WHEN, on April 14, 1814, the Peninsular War came to a happy conclusion, the country began to awake to the fact that something must be done about affairs on the North American Continent, where, for the past three years, a small British force had been engaged in defending Canada. The United States had declared war in June, 1812, over the question of the impressment of British seamen serving on board American ships. Canada was held by Sir George Prevost with four weak battalions of regular troops and as many militiamen. The contest was mainly round the Great Lakes, where, with varying fortunes, intermittent fighting had since been proceeding. Successes on land were countered by naval reverses on the lakes, and that the Dominion was saved was largely due to the mismanagement of the American Government and the incapacity of their commanders. The resources of the Medical Department in Canada were meagre. Deputy-Inspector Gabriel Redmond, who arrived as P.M.O. in October, 1812, reported all hospitals miserably bad, and medical and purveyor's stores deficient. There had been no replenishments since the War of Independence, which terminated thirty years before.¹

In May, 1814, 2,400 troops sailed from the Garonne under command of General Ross. These, reinforced by another 1,000 from Bermuda, arrived off the American coast in August, and more were sent from home. Ross, supported by a naval squadron, landed his men on the banks of the Patuxent River, routed a force of militia at Bladensburg, and occupied Washington, where, in retaliation for the damage done by the enemy to Toronto the previous year, he burnt down the public buildings. The raid accomplished, the troops were re-embarked. It is evident that by this date the chief medical officer had begun to assume responsibility for the transporting of the sick and wounded. Sir Harry Smith, who was present as D.A.G., states that Alexander Baxter, the staff surgeon, brought away every wounded man fit to travel. Those left behind were confided to the care of some of the inhabitants, to whose credit it may be stated that they were well cared for. Half the army is reported to have been affected with dysentery.

An attempt on Baltimore followed, in which General Ross was killed. On September 11 our naval and military forces on Lake Champlain, advancing on Plattsburg, suffered a severe reverse. The American despatch stated that the army precipitately retreated, leaving the sick and wounded to their generosity.

In October more reinforcements arrived and were assembled at Halifax.

¹ Extracts from Redmond's Journal were published in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, vol. xvii. He was invalided in June, 1813.
From the narrative of Captain J. H. Cooke of the 43rd we gain some impressions of the officer's life on a small transport. He embarked with a part of his regiment at Plymouth on the "Helen" brig, the cabin passengers including himself, Surgeon Matthew Heir of the 60th, Staff Surgeon Ryan, and eight other officers. "The small cabin contained two narrow berths on each side and two dark holes with doorways bearing the title of state cabins, from whence issued an effluvium which was a mixture of the most offensive and sickening compounds." Two officers were slung in cots under the skylight, and the remaining three were on the floor. Each paid £22 for pigs, poultry, sheep, porter, wine and fruit, but they never got a decent meal. Touching at Port Royal, the voyage occupied six weeks.

At the instance of the Admiral commanding on the station, the army was now launched against the town of New Orleans on the left bank of the Mississippi. General Pakenham, who was sent to command the troops, found them in contact with the enemy and involved in an impossible military situation. As the entrance of the river was barred, the ships came to anchor eighty-seven miles from the proposed landing place, which was at the head of Lake Borgne. A bare and desert island formed an intermediate post, from whence the men were transported by divisions through shoal water in small boats. On the island they were exposed, without shelter, to rain by day and frost by night, deprived even of their rations. The month was December.

Advancing through swamps, the enemy was found in a strong position covering the approach to the town. The British assault delivered on January 8 was repulsed with 2,000 casualties and the loss of the General. For nine days the British held their ground, while the majority of the wounded were laboriously conveyed to the shores of the lake, a distance of about nine miles. Some assistance was afforded by a small canal-cut, but the water was low and there were few boats. On the 18th a general retirement commenced; by the end of the month the remains of the force, sick, weary and dispirited, had been re-embarked. A few wounded, too ill to be moved, were left behind with a hospital mate.

The medical staff with the expedition appears to have been ample and to have done most creditable work. Referring to Deputy Inspector John Robb,1 Sir Harry Smith says: "The number of wounded was three times what he was told to calculate for, but never did an officer meet the difficulties of his position with greater energy or display greater resources. I firmly assert not a wounded soldier was neglected." The medical work during the latter part of the American War reflects the high state of efficiency reached by the Department under McGrigor in the Peninsula. Peace had already been signed when this, the last engagement of the war, was being fought out.

1 John Robb served in the Peninsula. He became Brevet Inspector 1818, Inspector 1890. Died 1845.