THE TRAINING OF A TERRITORIAL FIELD AMBULANCE IN CAMP.

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Every Commanding Officer of a Territorial Field Ambulance must be grateful to the officers who have written on this subject in recent issues of the Journal. They have made many new and useful suggestions for training, though I venture to think that a few of the schemes described may not prove to be as satisfactory in practice as they appear to be on paper.

I once met a Commanding Officer from another Division who described a field day in which the whole work of a field ambulance had been carried out in skeleton. He had travelled many miles in his car and remarked how instructive and interesting the day had been. Later, I met one of his men and, in the hope of picking up some tips, asked him what he had done. He replied somewhat as follows:

“Well, sir, my lot sat about camp for a bit until the lorry came back with the rations. Then we crowded in and drove to A—. We got out and had a smoke and then Captain B— turned up and led us over a ploughed field to a wood where we found Captain C— and three men. We carried the men back about a quarter of a mile (it was a hot carry) and put them in the lorry and waited a bit while it took them back to camp.

A despatch rider brought a message to the Captain and then we all got in again and drove to D—, a village I didn’t know, and ate our dinners and had a sleep. Then Major F— came along in his car and said we were at the wrong place, so we all got into the lorry again and went back to camp for tea.”

Further inquiries showed that he knew quite well what he was supposed to have been doing, but one could hardly say that he had had an interesting and instructive day.

Perhaps it may be of interest to outline the system of training adopted in my own field ambulance. Firstly, it has been found impossible to combine the training of officers and men in camp, except in so far as the officers are responsible for the training of the men. In this Division we are fortunate in having officers’ T.E.W.T.s at least once a year, sometimes for single days and sometimes for week-ends, and such matters as the siting of dressing stations, the writing of reports and messages, and the organization of transport, are to my mind better dealt with there than along with the men in camp.
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The men should, of course, know the system upon which a field ambulance works, but they are quite capable of imagining a M.D.S. miles away or the transfer of an A.D.S. from one site to another without spending weary hours huddled in lorries or smoking cigarettes behind hedges. On active service stretcher bearers in a field ambulance are little more than beasts of burden with a knowledge of first aid, and their main work is carrying stretchers over ground too rough for wheeled transport. This hardly forms suitable employment on what, to many of the men, is their only holiday and one of the advertised attractions of joining the T.A.

The only camp programme arranged is kept in the orderly room for the benefit of inspecting officers. It is never adhered to, and in fact each day is planned according to the weather, a fair weather and a bad weather programme being always ready. Everything savouring of ceremonial and military routine is reduced to a minimum—a policy which is anathema to the spit and polish school and which offends a few old serjeants, who, having learned the drill-book by heart, regret any lost opportunity of airing their knowledge. The serjeants have, of course, their own companies, but the corporals are given half companies and the lance-corporals tents, and they are all encouraged to take a special interest in the training and welfare of their own men. Everything possible is done to develop a sense of command and responsibility in the N.C.O.s, each of whom is responsible for some particular group of men or for some particular duty. On the first morning there is instruction in laying out kits but the sole kit inspection is on Sunday. Church parade and one previous drill constitute the only time spent on ceremonial. In camp, as in the drill hall, all training is done by the officers and N.C.O.s, the P.S.I., excellent though he is, being largely confined to the orderly room and to giving occasional instruction to junior N.C.O.s. Almost the only work on the parade ground is an occasional "shouting parade" for N.C.O.s in giving orders, an exercise not possible in the drill hall, practising saluting and delivering messages correctly, which is better performed in uniform than in civilian dress, the pitching and striking of bell tents and marquees, the improvisation of stretchers and the loading of ambulance cars. These parades come in useful for filling up short days. The men have been thoroughly trained in squad and stretcher drill during the winter and there is no need to repeat the work in camp, though squad and section formation marching is practised to some extent in the field.

As to field work, great pains are taken to select different ground each day and to prepare every scheme beforehand. Many evenings are spent in examining the country and selecting sites. The ground is always chosen with a particular object in view, sometimes it is deep bracken to train in searching, requiring some organization by junior N.C.O.s, sometimes in
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deep woods, sometimes in broken ground, giving training in scouting and taking cover, sometimes in a deserted farm or ruined castle, sometimes down precipitous hills necessitating hand carriage. On several occasions schemes have been held in historic ruins to which entry can be obtained on payment of a small fee paid out of the unit funds. Custodians are usually old soldiers and have always proved obliging, while the astonished visitors who may happen to be present go home, I hope, to advertise the joys of life in the T.A. Occasionally casualties are taken across a river or canal with improvised rafts or borrowed boats, though never, I am afraid, with such an elaborate structure as that illustrated in the May issue.

