DISPOSAL OF THE SICK AND WOUNDED OF
THE ENGLISH ARMY DURING THE SIXTEENTH
CENTURY

BY

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In the sixteenth century important changes were made in the methods of disposing of the sick and wounded of the English Army. In earlier times there had been no machinery for dealing with men when they became casualties, and it was not considered that the authorities had any responsibility for their welfare or for assisting in their recovery. If it was thought that incapacitated men would not be ready for service again within a short period, it was the custom to discharge them; and the Army lost all interest in them. If they were fit to travel they made their own way home; if not, they were left to the care of the civil population of the neighbourhood; and there they either recovered or died.

This system was bad enough during wars within the boundaries of the island of Britain, but in continental wars it must have inflicted indescribable hardships upon the sick or wounded soldiers. What must have been the feelings of these poor fellows, shanghaied somewhere in France among an alien people, speaking an unknown language, and openly hostile to them? They were not only far from their home, but they were separated from it by a very formidable obstacle, the sea.

Occasionally, however, the authorities realized the hardships that the men underwent under such a system. Edward III, in 1346, evacuated a large number of his sick and wounded to England (Oman, p. 132); and the same thing was done in 1415, after the capture of Harfleur, when the numerous victims of dysentery were allowed to return home (J.A.H.R.S., p. 168). This, however, was the only modification made in the normal routine: after the men had landed at the home ports, the authorities were finished with them, the Government felt that it was under no further obligation to them, and they had to make their own way to their homes as best they could.

It has frequently been asserted that the seriously wounded were disposed of in an even simpler manner, in a way that would cause neither trouble nor expense to the higher command; that is to say, their throats were cut. It has been stated that the dagger called the misericorde was so named because it was used for putting the wounded out of their misery. Scott (i, p. 184), however, suggests that this may be incorrect, and that the misericorde got its name from the cries for quarter from a wounded man when he saw his enemy advancing with this weapon in hand, ready to finish him off. There may have been isolated instances of commanders ordering the slaughter of their wounded, but these must have been extremely rare. That it was the usual practice, even in the Middle Ages, is more than improbable. It is not even a custom among the wildest and most primitive peoples; they may slaughter their
wounded enemies—after all Henry V did this at Agincourt—but they take the greatest care to see that their own wounded do not fall into the hands of their opponents, and even in defeat make every effort to carry away their incapacitated comrades.

If the matter be considered seriously, it must be realized that the morale of no Army would have stood up to such treatment. Life means a great deal to any man, and if a soldier knew that the result of being more than slightly wounded would mean that his throat would be cut, then he would take every precaution to see that he was not wounded, and this would have seriously diminished his value as a soldier. It is true that, at this period, the chances of a man recovering from a serious wound were not good, the percentage of deaths under surgical treatment was very high; nevertheless some did recover; and as life is sweet, the average man, when he was wounded, must have hoped that he would be one of the lucky ones. Actually, we know that some care was taken of the wounded during an engagement. At the Battle of Poiétiers, at one stage of the fight, the French made a vigorous attack and nearly won the day, because they caught the English busily employed in getting their wounded out of the fighting line to the rear (Oman, p. 173).

In the first part of the sixteenth century little improvement was made in the methods of disposing of the sick and wounded. Of the earlier, and rather farcical, wars of the reign of Henry VIII there is little or no information, but in the campaign of 1544 the wounded were dumped in England much in the same way as had been done during the reign of Henry V. There was, however, one important difference: an attempt was made to prevent fit men from getting away on the excuse of being sick (S.P.H., viii, p. 114). This does not appear to have been very successful as there were bitter complaints from the Privy Council to the Duke of Norfolk, that large numbers of men, perfectly fit for service, were being shipped over to England. The King went so far as to accuse Norfolk of doing this deliberately, so as to render his force unfit for further service, and thereby to make it necessary to recall him (L.P.H., viii, p. 224).

