"SOLDIER, SAILOR OR RUDDY DOCTOR"
FIELD AMBULANCE WORK AT NARVIK.
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The operational roles of several sections of the Royal Army Medical Corps have undergone such changes from the stereotyped book teaching with which we started this war, and will probably still suffer more such changes before the war is finished, that the following account of experiences of one Field Ambulance may be of interest. The reader will early reflect that little of the ordinary training of the Field Ambulance appears to have been of practical benefit except, perhaps, first aid, yet the organization was sufficiently flexible for the unit to cope with the circumstances and to give quite a creditable account of itself.

This particular Field Ambulance was formed in 1938 to complete the allotment of three Field Ambulances for a Division, and expanded from peace establishment to war establishment in April, 1939, as part of the general expansion of the Territorial Army. It was fortunately able to complete one annual camp at full strength in the summer of 1939 and returned home about a fortnight before embodiment. The personnel had thus been able to get to know each other very well and, in fact, formed a very happy family. The officers were almost all general practitioners and the men chiefly artisans from a large industrial town specializing in the heavy industries, with very few having practical experience either in the Army or civilian medical institutions.

The unit was ordered to mobilize in February, 1940, and was instructed to concentrate training on antigas and working in the darkness. Whether this was intended in the interests of secrecy as a dust thrown into our eyes or not was never discovered but eventually the unit found itself as part of the force which was to take Narvik.

The unit embarked on April 11 and within a few hours set sail from a northern port. After reaching the open sea the convoy turned north, picked up several more ships and eventually totalled thirty to thirty-five ships, the numbers never remaining constant for long because slim destroyers dashed off into the mist at times and almost miraculously reappeared a few hours later.

After three days at sea we awoke one morning to find the convoy much smaller and we learned afterwards that the Namsos and Aandalesnes detachments had left us. Next day we crossed the Arctic Circle and, on the following day, anchored in Vaags Fjord (fig. 1). The beauty of the scenery was almost beyond description; the sea was lovely blue, very clear and its sur-
face merely disturbed by ripples which served to reflect the brilliant sunshine into myriads of scintillating shafts of light. The land consisted of high towering mountains, snow covered and showing no signs of vegetation. At the foot of the mountains was a narrow band of flat land on which could be seen small clusters of houses painted in many bright colours, also reflecting the sunshine and giving the impression of toy doll's houses arranged by some childish hand. The whole was a scene not easily forgotten.

Here we had our first attention from the enemy—a lone Heinkel suddenly skimmed one of the mountains, descended on the ship, machine-gunned us and dropped a couple of bombs. There were no casualties and little damage to the ship. A small Norwegian fishing cobble, of the type we later called "puffers," was holed and sank within a few minutes, the crew escaping in their own dinghy.

Disembarkation into destroyers commenced, Signals and Infantry going before the Field Ambulance and other auxiliary troops. When our turn came next day, I found myself senior Army officer on board the destroyer, and, as such, was invited on the bridge. The Luftwaffe returned to complete the job started the day before and it was most amusing to watch our skipper calmly looking up to see where the bombs were falling and directing his ship away from them. Our course must have been one glorious zig-zag. 

![Diagram of the area showing German positions on April 16th.](http://militaryhealth.bmj.com/)
eventually landed at Harstad, a small Norwegian fishing port on the island of Hinno (fig. 1) and the unit was allotted a billet area a mile outside the town and reached by means of a steep road almost knee-deep in soft snow. The labour of man-handling our 22 tons of stores up this road became more obvious as it progressed. All our stores had been split into packages roughly 80 pounds in weight. Even so, all ranks were glad when the job was completed.

The billets were chiefly houses and barns owned by the various ramifications of the family of a man who had spent some time forty years previously working in a Grimsby shipyard. He was most helpful but did not hesitate to draw a revolver on one if he felt the occasion demanded it. At this time the Norwegian people were unable to do too much for us. After two days shuffling and adjusting, the billeting arrangements were regarded as satisfactory. Then the snow started and continued for the best part of five days, reaching blizzard intensity at times. The effect was to add another five feet of snow to the five already on the ground. Unfortunately the unit had been
unlucky in the issue of arctic kit, particularly boots, with the result that "care of feet" became an urgent and continual anxiety.

