TERRITORIAL FIELD AMBULANCE TRAINING IN CAMP.

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Some seventeen years' experience in a Territorial Field Ambulance enables me to endorse heartily Major J. H. Bayley's criticism of the "usual routine" of Annual Training in camp. For some years now this has been avoided in this unit by endeavouring to make the training as varied as possible and yet preserve its character as Field Ambulance training, which Major Bayley's suggestions, excellent as they are, admittedly do not. A few notes on how this has been carried out may therefore be useful.

Squad drill and stretcher exercises are never indulged in nowadays in camp. The out of camp training season commences with these necessary evils, but, as each man attains the required state of efficiency in the eyes of the P.S.I., he is "passed out" and is no longer required to do them for the rest of the year. We usually, however, have a shot at a ceremonial parade, which is scarcely possible outside of camp, and last year our field ambulance marching past in line was quite creditably performed for our D.D.M.S. after two rehearsals, which did not interfere unduly with other training. Our aim is to get the unit out in the field from the beginning and not to wait till the last few days of camp.

In our recent camps we have been much on our own and combined schemes with other units have not been possible. Two years ago a very successful programme was undertaken covering the whole period of camp, which entailed a fair amount of preparation, but the resulting increase in interest and appreciation by all ranks of what they were trying to do and the valuable lessons they learned made it well worth while.

A small scale map of southern Scotland and northern England was pasted on a wooden board about three feet square and varnished—a necessary precaution, as it is not always dry under canvas! This was hung in the men's canteen. A general war scheme was prepared to cover the whole fortnight and a "news bulletin" affixed daily beside this map on which the front line was indicated by a row of flags on pins moved in accordance with the day's "news." England had made an unprovoked attack on Scotland and for the first week we had to retire. By the second week Scottish mobilization was completed and a sudden attack from the west caused the "invader" in his turn to retire and our forces to make a successful advance. The "war news" had to be written up each evening as the following day's work depended on how things had gone that day; mistakes were made, the weather was sometimes unkind and a day's work
curtailed, and this resulted in the work being repeated, usually on different ground. The scheme could be adapted to the subject of training for the day and still fall in with the “General Situation”; the posting of this daily bulletin was very popular and there always appeared to be a discussion among the troops on its contents, which was doubtless valuable and certainly stimulated their interest.

Our camp that year was at the north end of a range of hills with two diverging roads leading south, one to the east and one to the west of the range. We retreated up the east road during the first week and advanced down the west road the second. Mechanical transport enabled us to start some ten miles from camp, each day’s retreat bringing us nearer home, for each day’s work began where the previous day’s left off.

The first day was devoted to evacuation from R.A.P.’s and at a certain hour the “R.M.O.s” (some represented by N.C.O.s) had to open sealed orders which told them their unit had to retire to a certain line and left them to make their own arrangements and get the information back. Valuable experience was gained in the necessity for rapid but smooth working to get all casualties away in time.

The second day we were evacuating from the retreating column, and, as sometimes happened during the last war, the field ambulance had to fend for itself and a look-out had to be kept for the advancing enemy to avoid capture. The “enemy” were represented by ex-infantry N.C.O.s, who carried signalling flags. They were given certain points to reach at certain times, and if they got within fifty yards of any bearers these were to be considered captured. Wounded were left at various points along the line of retreat and had to be treated and collected; evacuation being, I am afraid, considerably easier than in reality, as there was none of the road congestion one would inevitably get.

The third day we studied particularly running an A.D.S. under similar conditions, and here, as we have invariably found, farmers willingly gave permission for the use of sheds, stables and so on. A rapid clean-up and an official visit of thanks to the farmer before we left kept us on good terms and a return to the same site, if necessary, was always easy. This exercise was repeated further back as rain interfered with its first performance, and it included evacuation of casualties from cavalry patrols on the hills on our flanks. A few “casualties” had been deposited and a message sent in to say where they were and the appropriate measures taken. By the end of the week we were doing M.D.S. work near camp, paying special attention to gas casualties (though our anti-gas equipment was then of the sketchiest) and the keeping of proper records.

