

NOTES ON THE MILITARY POSITION OF OFFICERS OF THE
ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS IN RELATION TO THEIR MEN.¹

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GENTLEMEN,—A year ago I was asked by your Secretary to read a paper for this Society, and I selected for my theme the “Duties and Responsibilities of Officers of the Corps with Regard to their Men.” This was afterwards published in the JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS, and I was surprised and flattered by the number of letters and kind messages which I received from brother officers, showing that the subject was considered by some, at any rate, as one of interest. When Colonel Powell, therefore, asked me again this year to contribute something for discussion, I wondered whether there was any way in which I could add to or amplify my former remarks without going over old ground, and I thought that, at any rate, I could try to put before you something which might be of interest without unduly taxing your patience.

We have again, as last year, a large class of young officers whose acquaintance with the Corps is of recent date, and if they think they are in for another lecture, in addition to the large number which they are compelled to attend on all sorts of subjects, I can only promise that it shall be a short one and not followed by any examination.

To the seniors, I may say that the year which is closing has been one of very considerable changes, so far as the rank and file are concerned, and perhaps some reference to these alterations may not be uninteresting.

I do not wish to recapitulate the remarks I made last year more than I can help. Those who care to look them up will find them in the January number of the Corps Journal for 1906, but I should like to draw the attention of all, and especially the juniors, to the unique advantage we possess over all other branches of the Army, in the fact that we are not only the officers but the “medical officers” of our own men. From his enlistment to his discharge, whenever a soldier changes his condition the change is almost invariably accompanied by a certificate that he is “medically fit.” When he extends his service, re-engages, continues in the Service beyond twenty-one years, comes up for promotion to warrant rank, proceeds on foreign service, and so on, he comes before his officer in his capacity as a medical man. I wish all officers would realise what an opportunity this gives for knowing their men thoroughly and personally, and for selecting the best.

As regards recruits, as you know, the men must not only be physically

¹ A lecture delivered before the Aldershot Medical Military Society, December 3, 1906.

fit, but "suitable for the Royal Army Medical Corps;" and this point is so important that fresh instructions have lately been issued by the Director-General. I am afraid of wearying you, but I cannot refrain from pointing out that we are again in excess of our authorised establishment, and that, in all probability, we shall shortly have to stop recruiting altogether, so that each man now enlisted should be selected as likely to prove in all respects a desirable acquisition to the Corps. A man rejected for our Corps is not necessarily lost to the Army. He is available for enlistment into other branches, so I do not think the recruiting staff officer or recruiting sergeant have any reason to complain, or to bring pressure to bear on the medical officer, as is said sometimes to be the case. Consider particularly the men enlisted for one year with the colours and eleven in the reserve, how important it is that only intelligent men should be chosen, so that they may obtain full advantage from their year's training.

Again, as regards promotion, especially to the senior ranks, I do not recall any period during my service when we have had so large a number of thoroughly qualified non-commissioned officers and men *waiting* for vacancies to occur for advancement. Personally, I think that when a warrant or non-commissioned officer has obtained the pension to which he is entitled, it is for the benefit of the Service, except in very special cases, that room should be made for younger men. Yet, when the seniors are certified to be in all respects fit for continuance, it is hardly fair to throw the responsibility of refusing the request upon our office. We must accept the medical certificates of officers who are in the best position for knowing the physical capabilities of their own men.

I need not refer to foreign service, for obviously no one would certify a man as fit for a tour abroad who was likely to be shortly invalided, to the detriment of his health and expense to the public; but we have special appointments, such as those at Sierra Leone and under the Colonial Office, for which it is essential that only the best, physically and otherwise, should be selected. I may mention that recently Staff-Sergeant L. L. Woodell, R.A.M.C., has been specially granted the Meritorious Service Medal for service with the forces in Northern Nigeria, a reward for which, I am sure, the whole Corps will be proud. I have dwelt on this point of medical examination perhaps longer than I should have done, but after nearly eighteen months' work in that magnificent establishment halfway down the Hill, I am more than ever convinced that the future of our Corps is entirely in our own hands, owing to the fact that we are doctors as well as officers.

As an old officer clerk you cannot be surprised if I say a few words about "returns," those detestable "forms" with lines and cross-lines, notes and footnotes, columns and "demnition totals," which are frequently placed before you. The man does not exist who could make them

interesting, and the best advice I can give you is that they are part of our duty, and as they have got to be done it is worth while to learn how to do them right. Remember also that no man is master in his own hospital if he is not in a position to teach his own clerks. I well remember being at the Gambia many years ago, when my only assistant was a private of the West India Regiment, who could hardly read, when every scrap of every return had to be done by myself. I had to learn then, and the same experience may befall any of you. It may be some consolation to you to know that as regards several of these documents you are no worse off than any officer of any other branch of the Service, as the returns apply to the whole Army; and it certainly will be a relief to learn that after January next the most obnoxious will be transferred to the unfortunate Record Office.

Why the House of Commons, or the public at large, is burning to learn exactly how many Jews or Mahommedans with first-class certificates of education there are in the Army, I do not know, but the information has got to be supplied, and we must supply it correctly.

Sometimes one is involved in difficulties. The other day a man declared himself a "Unitarian." I searched the King's Regulations in vain for assistance, but at last solved the problem by including him among "Other Protestants," and there he will have to stay till the next annual return.