After the blizzard we were treated to a spell of lovely sunshine and the stimulating effect of this on all ranks helped to mitigate the discomforts. The unit spent one week in billets, time spent valuably on checking and arranging stores, putting men through upgrading tests and liaising with units with which we would have to work in the near future. By means of this liaising and with the help of Intelligence Summaries, one was able to get a good idea of the tactical situation.

Briefly it was as shown in figs. 1, 2 and 3.

German positions on April 16 were:

The German main body was in Narvik itself and probably consisted of 2,000 to 3,000 men. Line of communication troops were safeguarding the iron ore railway as far as Hunndalen on the Norwegian-Swedish frontier.
South of Narvik (fig. 2).

Enemy posts were known to be at Fagernes, Ankenes and round the peninsula as far south as Haakvik. He had also occupied the high ground forming the backbone of the Ankenes peninsula and his ski troops patrolled as far as Skjomen Fjord, thus safeguarding the electric power station on L. Storvand, and the cable running to Narvik.

North of Narvik (figs. 2 and 3).

Enemy concentrations at Oijord and Bjerkvik with well-planned machine-gun posts covering the intervening road. Machine-gun posts also along the north shore of Rombaks Fjord at any rate as far east as Lilleberget. This safeguarded the power stations near Lilleberget and the cable running into Narvik.

From Bjerkvik the enemy had pushed outposts along the north shore of Herjangs Fjord as far as Herjangl and Troldviken and northwards along the Bjerkvik-Elvenes road. He had a fairly strong force in Elvenes with outposts pushed westwards along the road as far as Foldvik and southwards to link up with those from Bjerkvik.

In general then, the enemy held the line running roughly North and South, pivoted on Narvik, with the Swedish border 25 to 30 miles behind him. He had fortified the high ground wherever possible and this, plus the fact the high ground was really high, consisting of steep rocky mountain covered with snow, and that all approaches from the West were easily dominated, had given him an extremely strong defensive position. His weakness was that his lines of retreat were very poor consisting only of one small track running over the mountains from Hartvigvand to Bjornfjelt, just inside the Swedish border and the railway from Narvik to Hunddalen. Elsewhere the mountains were impassable to everything except lightly equipped ski troops.

The order of battle of the enemy, as far as was known to us, consisted of three regiments of Alpinists, some Bavarian Jaeger units and a sprinkling of Prussians. In addition, the survivors of the seven German destroyers sunk in the first and second naval battles of Narvik were known to be still in Narvik.

His aerodrome was the frozen Hartvigvand, with the assistance of air sorties from Trondhjem, and he appeared to be receiving reinforcements by seaplanes landing on Rombaks Fjord.

The Approach March.

On April 27 one British battalion of the S.W.B. with “A” Company of 00th Field Ambulance moved out from Harstad and after a short stay at Lilland moved on to land at Skjomnes. About the same time, Chasseurs Alpins landed at Foldvik on Gratangs Fjord and pushed eastwards. After they had pushed the enemy beyond Sandnes, “B” Company of the 00th Field Ambulance landed there and established its A.D.S.
These operations were the opening of a pincer movement to force the enemy into Narvik.

H.Q. Company of the 00th Field Ambulance was established in a small coasting steamer, S.S. "Trondenes"—later registered as a hospital ship. In addition the unit was allotted two small fishing cobbles driven by Diesel engines and which emitted a characteristic noise producing the very appropriate sobriquet "puffers." One of the puffers was allotted to "B" Company and the other was retained by H.Q. Company until it could be handed over to "A" Company, that Company having departed with the S.W.B.s.

At this stage, such roads as existed were absolutely impassable to wheels of any sort and collection of wounded was by hand carriage or sleighs and evacuation by water.

No. 7 C.C.S. was established at Taorstad on Ofoten Fjord—20 odd miles from Skjomnes where "A" Company had its A.D.S.

"A" Company evacuation was through the C.C.S., "B" Company direct to the General Hospital at Harstad, a distance of 34 miles. S.S. "Trondenes" was capable of 10 knots; the puffers of 6 to 8 knots.

Contact and First Phase. May 1 to 12.

