RANDOM JOTTINGS ON THE TRAINING OF THE R.A.M.C.

By Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. K. H. Reed,
Royal Army Medical Corps.

PART III.—THE ADVANCED TRAINING OF STRETCHER-BEARERS FOR MOBILE WARFARE.

I.—GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS.

Much has been written and spoken about the important matters of medical administration in war and of the tactical handling and organization of the various field medical units with a view to expediting the collection, evacuation and distribution of casualties; but of the men who first find the casualty and who are, as it were, the spear head of the elaborate organization little is heard, yet upon them to a very great extent depends the success or failure of the whole scheme.

The work of clearing casualties from the line is in many ways the most difficult of all, and it is submitted that sufficient attention has not been paid to this echelon of medical aid—in fact, training in this respect has regressed of late years owing, I suggest, to excessive adherence to the lessons learnt in the semi-sedentary type of warfare with its restricted frontages and limited objectives which obtained most of the time on the Western front in the late war, and also to the inadequate numbers of stretcher-bearers, both regimental and R.A.M.C., which are shown in War Establishments.

Formerly some attempt was made to train stretcher-bearers to search ground in extended formations, but this has of late years been abandoned, and the R.A.M.C. stretcher-bearers are looked upon as “men of burden,” whose sole duty is to evacuate casualties from a definite and fixed regimental aid post to some point where they may be conveyed on wheels to the advanced dressing station of a field ambulance. In mobile warfare it frequently happened that there were no definite R.A.P.’s, and with the very wide frontages adopted nowadays it will frequently happen again. The place of the R.A.P.’s may be taken by numerous groups of wounded whom the R.S.B.’s have not been able to get to a central position, and in addition there will be scattered wounded whom the R.S.B.’s have missed altogether. With an infantry brigade occupying a frontage of between three and four miles the scope of the R.S.B.’s will be very limited unless their number is much increased; wounded will, therefore, have to be searched for either by the R.S.B.’s or the field ambulance S.B.’s, and for this purpose an extended formation is necessary. Some method of controlling this formation is essential, otherwise squads or individual bearers will lose their direction and themselves.
Beaters employed to round up game are carefully trained in moving in extended order, in keeping direction and in inter-communication by signals, orders, etc.

The infantryman is not considered "trained" until he can move over broken and difficult country in extended formation and under control, but the training of the stretcher-bearer who will also have to do these things in mobile warfare begins and ends on the barrack square!

The principles of this training which I have ventured to put down in some detail can be quickly learnt and form an agreeable variation to the formal stretcher drill, and on this groundwork a more complete edifice can be built at the annual field ambulance training camps. Such methods should also be taught to regimental stretcher-bearers. It may be argued, incorrectly I submit, that:

1. "The regimental stretcher-bearer is a trained soldier and knows all about extended formations, inter-communication, signals, etc.," but as soon as a squad become possessed of a stretcher they promptly put aside their training and hang together round the stretcher because they have been taught to do so.

2. "The duty of field ambulance stretcher-bearers is to clear the R.A.P.'s and to do this no training in extended formation, etc., is necessary, and their numbers also preclude their attempting to do more than this." Though this may be true, searching, as I will endeavour to show, is necessary; therefore, train the bearer suitably and increase his numbers.

3. "The organization of field ambulances, in common with that of the whole army, is in the melting pot, and mechanization may soon, by means of armoured "cross-country" ambulance wagons, eliminate the stretcher bearer almost entirely or at any rate make him a man whose sole job is to load a casualty into an ambulance wagon." It may almost come to this, but even the most efficient ambulance wagon cannot search thickets, spinneys of closely grown trees or similar features, and the method of training suggested is just as applicable to one squad as to many, and just as suitable for regimental stretcher-bearers (who generally work in single squads) as for field ambulance bearers who normally work in detachments of several squads.

The scheme described later has borne the acid test of mobile warfare over large frontages, and was used by many field ambulances and regiments on several fronts and was even found useful at the Battle of Loos.

