

SOME NOTES ON SERVICE IN WEST AFRICA COMMAND

BY

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DURING the war a very large number of R.A.M.C. officers and other ranks served in West Africa and left it after some eighteen months to two years of somewhat suspended animation with very mixed feelings. No country is seen at its best in wartime, even if it is not itself in a zone of hostilities.

This Command is off the beaten track and has only grown up as a result of the war; it is felt, therefore, that a few facts about it might be of interest.

Headquarters, West Africa Command, is in Accra, Gold Coast. It is well situated on a site which had housed a large American wartime camp, and is now known as Giffard Camp. The Medical Staff (officers) consists of a D.D.M.S. (Brigadier), an A.D.A.H., an A.D.A.N.S., a D.A.D.M.S. (non-medical).

The Command is spread over four colonies. Nigeria District is far the biggest and has two hospitals. West Africa Military Hospital, Kaduna, in the north, with 150 beds, commanded by a Lieut.-Colonel who is also Senior Medical Officer, North-East Sub-District and administers Zaria to the north and Enugu to the south-east. West Africa Military Hospital, Lagos, is a hospital of 100 beds commanded by a Lieut.-Colonel (a new establishment) who is also Senior Medical Officer, Southern Nigeria, and is responsible for two out-stations on the road north—Ibadan and Abeokuta. In addition to the staff of these hospitals, the four stations already mentioned have one medical officer each.

The appointment of A.D.M.S. Nigeria District has, quite recently, been abolished.

THE GOLD COAST

West Africa Military Hospital, Accra, of 200 beds and a Families Wing of 20 beds, is commanded by a Lieut.-Colonel who is also Senior Medical Officer, Gold Coast District. The staff includes Specialists in Surgery, Medicine, Gynæcology, Pathology, and Radiology. There are three out-stations staffed by medical officers: Takoradi—the only port with a harbour: Kumasi, in Ashanti: and, well to the north, Tamale.

SIERRA LEONE

West Africa Military Hospital, Freetown, of 50 beds, commanded by the Senior Medical Officer, Sierra Leone and Gambia District, has a staff of 2 or 3 medical officers and has only one out-station—Daru. The hospital and military

station generally are excellently situated well up on the hillside. There are wonderful views in all directions.

THE GAMBIA

One Company of the Gambia Regiment is stationed at Bathurst. It is cared for by the Colonial Medical Service and visited occasionally by the Senior Medical Officer, Sierra Leone and Gambia District.

The Q.A.R.A.N.C. are represented by the A.D.A.N.S. at Command Headquarters and some thirty nursing officers spread over the four hospitals.

A glance at a map will show that the Command stretches over an immense area, approximately 1,700 miles from East to West, and involves the D.D.M.S., who endeavours to visit all units at least twice a year, in a considerable amount of air travel and very pleasant and interesting visits. The professional work is interesting and sometimes, taking the climate into consideration, somewhat arduous. Professionally the best liaison exists with the Colonial Medical Service, who provide specialists in emergencies and afford considerable help in every way, which the "Army" endeavours to repay as and when occasion allows.

Some remedial surgery is done on the African soldier, but operations on European personnel are limited to emergencies.

The physician meets a wealth of clinical material seldom seen elsewhere by the R.A.M.C. officer, and is constantly kept guessing over African cases. One very intelligent young member of the Royal College states that the obscure problems he constantly encounters have made him feel very humble.

For the ardent venereologist this Command is a paradise, if one may use this word in this connexion; there are many fallen angels.

ACCOMMODATION

Bachelors and those awaiting the arrival of their families are reasonably well housed and have comfortable Messes.

The question of married quarters is as big a problem here as almost everywhere else these days. The tour of duty in West Africa is now three years, with a break of three months' leave in the U.K., with free passages for families each way, after eighteen months. There is a married quarter available for the Officers Commanding Hospitals at Accra, Freetown and Kaduna, which the O.C. may hope to occupy almost immediately after arrival, but all other officers must take their turn in the general pool.

This works out to the effect that there is practically no hope of getting a Government married quarter during the first eighteen months.