The second week started with the enemy being chased from the training area on the hill side in front of camp. Stretcher carriage over rough ground and the proper methods of searching the ground after an advance were the subjects of the day’s work. The configuration of the ground also gave us a good opportunity to practise our signalling. We have several
men with a smattering of morse and semaphore, and we aim at having one or two in each company who can read and send simple messages.

Then our advance was deemed to have been held up by the enemy occupying high ground commanding the main road some three or four miles from camp and a brigade to have been detailed to make a flank move and attack the enemy L. of C. behind their position. The collection and evacuation of casualties from this brigade entailed use of circuitous side roads to reach our position, and when word was sent back to the M.D.S. to send up all available transport to evacuate casualties, the civilian lorry driver who took back the orderly with the message disdained the circuitous route on his return journey and led the convoy straight down the main road in full view of the "enemy," and thereby put the whole of our transport "out of action."

The error of those responsible for this regrettable incident having been duly pointed out, the exercise was more successfully repeated as part of next day's programme—our big field day. We always try to have at least one whole day away from camp with every available man on parade. Even the cook-house staffs are included and they have to prepare dinner in the field. The problem of getting hot food to detached posts has to be overcome, and we usually have improvised hay boxes successfully keeping the food really hot while it is being conveyed some two or three miles to the outlying troops.

We had night operations on two occasions. One during the first week devoted to moves by night. Each company was sent away in a lorry to a different destination given by map reference. There they had to "debus" and march to a general rendezvous some three or four miles away. Meanwhile the lorries had met at a selected spot and in convoy proceeded by a circuitous route to the general rendezvous, where they picked up their companies and returned to camp. It worked very well as all three companies arrived at the rendezvous on time and the convoy was only five minutes late.

The second week's scheme was clearing a battlefield by night, and as we were "under observation from the enemy" no lights of any kind were allowed. The A.D.S. was a realistically ruined cottage and the battlefield rough moorland. At the first attempt hardly any casualties were found, as they hid themselves and "lay doggo." When it was pointed out that had they really been wounded they would have been only too glad to attract the attention of the bearers, the second attempt was more successful and realistic cries came from all over the moor as the dim shapes of the stretcher squads moved about.

I have described this programme in some detail to give an idea of how many aspects of field ambulance work can be tackled in one camp and yet the whole time spent on one scheme which correlated the whole work and made everyone appreciate more clearly where a field ambulance fits in in the general war plan. Naturally it is not possible to organize such a
scheme every year, but even a roughly drawn up idea for a day's work, explained verbally to all ranks before they start, makes a very big difference to the interest taken in it. Nor need it be a tactical scheme at all. Last year we devoted two days to finding out the times taken by squads per round trip under varying conditions and over different distances. The bearers themselves were as interested as we were in seeing how this worked out, and the general conclusion was that the official figures are much too high.

One could go on for much longer describing attempts to vary the camp programme. For instance, the problem of co-operation with the infantry which I have so far not successfully solved. I should like to get real co-operation, so that when an umpire tells an infantry company, for instance, that it has suffered so many casualties, these would be treated as casualties and evacuated to and by the field ambulance. With 75 per cent walking wounded up to the A.D.S., it should not be too difficult nor disorganize the infantry scheme. In fact it should help considerably to bring home to them the effect of faulty tactics, as well as to demonstrate as closely as peace conditions permit what actually happens to the wounded. A few men earmarked as casualties beforehand and told when they have to fall out is no real co-operation, and the lessons learned are of no more value than when the field ambulance is on its own and of no value at all to the infantry.

I have written enough, however, to show how strongly I support Major Bayley's plea to get away from the spirit-destroying monotony of the same routine each camp, and especially from wasting valuable time in squad drill and stretcher exercises at camp. By the time the field ambulance goes into annual training it should have passed that stage and be ready to proceed at once to the much more interesting duty of practising all its functions, as nearly as fact and imagination can make it, under the conditions it would actually find in war time.

I cannot finish without expressing my great appreciation of the very loyal and whole-hearted co-operation of our various adjutants, especially Major F. M. Richardson, R.A.M.C., who was associated in the various schemes described above and whose many suggestions and assistance made the training the success it was.