor ambulances (the first I had seen in France) to follow him out to us. In these he promised to take to Paris hospitals any of our cases requiring operation. I gratefully accepted his offer and the removal of the most suitable cases commenced at once.

As if by magic, out of the ranks of the London Scottish stepped four sergeants and privates, all qualified doctors, also some medical students
and with them their regimental surgeon, the gallant Captain McNab who was killed in action a little later on while attending to one of his beloved "London Scotties" in their front trenches. From somewhere too, I know not where, dropped three qualified lady doctors—fine they were, and splendidly they worked all night and day, snatching a few hours' sleep in a truck. What a transformation! Our large aid post shed which up to 11.30 that morning had been occupied by some half dozen light cases, at 4.30 p.m. was a huge and well-lighted ward with some 200 patients (officers and men), many of whom were dangerously wounded. Looking after them you would have seen 12 surgeons, male and female, 6 Royal Army Medical Corps orderlies and 100 volunteers from the London Scottish. From time to time motor ambulances kept arriving to take the cases to Paris, and by nightfall ninety of the worst were in bed and comfort at Neuilly. Long before dawn the remainder had been dressed and given their much needed sleep. In my recollection this day will always stand out as "Miracle Day."

By September 20, the seven ambulance trains were running unceasingly and doing fine work. Troops, however, were arriving as fast as they could be dispatched from England, and our tiny, but by no means "contemptible army," as so described by the Kaiser, was growing daily. More and more the need for extra ambulance trains was indicated. Three more French trains complete were accordingly asked for (these were never given) and in addition one tried to collect at Villeneuve any passenger carriages one could get so as to replace the original heavy goods wagons on trains 1, 2 and 3. Nursing sisters were now ordered for duty on all our ambulance trains and things were going just splendidly.

One's duty as director at this period was to picture oneself in the position of the officer commanding each train, and to think out what articles he might probably be in need of, and by any and every possible means to get them and have them ready to put on board at a moment's notice on his arrival; to effect this we at once set to work to form a depot. A large placard "Depot des Trains Sanitaires Anglais" was posted alongside the solitary guard's van which served as my sleeping-room, office, and store-room. The station authorities gave five other trucks, moved us to a side line, and after four days' work our depot had assumed respectable dimensions, and we had the joy of feeling that the hard-worked medical officers, sisters and Royal Army Medical Corps men on the train could count on our supplying all the needs for their sick at any hour day or night.

A welcome surprise came on September 21 when at 6:30 a.m. a Red Cross Ambulance Train under Sir S. C——arrived from Rouen, composed of wagon-lits and restaurant cars, the best rolling stock in France; again at 8.30 a.m. a similar train drew up. As the accommodation of each of these trains, some 200 cases, was too small relatively to our requirements, and the difficulty of getting a "marche" or order of passage for them over the
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one thronged line to the front, was very considerable, these two trains were joined into one, thirty orderlies were added to its complement and the train left next day for the front. This train passed through again two days later with a convoy of sick and wounded for No. 4 General Hospital at Versailles. After this trip its carriages were merged into those of the other trains as being of more value to us in that way.

By now the trains were becoming more and more comfortable and efficient, due largely to the energy and initiative of the train commanders and presence of our sisters, and an ample provision of stores and comforts of all kinds. As the days were growing shorter and colder, the question of how to light and warm our trains became a very pressing one. Experiments were accordingly carried out by all train commanders and the best form of lamp and stove decided on. The stoves were obtained from the "Flamme Bleue" Company at Paris, and placed in the corridors and wards with the surrounding woodwork well protected by iron and asbestos. They warmed our trains very effectively. Difficulties in our train service could never exist long. A Board composed of the director and several train commanders attacked each problem as it confronted us, and in this way a solution was usually very quickly forthcoming.

During all this period carriages were being collected at Villeneuve, with a view to forming another improvised train, and on October 3, we had the satisfaction of seeing No. 8 ambulance train under Major B—start on its first trip.

The French railway authorities were now asked to furnish us immediately with three more large restaurant cars. These made splendid wards for our badly wounded and lying down cases. Eighteen to twenty-four cases could be accommodated in each, and hundreds of lives were undoubtedly saved by their employment. We loaded these cars through their broad windows from which we had removed the plate glass, substituting for them light wooden shutters.

On October 3, our army began the wonderful quick change of battle front towards the north. As a result our trains had to be run on a more northerly route, and a new junction through which they must pass and at which they could keep in touch with their depot, had to be sought for at once. Everything pointed to Rouen as being the most suitable for this.

On October 12, we were able to acquire several commodious luggage vans from the P.L.M. Railway Company; these made excellent wards. They were very welcome as the various coaches asked for weeks before were not forthcoming, and our needs grew daily. All these vans were fitted with the invaluable "Bréchot Apparatus" sets, each of which supported three stretcher cases.

