A FIELD AMBULANCE ON THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER.

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In January, 1924, I was ordered to “proceed forthwith to Chagmalai, Waziristan, and report to the Officer Commanding 64th Field Ambulance for duty.”

As far as one could gather from speeches in the Legislative Assembly, the thorniest tract of the Border, Waziristan, was then “quiet,” so also was the rest of the Frontier, where “normal conditions” held sway. I had received my orders during the so-called cold weather. The climate in the United Provinces, where I was stationed, was then perfect, or as nearly perfect as one can get in this wicked world. From a cloudless sky the sun shone brilliantly during the day, and in the evening there was a sufficient nip in the air to make one appreciate a fire.

At that time of the year the plains of India are at their best, and provide good sport, such as pig-sticking, shooting and hunting.

There is, too, a stillness and calmness in those vast spaces that has a fascination all its own.

I had met many officers who had served in Waziristan, and their conversation about life on that part of the frontier had always been of a disparaging nature. With anything but cheerfulness, then, I left the pleasant cantonment in which I was stationed, and journeyed north-west on the Punjab Mail, changing first at Lahore, and at many stations subsequently. I was quite familiar with the country I saw between Ambala and Rawalpindi, as, only a year previously, I had marched along the Grand Trunk Road, which runs close to the railway line all the way. Day after day, when on that march, I saw the peasants at work in their fields. They were poor, kindly souls, bent with toil and ever oppressed by the possibility of a poor harvest. Around Lahore is the Land of Kim, and I saw the gun, Kim’s gun, when on that march. Many consider “Kim” to be Kipling’s masterpiece. In it he has made his characters express the Soul of the East—infinite patience and passive acquiescence in fate.

I saw again, but this time from a carriage window, some of the big irrigation canals that have converted a one-time barren desert into a productive corn land. It was late in the afternoon when the “Mail” reached Campbellpore, where I had to change. After a few hours’ wait in the almost deserted station the train started for Daud Khel.

For some reason there was an unforeseen stop at the small station of Garda Zai, due, as far as I can recollect, to a breakdown ahead. The night was one of those cold ones common to Northern Punjab during the winter. The place was dimly illuminated by a few oil lamps and it was raining. I
wanted to find out if the delay would prevent my catching the boat train from Daud Khel to the river bank, so I went to confer with the station master. I found him in an attitude of placid content, squatting on a stool. He was muffled up to the eyes, though the room was not cold. What with the heat and smoke from a wood fire and the smell from an oil lamp that, as usual, was not burning properly, the place was warm and stuffy. Having partly unwound his head-dress, a muffler-like creation, so as to uncover his mouth, he replied to my question, “But, sir, I do not know, it is not my department. Perhaps the Indus will not be crossed to-morrow as, without doubt, there has been too much rain in hills.”

To enhance this rosy forecast he added another possibility: “Moreover, the boat will doubtless be late to catch train on other side of river.”

Then, because neither of us had anything to do until the train was allowed to start, we fell to discussing various matters. I have a vague recollection that he proved that Bengal was the cradle of Indian genius. “We Bengalese,” said he, “have first-class brain.” I pointed out that grey matter alone would not win battles. “But, sir,” he argued, “we do not make war, we are not fighting race, we enjoy fruits of peace of British Government.”

His outline of a policy to solve the Border riddle was interrupted by a request for his dominating personality at the telephone. As the message had to do with the immediate starting of the train, I was unable to hear the full details of the scheme he proposed. Part of it was, I remember, to give every man in India a rifle and send him to the Frontier. I have no doubt that this would solve the problem, but in a way pleasing to the tribesmen.

At about 5 a.m. we reached Daud Khel. At the junction there, connexions are made with the rail services to the left bank of the Indus. It was still dark when the train arrived in the station and the oil lamps had gone out or had been blown out by the wind.