War is undoubtedly the best training, but in this connexion one cannot help but think that many of us cannot get away from the highly specialized, narrow-fronted, semi-sedentary warfare of the "Western Front," with its limited objectives.

The authorities tell us that the warfare of the future is to be highly mobile and over large frontages, and I would here draw attention to the rough sketch, fig. 1; this shows the actual deployment of an infantry brigade, forming part of a division during some recent tactical exercises.
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The frontage occupied by the whole division excluding the divisional cavalry was 7½ miles, and the frontage of the brigade in question was 3½ miles with three battalions in line and one in reserve. The country was very hilly, very close and covered with woods of varying density. The deployment was at the commencement of an attack, and during the succeeding three hours the brigade had advanced some two to three miles further forward. The frontage is not exceptional, in fact several battalion commanders have told me that they expect to have to look after a front of
2,000 yards under certain conditions. As the essential principle in handling field ambulances in mobile warfare is to keep as large a reserve as possible to meet developments the officer commanding field ambulance in this situation could only spare one company to collect the casualties of the brigade in this initial phase. A company has only nine stretcher squads; each battalion has only four squads (of four men). It will be noticed that the R.A.P.'s were over one mile apart—i.e., corresponding to the frontages occupied by battalions, and that the two field ambulance collecting posts (car posts) were nearly two miles apart as the main road was under view and fire from the enemy. This also explained the reason why the A.D.S. was situated so far back. It was impossible to get transport along the road, collecting posts were therefore formed to each flank under shelter. The increased range (9,000 to 10,000 yards) of light Field Artillery will make this situation very frequent.

The sketch is roughly to scale and the distances which would have to be traversed by the bearers are obvious; also, if it is remembered that the country was very broken, the liability of wounded to be missed by the R.S.B.'s is apparent.

The line advanced at the average rate of half mile per hour.

Over this densely wooded area a single regimental stretcher squad would be responsible for searching over a quarter mile of front.

It was necessary to keep two field ambulance squads in reserve to "take care of" the reserve battalions, therefore the remaining seven squads had to evacuate casualties from three R.A.P.'s, each situated over a mile apart, an average of two and one-third squads to each R.A.P., the area to be covered being some four square miles. The collecting posts (car posts) were as far forward as possible, but owing to the large frontage were on an average over one mile distant from some R.A.P.'s.

The wheeled stretchers would have helped only a little. They average hardly more than one wheeled stretcher to each R.A.P., i.e., six per field ambulance. Can one put the necessity for more bearers, both regimental and field ambulance, more strongly?

It must be emphasized that the line was advancing at the average rate of half mile per hour, and that R.S.B.'s must keep in touch with their companies in mobile warfare, otherwise they cannot do first aid to the maximum number of cases.

It should also be understood that the writer has not in view an extended wave of field ambulance stretcher-bearers dogging the footsteps of the infantry, for a wounded stretcher-bearer is worse than useless, he makes work for others. Collection of casualties on any scale must take place, during lulls in the fighting, but lulls are only comparative in modern warfare; attack and counter-attack follow closely.

A few field ambulance squads or even single squads can, however, do good work during the actual fighting by searching patches of broken ground.
and working up to the R.A.P.’s, but they must be properly trained if they are to do this successfully.

The necessity for re-organizing field ambulances is recognized, but in the new war establishments it is noticeable that the number of stretcher-bearers has not been increased. This I submit is a crying need.

In mobile warfare a field ambulance reverts to its normal rôle as a collecting and clearing unit. It is not the place for elaborate medical or surgical work. It is thought, therefore, that the large headquarters might be reduced somewhat.

This headquarters, moving as it does partly on foot and partly in automobiles and partly on horses, is a difficult unit. It is suggested that it be completely mechanized, including means of transporting the personnel. It would also facilitate matters very much if one of the vehicles was fitted up as a mobile dressing-theatre, so that the necessity of packing and unpacking each time a move has to be made would be reduced.

Let us hope that the day is not so very far distant when a “permanent field ambulance” will become a fact, when these and other probably more important problems can be worked out in practice.

