Correspondence

PHYSICAL TRAINING IN THE ARMY.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS."

Sir,—Lieutenant-Colonel Cotton's letter on "Continued Physical Training of Troops" (after their period of recruit training in depots), opens up a subject of considerable importance.

There is little doubt that the average trained soldier in barracks is not so fit as the majority of six-months' recruits, and the average reservist still less so. In other words, the trained physique of the six months' recruit tends to some extent to deteriorate, by reason of the fact that games offer a means of maintaining tonus which are not always compulsory, and which are the hobby of the few rather than the necessity of all. The tendency to play the part of onlooker rather than that of performer has to be overcome. How effective the practice of universal games proved in the war will be recalled by many who interested themselves in such matters; and the Japanese practice of regimental running games commended itself to the British observer officers in 1904 as one of the greatest value. The effects of physical training and games on the recruit are obvious. Detting ("Le Corps Humain") showed that the average French recruit improved very greatly in agility after his training (as tested by timing him over a quarter of a mile). It would be interesting to have data as to how far men relapse from such standards after ceasing their recruit training.

It is in manoeuvres and war, however, that the unevenness of physical fitness between individuals shows itself most clearly. There is almost always a phase of heavy march casualties ere yet the less fit are hardened to the rigours of campaigning. The retreat from Mons showed that even our Army of 1914 suffered in like manner. Foot conditions and other ancillary factors being admitted, it would still appear economical to have all the troops on the same physical level; and the maintenance of physical training throughout a man's service would do much towards this ideal.

Marching, under the load and conditions of war, would appear perhaps to be the most valuable training of all. Luard, in pre-Crimean days, advocated occasional marches of formed bodies of troops from, say, Aldershot to Edinburgh; and the suggestion is eminently sound.

We may note that the Roman Republican armies, whose physical condition earned the admiration, not only of contemporary observers, but of all later critics, placed particular stress on the training of their recruits: a full description of this training—and a testing one it was—is given by Vegetius ("Epit. rei mil.," A.D. 395). But the training of the soldier was continued after embodiment in the Legions, and for so long as his service continued. At least three times in each month the legionaries were required to undertake a twenty-mile march in full equipment at the normal rate (militare gradu) with intervals of quick time (pleno gradu), and over country of every degree of irregularity. Under the Emperors the custom declined, and as a result the troops, not inured to marching under the load of war, were at first disinclined, and later unable, to carry the old equipment and to perform marches comparable to those of the Republican armies. To such an extent did this disorganization proceed that, despite Vegetius' plea for the re-establishment of the ancient practice of training, the Roman armies gradually succumbed and disappeared before the hardy barbarians of the North.

Many arguments might be supplied in favour of Lieutenant-Colonel Cotton's plea, and it is to be hoped the subject will be further ventilated.

I am, etc.,

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Blackpool,
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