Whenever possible training finishes by midday, when the men embuss to the beach and bathe before dinner, which is sent out hot in hay boxes and eaten in various stages of undress. Then a long sun bathe and back to camp for games and tea. Should any Commanding Officer hesitate to indulge in bathing before dinner let him salve his conscience by calling it "physical training." Incidentally, physical training classes and boxing classes, both of which count as drills, are held at headquarters throughout the winter.

Frankly, most exercises tend more to the work of regimental stretcher bearers than ambulance bearers, but the collection and dressing of wounded does occasionally fall to the lot of an ambulance bearer. Invitation to take part in regimental or brigade field days are always refused as a waste of time, though occasionally the whole unit has been taken to a commanding hill top to watch a battle, when the positions where the R.A.P.s, A.D.S., and M.D.S. would be situated and how the transport work would be organized is pointed out. Wounded are usually labelled and each stretcher squad is required to find and dress its case properly. This, it is true, is a repetition of the winter's work, but I find that the men are extraordinarily keen on putting on splints and dressings under service conditions, and the finding and dressing of a case in the open is more interesting than the mere clearing of a hypothetical R.A.P. After collection at the A.D.S. an officer gives a short lecture on each case. There are more possibilities of variety than might at first appear. Casualties can be placed on roofs, up trees, in cellars, in dense thickets or across walls and streams, giving scope for much ingenuity in hand carriage and improvisation. Mustard gas can be simulated by scattering flour secretly on the ground to be crossed. Each scheme is explained beforehand on the ground and plenty of shell-fire, machine-gun-fire, gas attacks and hidden snipers included, giving the N.C.O.s and squads training in choosing their ground and taking cover. Sometimes a problem is included such as the collection of the crew of an aeroplane crashed on ground exposed to enemy fire, or the dressing and removal of a compound fracture from an almost inaccessible position. Such conundrums offer scope for
endless arguments. Needless to say unexpected casualties among the senior N.C.O.s are common, giving junior N.C.O.s an opportunity of showing initiative and taking command.

At least one short day is filled with map-reading. The method used is to arrange the men in parties of five or six, usually according to tents, as friends usually sleep together. They are taken out in lorries and are dropped on given map references some five miles from home. Each party is provided with a map, supplied by Division, and is required to find its way back to camp across country or to a given point if the camp is too conspicuously placed, studying the map all the way and identifying its features. The value of such an exercise depends very much upon the men themselves, but few men have had even the experience of the average motorist in studying maps, and most are interested. Many are at first inclined to argue that the map must be wrong! We usually have one night bivouac, which is very simply run. All that is required is a number of 1½-inch deal poles of suitable length, sharpened at one end and notched about an inch from the other end, several balls of thick twine cut into lengths and a quantity of 6-inch nails. The men parade about an hour before dusk, march to a selected spot (beware of mosquitoes!) out of sight of camp and pitch their bivouacs. Stores, blankets and spare ground-sheets can be carried on a lorry. Camp is struck at the usual hour of reveillé and the men are back in camp in time for breakfast. Night manoeuvres, usually the repetition of a day’s scheme on ground near camp, are also held if possible, and experience shows that the scheme must be a very simple one. I have never found the men complain of giving up two evenings to training. Walking out costs money and the joys of a seaside town soon pall.

The holiday side of camp is not forgotten, for to many men this is their only holiday. Excursions, usually in uniform, are arranged to such attractions as a military tattoo, an R.A.F. aerodrome, or a tank or artillery display. One whole day near the end of camp is usually devoted to a purely holiday outing, towards the expenses of which the officers contribute, as, for example, a boating excursion to a lighthouse, a visit to a naval dockyard in Navy Week, or one year, when at Folkestone, a day in Boulogne (in civilian dress). Such outings may not be in accordance with King’s Regulations, but they undoubtedly help to keep the unit above full strength, while the various competitions won and the large number of Nursing Orderlies, Class III and II, would suggest that the time lost has not seriously interfered with the year’s training.

I offer these suggestions for what they are worth and am grateful for those I have already received. The conclusion is that any Commanding Officer who keeps his men doing stretcher drill and loading ambulance cars in camp must be sadly lacking in imagination.