In peace time re-organization is difficult, especially when all the units in question are non-existent; too much has to be left to the imagination, and experience has often to be based on situations which are becoming obsolescent. On the other hand progress has to be gradual and must march pari passu with the general evolution of the army as a whole and the necessity for an intermediate and elastic organization or stepping stone not lost sight of. The training of the infantryman to manoeuvre and fight on his feet has not been curtailed because he may one day occupy a “one-man tank.” We want something to meet present conditions, even though these may be obsolete in a few years, and I suggest that one of the things we want now is more and better trained stretcher-bearers both regimental and R.A.M.C.

Under the conditions of mobile warfare, therefore, it often happens that little can be done in the way of systematically clearing a battlefield of casualties while an action is in progress in the vicinity.

A certain number of wounded are likely to be missed by the regimental stretcher-bearers and lie where they fall. These casualties may be considerably scattered over the area of advance.

The work of the R.S.B.’s, under the conditions of rapid movement, may be limited to grouping wounded under cover and leaving them.

The problem, therefore, which may face the Field Ambulance Company is, not only to clear the R.A.P.’s but to search the area of advance for “groups” or isolated wounded which the R.S.B.’s have not been able to get to the R.A.P. This work is made more difficult by the very much wider frontages occupied by infantry in attack mentioned before.

In order to search broken ground systematically, or even to advance with comparative safety under casual shelling, etc., it is often necessary for
the regimental and field ambulance stretcher-bearers to assume a widely extended formation.

Unless some system of control and inter-communication is in force stretcher squads in extended formation are liable to lose direction and touch.

This system of control is comparatively simple and has been modified and adapted from that in use in infantry units. "Control" is of course more necessary with field ambulance bearers, as regimental bearers usually follow their companies.

II.—INSTRUCTION IN CONTROL BY WHISTLE, SIGNAL AND PASSAGE OF ORDERS, VISUAL TRAINING, etc.

All ranks should be instructed in the above as laid down in the chapter on "Section Drill" in "Infantry Training" and in the practice of extended formations adapted to the requirements of stretcher-bearers of regimental medical establishments and field ambulance companies. First of all as a short formal drill on the parade ground with moderate intervals between the stretcher squads and later with full intervals over broken country.

As a stretcher squad often has to act independently the training of the "Nos. 1" is highly important.

The necessary signals (see Appendix II) for inter-communication and control when in extended order are to be found in "Infantry Training" (Vol. I, Chap. V) (with one exception)—they are easily learnt.

The passage of orders down a widely extended line requires practice and is essential as it is not always possible to use the whistle to call attention, and it should never be used in the neighbourhood of other troops.

All ranks should also be trained to recognize short distances, i.e., 25, 50 and 100 paces, by placing men at these distances and noting their height compared to a finger held vertically at arm's length.

(A cricket pitch is roughly 25 paces—a man at 100 paces corresponds in height to the width of a finger-nail with the hand held at arm's length.)

Instruction in the principles of "Visual Training" and the "Clock and Finger" method of describing features in a landscape (see Appendix III) should also be given. Further details may be found in "Infantry Training."

III.—EXTENDED FORMATIONS.

The following extended formations which may be known as "first extension" and "second extension," are applicable to units consisting of several stretcher squads or to single squads acting independently (regimental stretcher-bearers for instance).
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A.—First Extension.

![Diagram of stretcher drill formation](image)

This formation is suitable for the following conditions:

1. When searching open ground where casualties can easily be seen.
2. As a protection when the bearers are liable to casual shelling, indirect fire and "overs."
3. As a method of concealment under certain conditions (Air Craft).
4. As a preliminary formation to "second extension."

Note.—(1) The extension between squads, except for practice purposes, should seldom be less than 30 paces (as the lateral spread of shrapnel is some 25 paces), and need seldom be more than 100 paces.
(2) Before moving off in extended order landmarks, etc., should be pointed out to the directing squads on which they will march and so keep direction.
(3) Under difficult conditions both centre and flanking squads should be given these landmarks as a guide.