The only light in the place came from a small office. In it I found one of the lesser luminaries of the railway staff, sitting at a paper-littered table and engrossed in correspondence. He was sure that the boat would cross that morning, but was unable to inform me when I could hope to reach Tank, the principal military centre on route to Waziristan. “Perhaps today, perhaps to-morrow, I do not know,” was what he said. I had to be content with this vague answer, as, having no servant, I had to hurry back to my carriage to watch my kit being unloaded. The sacredness of private property is not fully understood in this part of the world!

Waziristan is not popular with servants and Mohammed Yussuff had refused to come with me at the last moment before starting. He gave the usual excuse of his class to cloak his dislike for frontier life, family illness. The Civil Surgeon’s khansamah (butler) had been consulted and had pronounced the sick relative as “dangerously ill.” With the aid of a fellow-passenger’s servant who had not, presumably, such an obliging family doctor as mine, I got my belongings into the boat-train. After a short
journey Mari Indus was reached. In the dim morning light I could just see the river. Its near bank was a wide sandy waste, and on the other side high hills rose sheer from the water’s edge. From Mari Indus a narrow gauge railway runs to the landing stage. This toy railway, as it is called, has to be frequently moved because the river bed is constantly changing. The same reason, too, explains why no bridge has been erected over this part of the Indus. With much puffing from the engine and a false start or two the train jolted over the half mile of sand that separated the broad gauge from Mari Ghat. There it stopped with a jarring suddenness, and my carriage was immediately surrounded by a crowd of half-clothed coolies. They were tall, dark-haired, wiry fellows, a foretaste of the types met with in the lands beyond Indus. They squabbled with each other for the privilege of taking master’s baggage aboard the ferry-boat “Jhelum,” which was moored close by. Each man wanted to carry something and pounced vulture-like on any bit of kit he could grasp. The result was a great division of labour, entailing proportionately heavy distribution of bakshish.

The boat crossed diagonally, partly carried by the current towards Kalabagh Ghat, the landing place for the station.

The river-side village Kalabagh when seen, as I first saw it, on a wet morning from the deck of a ferry boat, was not attractive in the least. It consists of rows of mud and stone houses built along the bank, rising in tiers one above the other over the lower slopes of a bare hill. It is a triumph in the science of makeshift architecture. The reader probably knows the usual type of house that graces a small Indian bazaar. Such a structure is solidly built compared to the variety seen in this village. Here is one built partly on rock and partly on planks supported by props which are made from two or more rough poles tied together with rope, Heath Robinson style. These props are never straight, and the whole edifice leans to one side like the tower in Pisa. Put a number of such creations in rows one above the other at the foot of a high hill, give them flat roofs and plaster the walls with mud, and you have an idea what this village looks like—an engineer’s nightmare. With poetic imagination only could it be endowed with beauty. Possibly after many weary months in Waziristan it might appear artistic in contrast to the walled-in villages seen there. My travelling companion, a veteran of the Frontier, said that it reminded him of Rhine-side villages. But they have the grape, lightener of life's worries and burdens, whereas Kalabagh produces the most mundane of necessities—common salt.

The river forms the natural boundary between the Punjab and the North-west Frontier Province or trans-Indus part of India. Throughout practically its whole course it runs close to the mountain walls that are India’s barriers on the north-west. It separates the arid stretches on one side from the rich plains of Hindustan on the other. It was still raining and the hilltops were enveloped in mist and cloud when I landed on the right bank, that is in the North-west Frontier Province.
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Kalabagh Village, from train ferry-boat. Photograph by Major R. F. Bridges, R.A.M.C.

Kalabagh Ghat and Station. "The jumping off point for Waziristan." Photograph by Major R. F. Bridges, R.A.M.C.
This Province consists of five settled districts, Hazara, Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan. Beyond them and between the Afghan border is a strip of country which is not directly administered by any government. It is independent tribal territory. In that tract of land dwell a number of different warlike tribes. Living in barren hills and unproductive valleys they eke out their resources by raiding the more prosperous settled districts. They have even been known to cross the Indus to ravage the riverside villages of the Punjab. Their mode of life has endowed them with an independent spirit and has produced a physique that can withstand great hardships and fatigues. Being Moslems, and therefore co-religionists with the Afghans, they are susceptible to the political currents of that country. This explains why the Frontier was in a ferment of unrest during the third Afghan War in 1919. By nature they are fanatical, and at any moment an outstanding personality might unite them in a Jihad (Holy War). Mustering on the whole frontier over 120,000 fighting men, well equipped with modern rifles, they constitute a constant menace to the peace of India.