This phase, written purely from a Field Ambulance point of view, was a period characterized by really hard work on the part of the companies, much going and coming on the part of H.Q. Company and considerable air attack on all companies.

"B" Company. A.D.S. at Sandnes evacuated wounded of Chasseurs Alpins. The A.D.S. was dispersed in unoccupied houses with the bearers working eastwards towards Elvenes-Bjerkvik road. Relay posts had been established along each route but even so conditions made the carries very laborious and the work became even more difficult later as the snow melted. At one time one of the carries in the Laergerdalen took four hours; this in three to four feet of snow and subject to repeated air attacks.

Fortunately battle casualties were not very heavy but the French had a fair number of frost bite cases.

Rations for "B" Company at this stage were "Composite rations," all preserved commodities, but they were able to supplement this by barter with the French and such Norwegian civilians as were left.

"A" Company. At Skjomnes, later Haakvik. The A.D.S. was first at Skjomnes and later pushed up to Haakvik—carries were generally long but conditions were not so severe as with "B" Company. Being nearer to Narvik they were, however, subject to more frequent and more intense air attack. In addition, enemy ski patrols were constantly crossing the mountains from inland, making life in the A.D.S. quite exciting at times. The ridge between Haakvik and Ankenes itself proved too big an obstacle for our troops under conditions at first, so activity was chiefly centred on the coastal road. As ground conditions improved it became possible to use
wheels so two light ambulances were allotted to "A" Company and proved a great boon.

_H.Q. Company in S.S. "Trondenes."_ During this stage H.Q. Company spent the time chiefly in evacuating A.D.S. of "A" Company but made one or two trips to "B" Company at Sandnes. In addition H.Q. collected and evacuated casualties from the Navy. The latter presented problems of its own, particularly with regard to the "lifting" of stretcher cases, often from deeply hidden corners and along narrow corridors or steep companion ways 'tween decks. Our best effort was a compound fracture of both legs, weighing 18 stones, who had to be taken from a single bunk, carried up two companion ways and finally evacuated to S.S. "Trondenes."

It was during this period that the title of this article was born. I had received a wireless message, via the Navy, to pick up some casualties from a certain cruiser but when I contacted that cruiser she had transferred them to another one which had gaily departed into the "blue." After several hours of glorified hide and seek the casualties had not been found so I retraced my steps determined to speak to the first British warship and enlist its help. About 2.30 a.m. I found a small armed trawler anchored for the night under the lee of a towering mountain so I hailed it. In a few minutes an apparition clad in a very "off-white" sweater and grey flannel trousers turned out and treated me to the finest flow of language heard outside Billingsgate. The only retort I could muster to his very embellished query as to my identity was—"I don't rightly know. I'm either a soldier, a sailor or just a ruddy doctor—but who, etc., etc., are you?" However, he helped considerably and in a short time I had found the casualties.

Apart from the evacuation of wounded, much time was spent in fitting out the S.S. "Trondenes" as a hospital ship. Canvas awnings and screens were fixed to enclose decks and Bréchot gear mounted to carry the stretchers. The original passengers' saloon was fixed up as a treatment room and as many bunks, etc., as could be filched were arranged for patients. The Norwegian crew consisted of three officers and about twenty men. These with the personnel of H.Q. Company made the ship already very crowded yet, when the transition was complete, 150 stretcher cases and about 100 sitting cases could be accommodated. Orders were given to display the Geneva Cross—to the great disgust of the Norwegian crew. I secretly sympathized with them. It is not a joke to sit in a ship "waiting for it" while Jerry circles just above, mast high, giving one the "works." A machine-gun would have been more pleasing to the Norwegians than the Red Cross. However, the ship never received a direct hit. Here I must pay tribute to C.R.E., Narvik force. No matter what one wanted, or when, he was always most helpful. He must have come to hate the name of Trondenes and its alterations yet he never lost patience nor his ingenuity in obtaining what we wanted.