In order to indicate a landmark quickly the "clock and finger" method must be known (Appendix III).

 Movements for Assuming First Extension.

Preliminary. Formation.—Squads numbered, sized, and formed up in close order with stretchers, standing at ease.

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<tr>
<th>WORD OF COMMAND</th>
<th>DETAIL</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. &quot;From the Right (left or No.... Squad) to..... Paces—Extend,&quot; or appropriate signal (the number of paces being given verbally)</td>
<td>Squads come to attention, lift stretchers, extend laterally in quick time, turn to their front when in position, lower stretchers and stand at ease</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. &quot;Right (Left or No.... Squad) directing — (here give the landmark)—Advance&quot; (or signal or order passed down line)</td>
<td>Squads come to attention, lift stretchers and advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. &quot;Retire&quot; (or signal, or order passed down line) If when retiring it is required to &quot;advance&quot; the signal for &quot;about turn&quot; is given</td>
<td>Squads turn about towards the stretcher the Nos. 2 and 4 carrying it in their left hands* (see Note) The directing squads select fresh points to march on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. &quot;On the Right (Left or No.... Squad) — Close&quot; (or signal or order passed down line)</td>
<td>Squads halt, if not already halted, lift stretchers, close laterally in quick time, turn to their front, lower stretchers and stand at ease</td>
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Note.—* This rests the Nos. 2 and 4 and facilitates instruction.
If permanent stretcher squads have been formed the Nos. 1 of each squad can be posted as markers and the order “on Nos. 1—Fall-in” given.

Remarks.—As intervals may be wide, extending and closing and changing direction when extended must be carried out “at the halt” and in quick time only, i.e., not at the “double.”

If squads, in close order, are required to extend facing a flank or to the rear they must be wheeled in close order and halted when facing in the required direction “change direction right (or left), right (or left) wheel” (see Platoon Drill, 1914).

Whenever direction is changed the directing squads must be given a new point to march on.

B.—Second Extension.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 3.**—The intervals between bearers is one-third of original extension. Four squads in “second extension”; intervals between stretchers as in “first extension.”

This formation is suitable for the following conditions:

1. When searching broken country or in heavy undergrowth.
2. When liable to rifle fire as when working close behind troops (R.S.B.’s).
3. When operating in the dark. In this case it is an advantage for the bearers to wear a piece of white paper or cloth fastened on their backs (see fig. 3).

**Special Signal.**—As there is only one signal in Infantry Training for “extend” a special signal is necessary to order the “second extension.” See No. 7, Appendix II.

** Movements for Assuming “Second Extension.”**

**Preliminary Formation.**—Squads in the “first extension” either at the halt or on the move.

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<tr>
<th>WORD OF COMMAND</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. “Second—Extension” (or special signal or order passed down line)</td>
<td>Nos. 1 and 3 bearers double out from their squads, No. 1 proceeding to the left and No. 3 to the right and form (with the Nos. 1 and 3 of other squads) an extended line. The intervals between the Nos. 1 and 3 being one-third of the interval between stretchers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “First—Extension” (or special signal or order passed down line)</td>
<td>Nos. 1 and 3 bearers double back to their stretchers and re-assume “First Extension.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “On the Left (Right or No... Squad)—Close”</td>
<td>Squads whether in “First” or “Second Extension” close into “close order” on the squad named</td>
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Note.—If squads in the “second extension” are ordered to “retire,” the Nos. 2 and 4 will turn about (towards the stretcher).

Preliminary Practice in Extended Order on Parade Ground.—Squads should be practised in advancing, retiring, halting, doubling, lying down, changing direction and inclining by orders, whistle and signal and orders passed down the line.

When practising these movements it must be impressed on the men that correct direction, interval and lateral touch are essential—there is however no need to keep a “dressed line.”

The pace should be steady (about two miles per hour) as in later practices some squads may have to cross difficult ground.

If the parade ground is limited in size, moderate intervals in “first extension” to ten or twenty paces may be used.

The directing squads however must always be given a point to march on.

(To be continued.)