Civilian houses can be obtained with difficulty, they are generally expensive and sometimes of a very poor standard. When an officer can satisfy his District Headquarters that he has obtained satisfactory accommodation, War Office are informed and his family are given passages. The general experience in this

respect is that "Where there's a will there's a way," but it is often a fairly grim way.

Trooping to and from West Africa is now entirely by air, but families can in certain circumstances be transported by sea if they so prefer.

CLIMATE

There is great variation in this respect, both according to the time of the year and the location of the station. Lagos, for instance, is hot and humid for most of the year, but can be very pleasant during August, September and October, and this more or less applies to Accra, where conditions are pleasanter from June to October. The mean temperature in Accra for most of the year is 87 to 90° maximum and 72 to 75° minimum, with relative humidity 80. The climate in stations in the Northern Territories of both colonies tends to resemble what we knew in India—hot and dry in the day, with reasonably cool nights.

During the Harmattan season in the winter, and particularly in the north, the atmosphere becomes uncomfortably dry, and a dust haze reduces visibility to a few hundred yards. It is cool, but many dislike it. The Harmattan wind blows from the Sahara. This state of affairs may last intermittently for two to three months.

The climate in "Hill Station," Sierra Leone, is quite reasonably pleasant except in the Rainy Season, which lasts for many months—May to October. The rainfall is prodigious and tends to limit all activities.

Everyone takes one tablet of Paludrine daily and the malarial incidence is low, but unfortunately it has been abundantly proved that this drug is not a true causal prophylactic against some West African strains of M.T. malaria. Europeans keep quite reasonably fit, but it is very difficult to regain one's sense of well-being after even a comparatively trivial illness.

With the exception of the Jos plateau (4,000 feet) in Nigeria, there is no hill station.

Children never look as well as in a temperate climate, but for the most part keep quite fit. They should never remain in the country after the age of 8. Education is practically limited to that afforded by the Army Schools.

The cost of living, despite the fact that drinks and smokes cost less than in the U.K. (a bottle of whisky costs £1 and 50 cigarettes just under 5s.), is very high. Food is reasonably good. The general standard of servants is considerably below that of India; there are good steward-boys and cooks, but they are hard to find.

Extra pay and allowances go a long way towards maintaining a state of solvency.

SPORT

Bushfowl are found almost everywhere and give quite good scatter gun shooting; in Nigeria and the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast one often gets a chance of guinea-fowl as well. The prospect of rifle shooting is not

bright, game can seldom be got from any station without going long distances, and then with difficulty. The West African is almost starved of meat, so that few deer or buffalo (Bush Cow) survive.

River fishing for giwan rua and tigerfish can be had, and sea fishing in Lagos for barracuta sometimes affords good sport, but it is not a fisherman's country.

Polo is available in Kaduna, Lagos and Accra. It costs from £10 to £15 per month to keep two ponies. It seldom reaches Indian standards, but one gets great exercise and a lot of fun.

Almost every station has a golf course, and despite the fact that they have their limitations this is a very popular game on the Coast. Tennis is available everywhere.

There is serious racing in Accra and Lagos. In the former station there is a very flourishing Turf Club with an electric tote dealing with thousands of pounds on each race, and a photo-finish apparatus. It has become customary for the D.D.M.S. to act as a steward. Taking into consideration the quality of the horseflesh, which is all indigenous, the racing is surprisingly good. There is a more amateur type of racing in Northern Nigeria, where the "Captains" have a bump, and even their wives.

A car is an essential. The roads in and around stations and some main roads are good, but the latterite surface that one often meets in the country is calculated to shake the most robust of cars to pieces in a short time. Petrol is unrationed.

Everywhere one goes on the Coast one finds a very pleasant social life and wonderful hospitality.

Altogether, if one discounts the climate and the many minor frustrations, it can be safely said that an R.A.M.C. officer or other rank serving in the West Africa Command has the possibilities of living an interesting and pleasant life. Now that the scope for foreign service has been so much reduced, there are many worse places in which to serve.