In this trans-Indus country, too, are the great passes or gateways from Central Asia to Hindustan. From time immemorial wave after wave of Assyrians, Greeks, Persians, Pathans, Tartars and Afghans have swept through these portals carrying terror and destruction wherever they went. Mahmud of Ghazni and Timur the Lame were specially ruthless invaders. Alexander the Great came through the Khyber Pass, but his
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Chagmalai Camp. Photograph by Mr. Maroolyn, I.A.S.C.

At the water-point, Chagmalai Camp. Water-testing on the right, tribesmen-owned camels in the background. Photograph by Major R. F. Bridges, R.A.M.C.
subsequent conquest of the country was not marred by the barbarism that characterized the Oriental invaders. As his army was unable to withstand the fierce heat of the Punjab he was forced to return homewards. The conquerors who have made their influence most felt were the Moguls. They founded an empire of unparalleled splendour, which reached its zenith during the reign of Shah Jahan. A measure of his greatness may be gauged from the buildings he had erected. But the Moguls, like so many other dynasties in the East, gradually declined in power. At the same time the Sikhs attained importance. Their empire extended over present day Punjab, and it was sufficiently powerful to send many expeditions to conquer and control the lands beyond the Indus. This policy we inherited after the last Sikh war, when their territories came under our sway. Ever since those days the tribesmen of Waziristan have been the most turbulent irreconcilables of the frontier. Their repeated misdeeds have called for punishment, and have led to the launching of many campaigns against them. Military operations in the past were beset with great difficulties, chief of which was the transporting of supplies through the then roadless lands that lay beyond the Indus. Now, however, a narrow-gauge line links up the river bank at Kalabagh with the military bases situated on the confines of tribal territory.

Kalabagh is the main railway centre and jumping-off point for Waziristan. It is impossible to take the wrong train from there. Once and once only in the twenty-four hours does the Tank "Express" leave the station. It was ready to start by the time I had distributed backshish among the many coolies who had piled my kit into a diminutive first-class carriage. The guard, however, was obliging enough to hazard that "No doubt departure could be delayed until sahibs had food." So my fellow traveller and I repaired to a mud-plastered building marked "Refreshment Room." It provided the usual "eggs to order," "half-boiled," "three-quarter boiled," or "full-boiled" according to individual taste. At the marmalade stage we were informed by an emissary from the station-master that the train would start in two minutes. My companion, who had an infinite experience of the East, was not perturbed at the imminence of departure, confidently asserting that "it couldn't go without us." Not wishing to tempt the gods I hastily finished my breakfast and got into my compartment. But I need not have worried, as the guard did wait until my confrère had rejoined me. Then we rumbled out of the station, past galvanized iron sheds, mud and brick offices and stores depôts. The hills on the right gradually receded, and on either hand stretched a desolate plain. Here and there a stunted tree relieved the dull monotony. For hours we travelled over a featureless land, with occasional stops at small stations. They consisted of squat huts built on straight lines of a uniform and monotonous standard. The water channels were filled with chocolate-coloured water. Here and there were muddy pools and the ground was sodden. "What a climate!" "What a country!" exclaimed
my companion. He was returning from leave in the South, and his mind ran on sunshine-filled days and palm-groved river banks.