During this period, when enemy air forces paid us considerable attention, the Navy came to our rescue with gifts of lifebelts. In the space of a day
and a half one was able to beg sufficient lifebelts for all the personnel. They were of the cycle type and could be worn comfortably, semi-inflated, underneath a battle dress blouse. It was but the work of a few seconds to inflate them fully. Also at this time one encountered the question of maintenance of ships. The "Trondenes" was a coal-burning ship which could only bunker in Harstad but could take on water at Ballangen in addition to Harstad. The puffers were Diesel burning and could obtain oil at Harstad or Lilland. The "Trondenes" was due for boiler scaling and bottom scraping and one or two of the puffers needed engine overhauls. All these, for us, unusual features had to be solved and one was considerably helped by the Norwegian crews but almost more so by one or two men of the unit who had had deep sea experience in fishing trawlers. One particularly dubbed "The Admiral" did exceptionally well.

Rations for H.Q. Company during this period were almost entirely composite and, unfortunately, no opportunities came our way to supplement them.

**Phase II. The Assault on Bjerkvik, May 13.**

By this time, in the north, the enemy had been pushed out of Elvenes and in the south he was held in Ankenes. It was decided to attack Bjerkvik by combined land operations and a seaborne landing.

The plan was: (i) Polish troops advancing overland from Bogen towards Trolsviken, Herjangl and Bjerkvik; (ii) two battalions French Foreign Legion to land at Bjerkvik after preliminary bombardment by Royal Navy.

No British troops took part in the assault except ourselves and reading my diary entry for that day I find a note to the effect that the C.O. asked me to record the fact that all our work for the previous fortnight had been with foreign troops.

The medical arrangements were that one bearer company of the Field Ambulance detached to command of O.C. Field Ambulance should follow the Foreign Legion in at Bjerkvik. Two bearer squads from 00th Field Ambulance were attached to the Poles and I, with the remainder of the H.Q. Company, should lie off in S.S. "Trondenes" with two puffers to evacuate casualties from A.D.S.s to S.S. "Trondenes." Actually the plan worked quite well, the Poles encountering little opposition until they reached the outskirts of Bjerkvik and so had few casualties in the early stages. After Bjerkvik was taken, Polish casualties were evacuated from there. Here we had one stroke of luck. The wooden jetty at Bjerkvik was mined but the Germans had not blown it, thus it was available for our use—an important point to us always was whether there was a usable jetty. The one at Bjerkvik was somewhat damaged as a result of R.N. shelling but in a short time was working efficiently. All casualties were evacuated to S.S. "Trondenes" before 8 p.m. and by that time the Foreign Legion and Chasseurs Alpins had met on the Elvenes—Bjerkvik road. The enemy were retiring eastwards and by May 18 had reached the area Lillebalah, 7 miles east of Bjerkvik. Hartvigvand was in our possession along with nine or ten Heinkels
which had frozen to the ice, but the loss of Hartvigvand did not appear to lessen the enemy’s capacity for annoying us.

As all casualties could now be evacuated through Bjerkvik, “B” Company at Elvenes went out of business but remained there for a few days having a well earned rest. They were later ordered back to Harstad but were bombed on the way and only just managed to beach the ship in time. They were later rescued and brought to Harstad.

After the capture of Bjerkvik, it suffered severely from enemy air attack but the Foreign Legion continued attacking, eventually reached Oijord and turned eastwards towards Lilleberget. During this period one came into intimate contact with the Navy again as they were covering the French advance. I was forbidden to take any risks with S.S. “Trondenes” so I used puffers and it was a heartening experience to proceed up Rombaks Fjord with a destroyer escort to collect French wounded, the destroyer doing its utmost to demolish the many tunnels on the railway and so silence the guns on railway mountings which the German was using.

The end of this phase saw the Allies in possession of all former German positions except Narvik, Ankenes and the railway running East to Hunddalen.

The stage was now set for the final assault on Narvik.

**Phase III. The Assault on Narvik, May 27.**

The plan was simultaneous attacks from Oijord on the North and Ankenes on the South.

**Oijord Attack.**

Two battalions of Foreign Legion and two battalions of Norwegian infantry landed by M.L.C.s at Taraldsvik and Vassvik, north east of Narvik. The Norwegians were to take the town of Narvik and the French were to push along the railway, take the high ground south of it and cut off the enemy’s retreat.

The naval bombardment commenced at 22.30 hours and was magnificent. The infantry went in at 23.30 hours. The arrangements appeared to work without a hitch. The medical dispositions had been made and checked and, as there was no prospect of wounded for some little time, another British M.O., a French M.O. and myself took up position on a hill overlooking the proposed place of landing. We had a ring-side seat—but not for long.