We were very proud and happy people when, on October 16, having collected a great many vans and taking Major G—— with us we left Villeneuve, and that evening pulled up outside Rouen on the very siding
which we had had to leave so precipitately on August 31 in the "Franco-British" train.

On arrival I was informed, "the Adjutant-General wants more trains at once." Accordingly a start was made by asking all in authority for the necessary carriages. I was promised such, and meanwhile we started converting the vans of the P.L.M. into comfortable, well lit, and well heated wards and kitchens. Each van was disinfected, painted, and the floor covered with linoleum. Sets of "Bréchet Appáratús" were installed. It having been explained to the French workmen that our soldiers urgently required these trains, they worked splendidly night and day, even on Sundays and festivals. I shall never forget their devotion in this matter.

Fate was kind to me that day. There arrived to help me in the remodelling, repainting and transformation of the various types of wagons into comfortable wards, an engineer, mechanic, lawyer, doctor, electrician, all in the person of Lieutenant P——, R.A.M.C. Repairs of any description, machinery, electric plant, etc., etc., were child's play to this phenomenon, and I verily believe that if given sufficient iron and tools, he could easily have made an entire railway train himself. In any case his services to our trains and sick and wounded were just invaluable. Later he proved his worth in other spheres and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry in action with the Royal Field Artillery.

On October 24, there arrived after many disappointments and cancelling of promises, the necessary number of carriages to complete our No. 9 train. Chiefs of the various services inspected the "last-joined" train and at 1 p.m. on October 30, No. 9 with a carrying capacity for 600 patients left on its maiden trip.

About this time the Red Cross and the St. John of Jerusalem Societies, were fitting up an ambulance train at Sotteville. The feature of this train, which was composed of third class carriages, was the large number of lying down cases it could carry on its comfortable bed-stretchers, the clever invention of Sir J. Furley, the doyen and veteran pioneer of ambulance train and sick transport in all its branches.

No: 10 train, own sister to No. 9 train (both being largely made up of the vans from Villeneuve) was now approaching completion and on November 9 started off for the front.

I now found myself at Boulogne where my duties were, to co-ordinate the running of our ambulance train service, settle complaints, arrange for repairs, supply of reinforcements of personnel, provision of fresh carriages, and all the requirements for the efficient transport of the sick. Meanwhile special arrangements, rendered necessary by their religion and caste, had to be made for the carriage of sick and wounded Indian troops. A knowledge of their language and customs made this a relatively easy matter.

The British Red Cross train No. 11 now started work and proved
from the first a great success. No. 12 also, the "khaki" train under
Captain D——, had arrived from England, a beautifully fitted train, with
inter-communication between all the coaches.

Now was the time to profit by our hard-gained experience, so from
mid-November to the end of the month the chief work consisted in sub-
mittin plans of types of ideal coaches for our ambulance trains, that is
to say, coaches, for our lying-down cases, for sitting-up cases, pharmacy
cars, kitchen, quarters for staff and personnel, etc.

All this was made easy by obtaining the views of the different officers
commanding the twelve trains, who had lived on these trains for months
and who were accordingly far the best judges of what improvements of
any kind should be added.

Picture then our proud fleet of ambulance trains. Almost every
one of the original heavy goods wagons on trains 1, 2 and 3, had by now been
replaced by first and second class carriages of the various great railway
companies of France—La Compagnie du Nord, de l'Ouest—l'Etat, du
Paris, Lyons, Mediterranean, etc.

In the compartments of these excellent carriages, swung on comfortable
springs, we placed our worst lying down cases; introducing devices both
to broaden the seats on which they would lie, and others to steady the
patient on his stretcher should the train swing or jolt.

In the third class carriages, we placed those sick and wounded who
were able to sit up and feed themselves. Skin cases, infectious cases,
and mental cases were accommodated in special carriages.

We placed two kitchens on each train, one near one end and the other
near the middle of the train so as to be near to and cook for the serious
cases.

As these trains carried up to 800 cases and were 320 yards in length,
one can realize that the cooks were kept pretty busy day and night
preparing for the next meal.

Two medical officers, three sisters and forty-five non-commissioned
officers and men formed the personnel of each train.

In addition to the transport of the sick of our British troops we
established an ambulance train transport for sick Indian troops between
Boulogne and the neighbouring hospitals. The new ambulance train
depot under Lieutenant and Quartermaster O—— catered excellently for
the needs of all trains. Here, an ambulance train, which had just brought
in a large consignment of sick and wounded, could be refitted, revictualled,
etc., and made ready to start off again in two hours.