Perhaps a few words on the changes that have occurred in the last twelve months may not be out of place. The most important has no doubt been the enlistment of men for one year with the colours and 11 in the reserve. In June last we were authorised to enlist 190 men under these terms for the General Duty Section. They were obtained in a very few weeks, and in August we received permission to enlist 250 more. This number has now been obtained and, as I said at the commencement of my lecture, recruiting, except for specials, will shortly be suspended. It has been decided that these one-year men cannot extend their service even if they wish to do so. To prevent there being any excess of men serving with the colours, non-commissioned officers and men of this Section (the General Duty Section) have been invited to convert their colour service and transfer prematurely to the reserve. Up to the present time about 40 have availed themselves of the permission. They are all certified to have definite permanent employment in civil life, and I wish them success but—there is no coming back.

Special classes for instruction in sanitation for sanitary sections and squads, and for instruction in connection with regimental water-carts, have been carried on under Lieutenant-Colonel R. H. Firth, and more than 350 have been trained. These men are allotted for special duties with units and on the lines of communication of an army in the field, and have been included in Mobilisation Tables just issued. All these non-

commissioned officers and men must belong to the General Duty Section of the Corps, and many of the one-year men have been through this course of instruction.

In common with the rest of the Army we have lost our reservists in Section "D." That is, that men who have completed twelve years' service either with the colours, or partly in the reserve, are no longer permitted to enlist or re-engage for a further term of four years in the reserve. Section "D" for the whole Army since July last has been in a state of suspense, and the effect will be that we shall lose about 180 reservists of the Corps.

A point of more immediate interest to the Corps is that compounders may belong to any Section. Formerly a non-commissioned officer or man who qualified as a compounder became, *ipso facto*, a member of the Nursing Section. It has now been decided that this classification is unnecessary. The examination has been divided into two parts, and a special Standing Board has been instituted at Aldershot to set papers and examine the answers, so that the examinations may be uniform at all stations at home and abroad. This will, of course, considerably reduce the labours of officers at all stations where boards for examination of compounders were previously held.

As regards the Army Orders recently issued abolishing nearly all extra duty pay and also service pay, it would not be becoming in my position to offer any remarks, except perhaps to point out that all corps and departments of the Army are similarly affected, and so the Royal Army Medical Corps has no special grievance; and to suggest that officers might impress upon their non-commissioned officers and men, that if certain sources of pecuniary emolument are closed, the way to advancement still lies open by qualifying for a higher rate of Corps pay and for promotion. The numbers who are qualifying for the special nursing certificate is satisfactory, but there are still vacancies for appointment to Q.A.I.M.N.S., the additional pay for which has not been touched; and as regards promotion, my seniority rolls tell me that the earlier a man qualifies the better his chance.

I was signing attestations the other day (weary task), and, as a matter of curiosity, I looked at the certificates of education. Scores, almost hundreds, were blank. Here and there a third. Now surely, gentlemen, this is a pity. Even if a man does not want promotion, for which he must have a second, even if a man does not mean to stay in the Army, surely it is worth his while to get a decent education which costs him nothing, and which will be of great service to him in civil life. I do think that here is an opportunity for a little friendly advice on the part of a commanding officer. I can assure you that the letters I often get from reservists and ex-soldiers are pitiful. Letters begging to return to the colours, or asking for employment, from men who, whilst with the

colours, never tried, so far as their documents show, to qualify, either educationally or professionally, for future employment in civil life. I need not tell you that the market for unskilled labour at home is overstocked, that the uneducated soldier who goes to the reserve without any definite employment runs the risk of starving. Unfortunately, the men themselves will not believe it until too late. Then they want to return to the colours, and I cannot take them. On the other hand, I sometimes get appointments offered me for well-trained men for which I cannot conscientiously recommend candidates. Good positions as valet attendants for a really qualified male nurse, a man who can look after a paralysed patient, use the catheter, &c.; clerks "with a good knowledge of accounts"; compounders, as dispensers, in private practice, or in stores; and so on. On the whole, I think we may say that, for well-trained men, we are fairly successful in finding situations, but for the untrained man we can do very little at home. In the colonies the prospect is better, and I am glad to say that as regards Canada certain restrictions regarding reservists have lately been withdrawn. We have more than sixty of our Corps now in that country, and a similar number in South Africa. These, I think, are points which, without being too inquisitorial, an officer commanding might fairly bring to the notice of his men when transferring to the reserve.

There is one thing more which I might bring to your notice before I sit down, and that is the existence of our own Corps Fund—the Fund which gives assistance in cases of distress, or aids in placing men in employment, provides for widows and orphans, and helps in the education of children. Many companies—they are all companies now at home and abroad, and shown as such in the Army List—another step forward in the recognition of the Corps—as a Corps—many companies appreciate the advantages of the Fund, and contribute from their canteens and recreation rooms, but I think *all* should do so; and whether a case of distress occurs at Bloemfontein, Bermuda, or Ballincollig, all should feel that they have a claim, in suitable cases, on the Fund, to which all, in their proportion, have subscribed.

Gentlemen, this address, which I trust has not wearied you, has been all about our men, and I make no apology for trying to interest you in the men you command, and on whom you must rely in peace and war.—*Homo sum et nihil humani a me alienum puto.*

I believe that the Royal Army Medical Corps, officers and men, is going to be the finest branch of the British Army, and I think that it is in the hands of its officers, especially the younger officers, to "make it so."