Norfolk and his colleagues repudiated this charge most strenuously (ibid., p. 235), but there is evidence to suggest that Henry’s suspicions were not ill-founded. After the failure of the siege of Monttreuil, Norfolk had retired to Calais, and continued to stay there, although he was urged from home to march to the relief of Boulogne, which at that time was besieged by the Dauphin. It was while the troops were at Calais that the immense exodus of the sick and others took place. One cannot blame the unfortunate troops, there had been a severe outbreak of dysentery, soldiers were literally dying in the streets, and naturally the men took the first opportunity of escaping from these horrors. Norfolk realized all this, and felt that something had to be done to check the wastage; he therefore appointed a small committee consisting of Sir George Cardoe, and Messrs. Baynton, Harper, and Ryche to superintend the evacuation, and to see that none but the truly sick were allowed to depart for England (ibid, p. 235). These gentlemen were not medical men, and it is difficult to see how they could have been expected to carry out their difficult
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task efficiently; indeed, Norfolk acknowledges that they did not do so, and that a number of malingerers slipped through their hands to get away to England. The whole business seems rather dubious, and one wonders if the committee were really expected by the commander-in-chief to do their work efficiently, or were merely appointed as a blind, in order that Norfolk could pretend that he had taken all possible steps to prevent fit men from deserting the colours, at the same time putting no real obstacles in their path. In this way he hoped that his Army might be so diminished in numbers that his recall would become imperative. However, whatever may have been the reasons for the formation of this committee, for the first time a body was set up to control and direct the evacuation of the sick and wounded, and this in itself was a marked improvement on what had happened before. But nothing appears to have been done for the sick when they arrived in England, presumably, as in the past, they made their own way home, and the Government felt that it had no further responsibility for them.

Incidentally, it must be noted that the French managed to capture one of the ships carrying some of the sick men, and this will not be the last time that we shall have to record such an action by the ancient enemy.

During the dreadful siege of Havre in 1563, many of the sick from the plague-stricken garrison were discharged, and sent over to England. Towards the end of the siege things were arranged more systematically than at the beginning. Sir Francis Knollys was sent over to the town to inform the G.O.C. that he could discharge all the men who were undoubtedly sick, or who were so seriously wounded that they would not recover within a short period. So that their discharge might not be held up from a shortage of money with which to pay them, they were given tickets signed by the local treasurer and controller, and they would be given their pay on presenting these on their return to England (C.S.P.F., 1563, p. 401). This again was an improvement on what had happened in the past.

When the garrison was allowed to return to England after the surrender of the town, the sick and wounded were carefully looked after at the port of disembarkation. The last detachment arrived at Portsmouth on August 6, 1563, and here the troops were mustered and discharged, except for the sick, who were retained until their condition had improved sufficiently to allow of their being sent to their homes (Salisbury, i, p. 277). They were accommodated in Porchester Castle, and some of them were still there on September 8, but their numbers were now decreasing daily (ibid., p. 282). It is interesting to observe that history repeated itself ninety years later, and in 1658 a proposal was made to use Porchester Castle to house naval casualties (C.S.P.F., 1652–3, pp. 235–6).

During the wars in the Low Countries, the methods employed for disposing of casualties shows little improvement over those in force in previous wars. Sir John Smith complains that the sick soldiers, who were brought to England in 1584, were in a disgraceful condition, and many of them died after their arrival in this country (Scott, ii, pp. 368–9). Three years later there were complaints from Flushing of the miserable state of the sick in that town.
Men had been discharged from the Army, and sent there to await shipping for England, without any money. If it had not been for the charity of the governor who, at his own expense, supplied them with food and drink, large numbers of them must have perished (C.S.P.F., 1587, p. 368). A year later, in 1588, things were no better, and on this occasion the situation was only saved by a collection in the local church. It was recommended that captains should not be allowed to discharge sick men from their companies, nor stop their pay, until shipping was available to take them to England (C.S.P.F., July–December 1588, p. 345). From what we know of them there cannot be the slightest doubt that the captains of that period would take the first opportunity of getting rid of the sick of their companies, as by doing this, they would be able to put money into their own pockets. They would discharge the sick men, but would continue to show their names on the company rolls, and would draw the pay of the absentees for their own benefit.