The New Year, 1915, saw the plans for our English-made ambulance
trains complete and the work on actual trains well forward. Good news,
as the French could provide no more coaches or vans to replace those
which had become broken down through their ceaseless journeying. Our
organization efforts were of special interest to the French Government,
who were faced with a like problem, the provision of ambulance train
transport for their sick and wounded. Groups of medical and other members of the French Senate, visited our trains, and train depots, and studied our methods.

At this period a scheme was worked out for the provision of supplementary emergency trains to be ready to work at shortest notice in time of heavy fighting or great pressure.

On February 8, Sir John Furley, the originator of the "Princess Christian Train," arrived in France with an offer to place this splendid train at the disposal of our armies. This was subsequently accepted, and this train did magnificent work for our sick and wounded.

There were rough times and few nights in bed for our train staff just then, owing to the transport of many casualties from the heavy fighting at Neuve Chapelle. Our organization stood the strain splendidly and the work of the medical officers, sisters and Royal Army Medical Corps was beyond all praise.

On March 18 I learned that I should soon be relinquishing duties in connection with the train service, as the Director-General wished me to take over a large Red Cross Hospital. Accordingly, on March 23 I handed over to my successor and said farewell to the work on which I had been continuously engaged since August 24, 1914.

A few words of explanation will be of interest before closing this little story. Among the many anxious problems our medical service had confronting them in August, 1914, were:

1) To find—yes, quickly too—sufficient and suitable railway accommodation for the transport to the sea bases of the sick and wounded of the Expeditionary Force at that time fighting against overwhelming odds and in countries unknown to them.

2) Having such trains, to obtain for them all the stores and equipment necessary for their useful employment—such stores, etc., being at the time unobtainable from Army sources. Happily success attended the operations. Thank God, on no occasion had sick and wounded to be left behind owing to the want of well-equipped ambulance trains, as the growth of these kept pace with the growth of our armies.

From April, 1915, onwards the new beautifully fitted ambulance trains made in our great English railway works began to arrive. These have been running without ceasing ever since. There it is to-day, a splendid and efficient service, worthy of its high functions, the caring for and carrying of our gallant soldiers.

Throughout the period under review, the British Red Cross and St. John of Jerusalem Societies were of the greatest possible assistance to the Army Medical Service by the provision of a complete ambulance train No. 11 and a never failing supply of comforts of all descriptions for our sick and wounded. The officers of the Royal Engineers, those of the Royal Army Ordinance Corps, Royal Army Service Corps and all their comrades, staff, R.T.O.s, etc., stood by us splendidly on all occasions.

Eleven out of our twelve trains in this story were made up of French
railway carriages and vans given to our service by the French Government. When one remembers that during the whole of this period our gallant French comrades were suffering terrible loss, and that their need for every available railway wagon was as great as our own, we must record our most heartfelt thanks to the French Government, and to the chiefs of their great railway systems, who spared us those wagons for our trains, and whose officers and workers helped and encouraged us in every possible way.

In conclusion, it would be reasonable to mention the work of those to whose efforts the success of the enterprise may be most largely attributed. Every one of the forty officers and some 400 non-commissioned officers and men of the Royal Army Medical Corps, engaged on our train service were out to give "the best of his best" for each sick or wounded comrade carried on his train. Trouble was a word unknown. Night and day were alike when work had to be done. And what am I to say of the work of our nursing sisters on the trains—just this, that no words could adequately describe their untiring energy, their gentleness, skill and devotion to the 67,000 of England's best who travelled to sea bases in France between August, 1914, and April, 1915, on the "First Twelve Ambulance Trains."

AFTERWORD.

Often it is asked when and from where did we get our ambulance train service in France at the beginning of the war.

This story is written to answer these questions and recall times of stress and fine work to many of the hundreds of Royal Army Medical Corps regulars and volunteers, members of the Red Cross and St. John of Jerusalem and kindred societies, male and female, to whom the care and carriage of our splendid sick and wounded men were entrusted in the early days of this Great War.

To show how their efforts were appreciated, one letter from among hundreds of others ran as follows:-

No 8 Casualty. Clearing Station,
December 20, 1918.

I am returning herewith the story of "The Birth and Early Days of our Ambulance Trains in France." I was intensely interested, more personally interested perhaps than any other who has ever read it, for I was one of the eighty badly wounded whom you refer to as "arriving in Army Service Corps wagons" at Coulommiers on September 8, 1914.

I did that sixty-hour journey in your train and was put on to the "Asturias" at St. Nazaire. I had a gunshot wound fracture of both my femurs. So I feel I can say nothing less than that I probably have to thank you all for keeping my leg if not my life. It was touch and go, and another twenty-four hours lying about at Coulommiers would have done me in, I'm sure.

Yours,
G. R. F.