REPATRIATION OF WOUNDED IN WEST AFRICA.

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WHilst reading a paper from home recently I came across the following sentence: “The repatriated wounded were moved as soon as possible to hospitals near their homes.” That sounds fairly simple and no doubt at home it is so but, in West Africa, the problem of transporting the sick and wounded of the 82 (WA) Division from the Burma front is rather more complicated. The following story is one which may illustrate the difficulties which have to be overcome. Fortunately, as at home, the co-operation between the military and civil medical services is excellent and is invaluable in cases such as this.

The repatriates are sent on arrival at Lagos to the Military General Hospital—there they are examined and treated and sorted into those cases which must remain for some time and those who can safely stand a long journey after a few days’ rest. Whilst they are resting the A.D.M.S. contacts the D.M.S. (Civil) and, giving him the name of the man’s town, asks if arrangements may be made to admit the man to the Civil Hospital nearest that town. This is speedily arranged and all is set for the commencement of the journey. In the case in point there were two repatriates, both stretcher cases, whose home town was Bamenda in the Cameroons, and arrangements were made for them to be sent to the Civil Hospital there. Bamenda is over 200 miles East of Enugu and has neither railway nor airfield near it. The journey is performed by road, track and river. From Lagos to Enugu there is a railway and the “Express” covers the 700 odd miles in three days and three nights. The gradients are considerable; some bends are nearly hairpin; halts at intermediate stations are apt to be prolonged affairs. The General Hospital at Enugu was notified when the cases were expected to arrive and an ambulance was there and took them to the hospital for a few days’ rest before continuing their journey. Whilst the patients were resting, arrangements were being made for the next stage of the journey. The executive officer at Obubra on the Cross River was notified as to when he might expect patients to arrive and was asked to arrange for a canoe; the only means of transport available, to take them on the next stage. A reply was received that a steel canoe with sixteen paddlers and equipped with cooking facilities had been placed at our disposal and the patients were accordingly despatched from Enugu by ambulance on December 24. The party, besides the patients, consisted of two very intelligent W.A.A.M.C. orderlies, both Nursing Orderlies Class 1, the ambulance driver and eight W.A.A.M.C. stretcher bearers. These were sent because the road ends some miles from Obubra and the journey must be through the bush on foot. As it happened, these bearers need not have been sent because when they reached the road end they found that the District Officer had very thoughtfully provided a bearer party, consisting of a Prison Warder and sixteen convicts, who were to carry the stretchers to Obubra. The ambulance, with the W.A.A.M.C. bearers returned to Enugu and the patients, accompanied by the two Nursing Orderlies, proceeded slowly through the bush to Obubra where they found the canoe waiting for them and they set off in that at once.

The Cross River passes through some of the wildest parts of West Africa and numerous hippopotami and crocodiles are to be seen there. Fortunately they made little attempt to interfere with the canoe and the journey was quite uneventful until Ikom, the next stop, was reached two days later. Here the District Officer had arranged accommodation for two days, during which time the local dispensers looked after the comfort of the patients. Another canoe, which had been specially prepared with planks for the comfort of the patients, then set out for Mamfe on December 28. This canoe was slightly smaller and had nine...
paddlers only. The journey to Mamfe occupied five days and was not quite such pleasant travelling as the river fauna showed an undue interest in the canoe. However, by shouting and splashing, they were frightened away and the journey was completed without mishap on January 3. The authorities at Mamfe had been notified by wire of the time of arrival of the party who were met by the District Officer. He made arrangements with the Medical Officer for the care and accommodation of the patients whilst they were at Mamfe and sent a telegram to Enugu notifying the hospital of the safe arrival of the party. It was not possible to obtain transport immediately and the party had to remain in Mamfe for five days before transport was finally arranged. The driver of the vehicle was instructed that under no circumstances was he to take anyone other than the two patients and two orderlies. This is a necessary precaution as the African driver tends to overload his vehicle. Bamenda was reached that same evening (January 12) and a party of convicts was again at hand in readiness to carry the patients to the local hospital. The Medical Officer had been notified by wire of the expected time of arrival and they were admitted without delay. They were questioned as to their treatment on the journey and said that they had been treated with exceptional kindness all the way and that the arrangements for their comfort and feeding had been very good. A wire was sent to Enugu notifying the safe arrival of the party at their journey's end. Their condition was good and they had stood the very trying journey well. Return transport was not available for the two orderlies for six days and they were housed and fed under the supervision of the Medical Officer during that time.

They started their return journey on January 18 and reached Mamfe that evening where they stayed for two nights before going to Ikom which they reached by canoe on January 22. There again they had to wait for three nights before a canoe was available to take them to Obubra. The District Officer at Obubra had wired to Enugu to arrange for transport to meet the orderlies at the road end and with their loads of kit and blankets on their heads they set off on their walk through the bush to the road end where they found transport awaiting them. They reached Enugu the same evening having had a round trip of thirty-five days, whilst the actual time spent by the patients on road, rail and river, exclusive of halts, was twelve days. To them the journey was nothing unusual—they had done the same thing before and it was merely a routine trip—the only thing that worried them was the fact that, on the journey from Ikom to Obubra, the canoe had nearly overturned and as a result one of them had lost his tunic in the river and was afraid he might have to pay for it. They had shown how capable the good African Nursing Orderly can be and, when complimented on the way they had carried out their task, showed surprise at such a routine job being commended.

Although this account is one of the journey only, it is a fair sample of the difficulties which have to be overcome on any of the numerous journeys of this nature which have to be taken. The secret of the success of such a trip as this lies in the fact that ample information is sent on ahead of the party and that the co-operation from the civilian authorities, both political and medical, is all that could be desired.