It was nearly five in the afternoon and getting dark when we reached Tank, a barbed-wire enclosed camp or cantonment, whichever you prefer. A unit accountant would style it a “peace time station” in the Waziristan district, and he is an authority on such matters. The Military Accounts Department dominates all spheres of life and activity in the Waziristan Force. Everything, down to the sepoys’ rations, is valued on a rupee basis. So the expression “peace-time station” robs one not only of romance, but also of the little concessions one expects on the Frontier. The important point for me was that shelter and accommodation were to be got there. Over the rest-camp mess was a notice board bearing a message that promised good cheer—“Ye. Olde Tank Arms, S.S.O., Proprietor and General Manager.” And it lived up to its promise, for though it did not provide a potman or tankards, or “mine host’s canary wine,” it provided their Eastern equivalents, *mutatis mutandis*. Next day, as if to make amends, there was brilliant sunshine, with a clearness in the air that did much to counter the dreariness of the country. To get to my destination, Chagmalai, required a two days’ road journey, for which I was given a Ford vanette for the first stage.

Tank is situated in the Darajat Plain, the name given to the flat country that lies between the Indus and the Suleiman range of mountains. In the clear atmosphere their slopes were seen to rise abruptly from the level ground. Towards them I motored over the metalled road. Within the first mile there stands a walled-in village, whose lines express prevailing conditions of life. Inside the walls are several high square towers, with loopholes on their business sides and observation posts on their flat roofs. From these commanding positions the tribesmen are able to watch their cultivated fields and grazing lands. Sometimes on account of local scarcity the herdsmen drive their flocks to remote pastures. Such an occasion offers a golden opportunity to the cattle raiders from the poverty stricken hill villages. Occasionally a headline may be seen in the daily papers worded after this fashion: “Daring cattle raid on the Frontier, four villagers killed.” Underneath this is a short summary of what has taken place; and the average man in the plains but glances at the account given. He passes on to something that is of more interest to him, for he is not affected by the happenings in these primitive lands. Nor does one consider a raid an inexplicable occurrence after seeing Waziristan. It is but an expression of the struggle for existence by a method sanctified by tradition and necessity. Ordinarily, after the day’s grazing, the cattle are driven inside the village walls and are shut up in their byres till the following morning.

Along the roadside are stretches without a trace of vegetation. This is due to the presence of mineral salts which show on the surface as a thin layer, like hoar frost. Their absence and the presence of water
are the factors that govern the agricultural value of land along the Frontier. After motoring for about ten miles Kaur Fort was reached. Opposite it are put in position the wire obstacles that "close" the highway for eighteen out of every twenty-four hours; during the remaining six hours the road is "open" for everyone, whether going up or down, whether on leave or business bent. From here onwards it is guarded during the "open" hours by infantry units, or "R.P." (Road Protection) Troops, as they are styled. Everything was peaceful and quiet as I motored along; so quiet indeed as to give the impression that sepoys and Lewis gunners were taking part in a peace-time manoeuvre. A little beyond Kaur the road touches the edge of the plain, which it follows, ascending and descending the many small foothills that flank the level ground. Grazing on these little slopes were flocks of sheep and goats. Their herdsmen were ragged cheery-looking riffians, whose faces and bodies were grimed with the dirt of ages. The rifle and cartridge belt that each one carried added a touch of the bizarre to what is regarded as a peaceful occupation. Instinctively one associates a shepherd with green fields and the simplicity of rural life. Artists paint him in a background of lush meadows and tall trees and give him a harmless expression. But in this inhospitable land a tribesman without a rifle would be as unusual an apparition as little Bo-peep.

About nineteen miles from Tank is Manzai, another barbed wire camp, an embryo cantonment. The road ploughs straight through, bisecting this "peace-time" station, where the playing pitch has to be piquetted before one can venture outside the wire for football or hockey. The road, after leaving the camp, still follows the edge of the plain. It crosses over many small watercourses and dry nallahs before reaching the next camp, Khirgi. It, too, is built on the same lines and has similar attractions to those already passed. In addition it is the terminus of the narrow-gauge railway, our link with Kalabagh and so with the happier lands to the south of the river. The first stage of my road journey was completed when I arrived at this camp. Behind it are bare mean hills and in front stretches the dreary plain. It is strange how the cheeriness of a mess varies with its surroundings. The more dismal the country the more cheerful the mess, and the Medical Mess at Khirgi was no exception to the rule.