Possibly on account of these complaints, the Privy Council began to take an interest in the disposal of the sick and wounded. In 1589 an English Army had been sent to France under the command of Lord Willoughby to assist King Henry IV. However, by the end of the year it became very sickly and the French King agreed to its being returned to England. The Privy Council took a hand in the evacuation, and sent Captain Ward over to Cherbourg in command of two of Her Majesty's ships to superintend this operation. They gave him orders to hire a sufficient tonnage of merchant shipping to accommodate the bulk of the troops, while the remainder were to be brought back in the two royal vessels. He was particularly warned to see that the sick were placed in the hired transports, and that he should put no man suffering from infectious disease aboard the two ships of the Royal Navy, lest they might contaminate these vessels (A.P.C., 1589–90, p. 303). At the same time they arranged to send money over to France to enable Willoughby to issue a portion of their pay to his men (ibid., pp. 291–2). Although the Privy Council appears to have been less interested in the welfare of the sick than in the cleanliness of Her Majesty's ships, they at least did make arrangements for the soldiers to have some money, and, as we shall see later, they made preparations for the reception of the sick and wounded on their arrival in this country.

The schemes of the Privy Council, however, went astray, because Willoughby had already made his own plans, and had begun to evacuate the sick and wounded to Rye before he received the instructions of the Privy Council. As soon as that body received this information, they issued orders to the Mayor of Rye to take charge of the sick when they arrived; to see that they were properly looked after; to pay each of them ten shillings; to get them billets; to arrange for their rations; and, when they should be fit to travel, to issue passes to them to enable them to get to their homes (ibid., pp. 308–9).

These instructions were faithfully fulfilled by the Mayor of Rye. Some 80 odd sick soldiers were sent to that town and judging by his report, the local authorities dealt with the situation very competently:

The Mayor and Jurats of Rye to Sir Francis Walsingham. Rye, Feb. 5, 1590.

"The diseased soldiers . . . rested upon the town's charge eight days in most miserable
sort, full of infirmities in their bodies, wonderfully sick and weak, some wounded, some
their toes and feet rotting off and lame, the skin and flesh of their feet torn away with
continual marching, all of them without money, without apparel to cover their nakedness,
all of them full of vermin, which (no doubt) would have devoured them in very short
time if we had not given them most speedy supply. Whereby we were con-
strained to wash their bodies in sweet waters, to take from them all their
clothes and strip them into new apparel, both shirts, petticoats, jerkins, breecks and
hose, made of purpose for them. Then we appointed them several houses for their diet,
and keepers to watch and attend them, and also surgeons to cure their wounds and
rottenness; by this means we have saved some forty-eight of them which will be able
to do Her Majesty good service . . . And this has been to the town of Rye so great a
burden as we are not able to bear. And that now happeneth amongst us is much to our
grief (God of his mercy stay in his good time), for the persons in whose houses they were
lodged and dieted, and the women that did attend and watch them are for the most part
fallen very sick, and every day there dieth four or five of them with the infection which
they had from the soldiers.

"We therefor humbly pray that the burden of this great charge, performed from
charity and duty to God and Her Majesty, may not lie upon us, which charge, as
appears by the book herewith sent, amounts to the sum of £55: 11s.: 3d.; besides
the charge of the soldiers that remain in Rye, which will be above 50s. every day.”
(Ancaster p. 305.)

This letter from the Mayor of Rye and his colleagues has been given in
full, because it gives such a vivid picture of the means available at that time
for caring for the sick and wounded, and of the risks which a town ran when
infected soldiers were placed in its midst. One feels that it will be generally
agreed that the authorities of the town of Rye carried out their difficult task
in a most admirable manner. The steps, which they took to cleanse the men
and issue them with fresh clothing, were the best available at that period for
the prevention of the spread of the disease (presumably typhus) to the civil
population. It can only be regretted that they were unsuccessful in achieving
this objective; and it is to be hoped that they were duly recompensed by the
Government for their expense and trouble. But, judging by the experience
of other towns at a later date, it is probable that they had to wait a long time
for their money.