The medical arrangements for this attack were: The French had a Poste de Secours on the reverse side of a hill just north of Oijord, “A” Company of 00th Field Ambulance came down from Bjerkvik and evacuated Oijord to Bjerkvik. H.Q. Company 00th Field Ambulance evacuated from Bjerkvik. My job was to clear the A.D.S. at Bjerkvik and keep contact with the French Poste de Secours in case it moved across the fjord. Fortunately we had been given three puffers and one was able to arrange a shuttle service from Bjerkvik to the C.C.S. at Taorstad. Wounded commenced to arrive in the Poste de Secours in the early hours of the 27th and continued in a steady
stream. At first, there were only a few Norwegians as they had made their own arrangements but later one saw more Norwegians. Air attack was almost continuous both on ourselves and on the ships of the Navy giving support fire. One of the puffers with almost regal disdain steered a straight course down Herjangs Fjord while concentrated bombing was being directed on three ships zigzagging in the fjord. Bombs dropped all around her for at least an hour but she got through untouched.

By the evening of the 27th Narvik was captured, the French were advancing along the railway and the Poles were making progress on the Ankenes side of Beis Fjord.

The French Poste de Secours is something between our old conception of an A.D.S. and an M.D.S. The equipment includes a portable operating table, a large variety of splints, almost all made of aluminium, and a good supply and variety of surgical instruments.

All patients on admission to the Poste receive a thorough treatment including a series of hypodermic injections, all cases had antitetanic serum, antigas gangrene serum and an anti-enteric injection, the nature of which I was unable to ascertain. In addition if a man was collapsed he got coramine, if he was not collapsed he got morphia. All this and the thoroughness of the surgical treatment took time and, as air activity was very intense at one period, it was decided to cut out the Poste de Secours if possible so puffers were diverted from Bjerkvik and brought to a convenient beach nearby and evacuation was effected in that way.

The following day evacuation was direct from Narvik itself.

This was comparatively easy as the French took their casualties to the Norwegian civil hospital and the Norwegians resumed control of their own. My puffers were able to use the jetty at Vassvik and with the assistance of wheeled stretchers and a few borrowed Norwegian lorries the carry from the hospital to the jetty was done quickly and easily.

Narvik itself, comparatively untouched except for the destruction of the railway yards, etc., by the British Navy, now began to receive air attention and I was called on to help in the evacuation of civilian women and children. This evacuation had been organized by a young lieutenant of the Royal Navy who was acting as Naval Liaison Officer. My puffers helped him to the extent of several hundred evacuees in a few hours. Incidentally, I found three British sailors, survivors of H.M.S. "Hardy," in Narvik hospital where they had been placed by the German authorities. Their delight at seeing a dirty British battledress was unbounded and my apologies for the humble transport in a puffer to the officer among them were quite superfluous.

The Ankenes Attack.

This attack was timed to coincide with the landing on the North side of Narvik but as I was not actually present, the details were not known to me. Two battalions of Poles advanced from Haakvik, one along the coastal road and the other over the mountains to cut off the enemy's retreat eastwards.
out of Ankenes. The mountains, though steep and rocky, were by this time clear of snow.

The medical arrangements were as follows: "A" Company had an A.D.S. at Haakvik and later established a second one around the point at Emmenes. The Poles had their own R.A.P.s. I believe that, because of the language difficulty and the consequent liability to misinterpret messages, it was decided at the outset that the A.D.S. at Haakvik should not move. At any rate, the Poles had reached a point opposite Fagernes and they gaily refloated some abandoned boats and I got their wounded out through Narvik.

Soon after this, arrangements for the evacuation of Northern Norway were put in hand, much to the disgust of the French who, by that time, had pushed the Germans almost into Sweden. As is well known the evacuation was effected without the loss of a single man though, of course, contacts were lost and it was not until one reached the United Kingdom again that one found the unit reunited.

The Narvik episode was extremely interesting, the climate was very unkind at first but, after the snow had gone, conditions were fairly comfortable. The Field Ambulance worked in, I believe, a unique role and most of the time served almost anyone except the British Army. It must be left to others to judge whether it acquitted itself well or not.