NOTES ON A "MULE BORNE" A.D.S.

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During the autumn of 1944, a company of a Field Ambulance, in a Division operating in the Apennines, North of Florence, was ordered to move in support of an attacking Infantry Brigade and open an A.D.S. on a site which could be approached only on foot or by mule over a mountain track. At this time the only track available to jeeps had not been cleared of the enemy. The move was made at four hours’ notice and, although a warning had been given forty-eight hours previously that such a move was probable, there was no opportunity to practise loading the mules before the operation started.

Prior to the move it had not been possible to reconnoitre the proposed site as it was under enemy control. It was known that there were several small farmhouses in the area, one of which had been allotted (on the map) to the Field Ambulance. The only area in which it was possible to site the A.D.S. was so vulnerable to enemy attack that it was decided that as few men as possible should staff the Dressing Station. At the time orders for the move were issued, the Commanding Officer stated that it might be necessary to hold casualties for any period up to forty-eight hours until the track mentioned was found to be clear for jeeps and ambulance cars. This factor influenced the number of rations carried by the mules.

After moving during the night with the mules over about 5,000 yards of mountain track, the A.D.S. was established at 05.00 hours—in fact before the R.A.P. of the second attacking Battalion. Ambulance cars were able to reach the A.D.S. by 14.00 hours on the same day, using a different route, and thirty-five lying casualties were evacuated.

The total personnel who formed the A.D.S. were—2 medical officers, 1 staff serjeant, 2 cooks, 1 clerk, 14 stretcher bearers (including 2 N.C.O.s).

Certain factors influenced the decision as to the quantity and nature of stores.

(a) It was intended to site the A.D.S. in a building, therefore tentage was not necessary. One tent, however, was carried for use in an emergency. It was not used.

(b) As it was expected that patients might have to be held for forty-eight hours extra rations were carried.

(c) If the action were successful, it was hoped to reach the A.D.S. by jeep or ambulance car within forty-eight hours, so that further supplies and equipment could be sent by road. In fact, ambulance cars reached the A.D.S. nine hours after it opened.

The following comments are made on the actual loading of the mules:

(a) The scale of equipment was designed for mules capable of carrying up to 200 lb. each. Mules vary mule to mule and close liaison should be maintained with the officer in charge of the mules, so that the best possible distribution of the loads may be made.

(b) It is suggested that strip metal cages with rings attached might be made for water and kerosene containers. Roping is difficult and, unless the "universal carrier" is available, almost impossible.

(c) If sufficient notice is given and the mules are available, the loading should be done with an adequate light. Roping in the dark is unsatisfactory as, even if items of equipment are not lost, the ropes tend to be put on "out of the true" and consequently slacken after the mule has travelled a few hundred yards.

(d) The carrying of closed stretchers on pack mules was deprecated by the officer in charge of the mules. His reason was that if the stretchers were carried close to the mule’s body, it
could not swing its head—a serious drawback to its hill climbing ability. If, on the other hand, stretchers are strapped on the outside of bulky loads, and the mule falls, then the stretchers are very liable to be broken.

In conclusion a few "Do's" and "DONT's," as advocated by various mule officers, may be passed on:

DO make sure that the loads are as nearly as possible equally balanced.
DO check all loads at short halts.
DON'T load mules until about ten minutes before the start.
DON'T keep mules standing about loaded at other than short halts.
Unload, and reload as late as possible before moving on.

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[Note.—The editor regrets that tables of equipment and loading have been omitted owing to pressure on space.]