During the campaign in France in 1591, a further improvement was made
in the methods of evacuating the sick and wounded from the Continent to
England. The responsibility for supervising this work was put into the hands
of a special officer, Sir Henry Killigrew, who was posted to Dieppe for this
purpose. He found his task a difficult one, and as early as September 22 he
is complaining of the difficulty of preventing men from slipping off to England
on their account. He maintains that there is no excuse for this conduct, as
everything possible is done for their welfare at Dieppe (Salisbury, iv, p. 127).
The evacuation of the sick was quite a large undertaking, and by the end of
October some 1,700 of them had been shipped back to the home country
(ibid, p. 155). About this period there was a hold-up in the evacuation on
account of contrary winds, and some of the men on board the transports were
suffering from a shortage of rations and money. The former shortage was due
to the fact that the governor of the town was a Frenchman, who could not
issue rations to English troops without orders from his superior officers, and
Killigrew promptly wrote to the Earl of Essex asking for such orders to be issued. Killigrew considered that the shortage of money could be due only to one of two causes. Either the company commanders had never issued it to the men, or, as he thought was more probable, the men had had it and spent it before they arrived at Dieppe (ibid., pp. 157–8). From what we know of the captains of those days, it is probable that Killigrew was wrong in his suggestion, and it is more than likely that the company commanders had not issued any pay to these invalids, and as soon as they had got rid of them, had pocketed the money themselves.

Killigrew throws an interesting sidelight on the methods of financing these evacuations, when he mentions that he has had to go to the expense of hiring a ship himself to take the last batch of 200 invalids. He asked, on the ruling of the Lord Treasurer, that this money may be refunded to him by the company commanders; in other words, from the pay of the men themselves. At this time, and for the next two hundred years, the financial authorities acted on the principle that all the expenses of the soldier should be met from his pay. It was from this doctrine that the evil system of stoppages came into existence.

The fact that the sick were short of money evidently came to the notice of the Privy Council, for that august body issued an order to the effect, that if it seemed likely that a sick man would be ill for a lengthy period, he was to be paid up to date by his company, and sent home with a special pass showing which part of the country he came from, and to which Company in the Army he belonged (A.P.C., 1592, p. 101). The Privy Council knew their company commanders better than Killigrew did, and realized that the cause of the shortage of money was due to neglect by the men's captains.

Although the machinery of evacuation was primitive and moved with difficulty, nevertheless it moved, and a distinct advance had been made in the transportation of sick from the Continent; and the Government realized that they had a responsibility for the sick, and that it was its duty to get them home to England. On this side of the water improvements had also been made. It was not now thought to be sufficient to pay a man up, and to tell him that he was free to make his own way home, without considering whether he was fit to do so or not. Now before he was discharged it was somebody's duty to ascertain he was fit enough to travel and, if not, to take steps to get him so before he was sent away.

A further instance of this comes from Gosport in September 1593. On account of contrary winds a batch of eighty-eight sick men were landed unexpectedly at that town. Instead of being packed off home straight away, they were allowed to rest for two days at Gosport, and received pay during that period. Two died, and seventy-seven of the remainder were then given travelling money, calculated on the basis that they would only be able to walk eight miles a day. The remaining nine men were retained at Gosport until they had recovered from their illnesses (C.S.P.D., 1591–4, p. 374).

Furthermore, it had come to be realized, before the end of the century, that the community was under an obligation to those soldiers who had been
incapacitated in the service of their country. Means were taken for their relief, but this is too large a subject to be taken up in this paper, and must be left to some future date.

From now onwards it was the established practice to evacuate the sick from the theatre of war to the home base. In the French campaign of 1597, on account of the loss of Amiens, some of the English troops had to move in a hurry (Salisbury, vii, p. 102). They had to abandon their baggage and some of their sick; nevertheless, a large number of the sick were got away and evacuated to England. On this occasion it fell to the lot of Dover to look after most of them. The authorities of that town were put to a good deal of expense in caring for those who were unable to travel, in issuing money to those who could, and in burying those who died. They wrote to Cecil, asking him to reimburse them for these charges, and at the same time urged him to send them a supply of corn which had become scarce on account of the influx of the troops (ibid., p. 157).