I started early next morning (suffering from this cheeriness) in another of the products of Mr. Ford's ingenuity, as the journey up the line is done in relays of cars. Immediately beyond the camp the road passes the boundary between British India and Waziristan. It is but a tentative boundary, which may be altered at any time, depending on whether a "forward" or "backward" policy becomes the accepted method of dealing with the territories between India and Afghanistan.

Just beyond the boundary the road leaves the edge of the plain and sweeps straight into the zone of hills that flank the Takki Zam river.
This stream it follows, but at a much higher level than the rocky bed, except where it drops down to cross and recross over bridges. When, during the road construction, very difficult stretches of rock were found on one side, the engineers found it cheaper to bridge the watercourse and follow the line of lesser resistance. Dominating the river valley are piquet posts. Some are low down and close to the road, others are high up, crowning wind-swept pinnacles. Possibly on account of the cold, which was Arctic-like in its intensity, there was no tribesman to be seen as I motored along. Gradually the road separated from the river valley, and ran over a relatively level stretch of ground. On this open space stands Jandola Fort. Opposite it is a military cemetery. The many white crosses make a sad record of "regrettable incidents" that have occurred in the neighbourhood, "But things like that you know must be." Here, a few miles beyond the Frontier Bar, sleep some of our own kinsmen, for

"Never the lotus closes, never the wildfowl wake
But a soul goes out on the east wind that died for England's sake."

Many of the units who spent part of their Frontier tour on this border-side outpost have adorned the walls of the Fort Mess with their regimental crests. Many, too, have left their names on the marble crosses that mark the last resting place of some of their officers.

This road from Jandola onward follows the Shahur River, zigzagging in and out along the hillsides. It switchbacks up and down the many small elevations and bends at very acute angles. It is as contorted as a corkscrew, but not as regular. On all sides are tangled masses of rugged hills and ranges of bare rock of every imaginable size and shape. Everywhere are stones and boulders, and the landscape is utterly devoid of vegetation. As I motored along, a land unfolded itself that was dreary beyond all conception. The mountains that limited the horizon on the north-west were covered with snow, and from their direction a cold wind was blowing in fitful gusts, moaning dismally down the river valley, whistling shrilly through arid gullies and yawning gulches. Overtopping a crest there suddenly came into view the white tents of Chagmalai camp. The stretch of level ground on which it stood was roughly triangular in shape, one side bounded by a nallah, another by the Shahur River, and the third by a rocky sierra. Rising from the ground just beyond the nallah and river were towering hills, on the crests of which were perched piquet posts that commanded the camp site. The level stretch was littered with rounded dark coloured stones. Sometime, in ages long past, this area must have been under water, and some convulsion of the Earth's surface has placed it in its present position, a cuplike depression with dominating hills all round. Here and there in the mosaic of stones were bushes of camel-thorn.

As I motored onwards the perimeter wall and the belts of barbed wire that surrounded the camp came into view. Here, at my destination, the road petered out. It had led me from Tank past one landmark of civiliza-
tion at Khirgi, the terminus of the railway. Immediately afterwards it had taken me past the Frontier Bar, and had led me through Yaghastan to this point, its end—the farthest spear-point of civilization. But the line stretched to a point some six miles further up the river. There, out in the blue, were encamped sappers and pioneers who were working at full pressure to extend this highway a little further through the wastes of Waziristan.

It had taken nearly five days to travel to this camp at the road's end. The earlier stages were through a land that had been the scene of numberless invasions. Dynasties that have ruled it have come and gone, leaving scarce a trace of the greatness that once was theirs. Hindooostan no longer resounds to the tread of barbaric invaders, but few of her inhabitants realize that this happy state is due to the ceaseless watch and ward on her Frontiers.

As I passed through the wire I directed the driver to the row of tents over which were flying, side by side, the Union Jack and Geneva Red Cross. After reporting to the Officer Commanding the 64th Field Ambulance, I came on the strength of a medical unit that had already seen over four years continuous service in Waziristan. Its history would be a record of more than ordinary interest, and would bid fair to be a story of Frontier Medical Administration embodying to the fullest degree the ideal expressed in the Corps' motto "In Arduis Fidelis."