PHYSICAL TRAINING IN THE ARMY.

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

SIR,—I have read with considerable interest the letters on the above subject from Lieutenant-Colonel Cotton and Major Lothian in recent issues of the Journal, further ventilation being invited.

First, as regards the initial training at the depot. It is excellent as far as it goes but much too short—lasting about seven weeks when the recruit—only half-taught, is hustled off to join the service unit. As far as my memory goes, at the Guards Depot, Caterham, three months is the regulation and this ought to be made applicable all round, besides it is well to bear in mind that the depot stands for the recruit in the same relation as the preparatory school for the public schoolboy.

Whilst on this subject I would like to bear testimony to the admirable manner in which these establishments are organized as compared with old days, and I can claim to speak with a certain amount of authority, as during six years (1908-14) spent at the War Office I practically inspected at every depot (all arms) in the United Kingdom, whilst as a junior officer I was, in medical charge of two different Brigade Depots—as they were then styled—in the early eighties.

My usual practice when visiting these places was to go straight to the gymnasium where the recruits (regulars and special reserve) were drawn up separately: the gymnastic instructors were, as a rule, very keen about their work, gauged each man's capacity, kept accurate records and it was remarkable how the recruits in a short time improved in physique—especially as regards weight, generally a reliable test—some of them gaining fourteen pounds and over. I may add that the rations were always pronounced excellent and on this subject I never at any place heard a complaint. This satisfactory state of affairs I attribute to two innovations made by the Army Council when they assumed control of the Army. The first was vesting the command of the depots in Majors still on the active list: these officers I invariably found took the keenest interest in their work and in the welfare of the recruits under their charge, but without exception they regarded the period of training as far too short. I often represented this to the Adjutant-General on my return to Headquarters, and he fully concurred, but the demand for men for the service battalions, etc., was so urgent that no extension could be given.

The second factor was the appointment—at the instance of my predecessor—of Medical Inspectors of Recruits: these officers have fully justified their existence for many reasons that I need not now enter into. Of course it will be understood that the above remarks apply to pre-war days, but I have no reason to imagine that there has been any change in the wrong direction since that time.

However, the crucial point now to be decided is whether the physical training (three months let us hope) which a man has undergone as a recruit is to be maintained when he has joined the service unit. There is much to be said in its favour but I think this is a matter on which the opinion of commanding officers ought to be obtained before any action is taken; the one objection that I can

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1 Since the foregoing was written I have been informed that the time spent by recruits at all depots has been considerably increased.
imagine is that, when a man has undergone a strenuous course at the depot, he is apt to be "fed up," to use a colloquialism, if he has still to continue it as a trained soldier.

As an alternative, I can only suggest increased attention to what is after all physical training in an attractive form, viz., athletic sports, hockey, football, boxing and, best of all, cross country running by teams, neither ought route marching to be lost sight of: one of the items in the "Kitchener test" instituted in India in 1904 was a fifteen miles march under service conditions—ten marks being deducted for each man falling out, and it was astonishing how very few in a battalion between 800 and 900 strong did fall out, which spoke well for the men's condition.

As regards the reservists, I doubt very much if—as Colonel Cotton suggests—any considerable proportion would continue the daily exercises in civil life. I noticed this class particularly in my own division during the South African war and although, on rejoining, many were of the portly and flabby variety, six weeks on the veldt soon got them into form and in the long run, they were as good as anyone could wish.

In conclusion, I would like to mention one type of recruit that always impressed me in old days. When Principal Medical Officer some twenty years ago, of the Home District, as it was then called, and which—in addition to Caterham—included other stations such as Guildford, Reading, Oxford, etc., I was much struck by the excellence of the London carmen (e.g., Carter Paterson and Co., etc.): these men from the nature of their calling—always handling heavy packages and living an open air life in all weathers—were of superior physique and in addition were remarkably intelligent. The commanding officers of depots had a high opinion of them and I imagine that a battalion composed exclusively, if that were possible, of London carmen would be hard to beat.

I am, etc.

LAUNCELOTTE GIBBINS,
Wimbledon, September 29, 1921.

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As is in the case of the selection of Colonels Commandant of other Corps, two officers were selected for distinguished services during the recent war and two according to seniority on the list of Generals. A rule has been made that no officer should be appointed, who is over 70 years of age and a selected officer relinquishes his appointment on attaining that age.