In Ireland the same procedure was carried out, as various references in the Calendars of State Papers show. However, in 1599, it occurred to certain people that this was not an economical policy. Large numbers of men were sent back to England, who never returned to Ireland. Their places were taken by drafts of new and unseasoned men, who were not inured to the climate and conditions under which they had to live in that country, with indifferent food and poor lodgings. As a result they went sick in large numbers from the country disease—dysentery—and they, in their turn, were also evacuated to England; and so the vicious cycle went on. Why not stop all this, and institute Guest Houses or Hospitals, such as were to be found in Holland, where the sick could be looked after and nursed back to health? If this were done, the men, after their recovery, would be of three times the value to the Army than they had been before. They would have established an immunity to the prevailing disease, and would more easily become inured to the hardships that they would have to endure in such a primitive country. In this way the sick-rate would be brought down to a reasonable level; the Army would be kept up to strength; the Queen would be saved the expense of hiring transport for the evacuation of the sick, and also the cost of having to supply large numbers of new soldiers every year to take the place of those who had died, or had been invalided (C.S.P.I., 1599–60, pp. 334 and 350). To show how great this wastage was, it was generally accepted that any body of troops, six months after landing in Ireland, lost about 50 per cent of its strength. Although a certain proportion of this loss was due to men slipping back to England, or even deserting to the Irish, the greater part of the wastage could only be accounted for by death and disease.

Once the question of establishing hospitals was raised, it was given the most serious consideration, and at the highest level. In the Calendars of the Irish State Papers and the Carew Papers there are a number of papers bearing on this subject. It is, however, interesting to note that even earlier than this, in 1598, some of the leading citizens of Dublin proposed founding a military hospital in that city. At a cost of £1,000 a year they proposed to establish a hospital of fifty beds, which, according to the practice of the period, would
accommodate a hundred patients. A staff of half a dozen nurses and a surgeon were also to be provided (Cruickshank, p. 124). Nothing came of this scheme, and it was only when the matter was taken up by the Privy Council that anything concrete was decided upon. Lord Buckhurst proposed that a hospital should be provided in Ireland, fully equipped with everything necessary for the treatment of the sick and wounded (C.S.P.I., 1590–1600, p. 377). Lord Mountjoy, the Lord Deputy elect, went into greater details, and recommended that hospitals should be established at Cork, Dublin, and Drogheda. Each of these hospitals should be under the supervision of two unpaid overseers, "Honest householders of the town." The stipendiary staff was to consist of a Master at five shillings per diem, his servant at twelve-pence, and four women at sixpence apiece. The masters were to be either surgeons or physicians, and the hospitals were each to be provided with one hundred beds—presumably for two hundred patients (ibid., p. 448).

As a result of these discussions the Lord Deputy was instructed to erect four hospitals in Ireland (C.C.P., pp. 358–60). Whether all of these were established is uncertain, but a warrant was issued to certain aldermen of Dublin on May 28, 1600, to form a hospital in that city (C.S.P.I., 1600, p. 209), and in October of the same year there is a reference to certain hospitals being in existence in Ireland (ibid., p. 505).

About one of these hospitals a good deal of information is available. This was the one established at Derry, for the sick of the force operating in that area, under the command of Sir Henry Docwra. On the motion of Lord Buckhurst, at a meeting at Richmond at which Docwra was present, it was decided that Sir Henry should be instructed to establish a hospital at Lough Foyle (C.S.P.I., 1599–1600, p. 393). In March the Lord Deputy and his council issued a formal order to Docwra to build this hospital, with materials sent from England for that purpose (C.C.P., p. 375).

The institution of the hospital at Lough Foyle was a very wise move, as the men of that force fell sick in very large numbers. Unfortunately Docwra did not carry out his instructions as fully as he should have done, and only provided a unit of twenty-eight instead of a hundred beds, as had been ordered. His excuse for this omission was that, first he could not get the men to work, and secondly that he had not sufficient material to build a larger structure. It is possible that the general corruption of the times had something to do with it; and it may be that Docwra put money into his own pocket through this transaction: Be that as it may, the above were the excuses offered by Docwra when criticized for not providing a hospital of sufficient size to accommodate the large numbers that fell sick, in the force under his command (C.S.P.I., 1600, p. 406).

The evidence brought forward in this paper shows that important advances were made in the organization of the disposal of the sick and wounded during this century. The evacuation of casualties was controlled by the central authorities; and the individual sick soldier was no longer personally responsible for arranging for his return to his native land. That the State now undertook this duty must have been of benefit to the sick soldiers, and an ultimate...
economy to the country. Despite what has been stated by some earlier writers, who affirm that the English Army had no military hospitals until a much later date, it has been shown that such institutions, crude though they may have been, were authorized and established in Ireland before the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. True the date is just outside the sixteenth century; but these hospitals were a direct development of that century, and must be considered part and parcel of the medical service of that period.