

HEALTH EDUCATION IN THE ASSEMBLY OF THE HONG KONG FORCE

BY

W.O.II J. SLOAN

Royal Army Medical Corps

“—and at least you will not be able to say you became a victim of sickness through ignorance—”

Extract from broadcast aboard H.M.T. “Lanca-shire” en route to Hong Kong—September 1949.

THE assembly of the British Army force in Hong Kong between June 1949 and February 1950 was accompanied by an interesting advancement in mass health education. For the first time—as far as is known—an effort was made to indoctrinate an entire force, not with scattered and inco-ordinated lectures but by skilled teams working in concert towards a definite objective.

The dominating theme of the project, both in planning and in execution, was to provide each man with such information as to enable him to maintain his positive health and to protect himself against preventable disease.

The task of preparing the officers and men for the “risks potential” in their new station devolved upon Medical Directorate at FARELF Headquarters in Singapore, and there it was decided to tackle the job in such a way that, as far as possible, the men would be lectured before their arrival in Hong Kong.

To achieve this it was necessary to put teams of experienced lecturers aboard the troopships to carry out their work on the voyage from Singapore to Hong Kong. During certain phases of the operation, however, it was not unusual for several ships to sail virtually on the same schedule and, as the availability of suitable instructors was very limited, it was necessary from time to time to vary the original intention and provide the instruction immediately after the arrival of units in Hong Kong. In one instance the lectures were given on the voyage between Ceylon and Singapore and in another, while the troops were delayed at Singapore due to damage to their ship.

The new force was being built up of regular soldiers and national servicemen: many of them had never been overseas before, and of those who had, few had been to the Far East. Therefore, to understand the perplexities of the job, it is necessary first of all to look at Hong Kong as it was fairly certainly visualized by the average British other rank. To him this was no posting to the desert or the jungle but a move to an oft-acclaimed high spot of the Empire.

He regarded Hong Kong as nothing more or less than a British city over-

seas, and, if the "old soldier" was to be believed, a first-rate military station. He had no knowledge of the proposed disposition of the force and the planners realized that it was going to be difficult indeed to convince him that such a place—as he imagined it—could present any threat to his health. There were also among the men those who displayed inherent indifference to the whole move. To them Hong Kong was just a "far away place." Of its geographic and climatic aspects they knew very little, of its social development and natural history they pretty certainly knew nothing at all.

Each lecture team—as far as possible—comprised an officer and two senior N.C.O.s, and the personnel selected had all spent some considerable time in the Far East. By a fortunate stroke a team of instructors from the School of Hygiene, Far East, had been active with the garrison force in Hong Kong during May and June and had in fact lectured to the first reinforcement battalion—1st Bn. Royal Leicestershire Regt.—on its arrival in the colony. This team was recalled to Singapore and embodied into the new scheme. Its up-to-the-moment appreciation of conditions and health hazards in the new operational area formed a good topical foundation on which the other teams could build.

The primary object of the work was clearly—if coldly—given in the original directive as "To provide instruction in hygiene to officers and men proceeding to Hong Kong." The subjects to be covered were:

- (a) Excremental diseases—cause and prevention.
- (b) Field Sanitation.
- (c) Personal Hygiene—including Bites and Stings, Skin Diseases and Venereal Disease.
- (d) Water and Health (Heat Exhaustion).
- (e) Sterilization of small quantities of water.
- (f) Scrub Typhus—transmission and prevention.
- (g) Malaria (Personal Protection).

In order to ensure unequivocal instruction on all troopships, the lecturers were collected together at the School of Hygiene, F.E., and briefed on the data to be imparted. The *modus operandi*, however, was left sufficiently fluid to allow each instructor to handle his particular subjects in his own individual style. This proved to be a wise policy and the lecturers quickly developed the ability to adjust their methods to suit the varied requirements of different audiences.

A comprehensive time-table was drawn up to enable the teams to cover the syllabus in four days and although many factors arose to cause the original schedule to be modified, the teams, often working in very difficult conditions, managed to impart all the material to the personnel on each ship.

In the light of experience gained on the earlier ships covered by the scheme, it was subsequently deemed advisable to temper the bare facts of health maintenance with interesting morsels of local information. The idea was to fit the new arrival smoothly into his future environment, and to give

him the benefit of applicable local knowledge even if sometimes it meant going beyond the generally accepted bounds of pure hygiene. This required a lot of forethought and careful planning as it was imperative to ensure that the importance of the subject matter was not diminished by the addition of topical adjectival material. The instructors quickly developed skilful methods of getting the Hong Kong picture over to the men without prejudice to the primary object of the task in hand. An explanation of the careless characteristics of native food and refreshment dealers; the danger of commercial ice in drinks, the threat from disreputable ice-cream dealers, the use of human faeces as manure by native farmers and the consequent danger in eating ill-prepared fresh vegetables, all helped to press home the excremental problem. Similarly the influence of climatic conditions and the irresponsibility of many local laundry contractors assisted the instructor in his talks on skin diseases.

In the lectures on rabies it was found beneficial to explain the widespread—but illegal—practice of killing dogs to satisfy the Chinese habit of eating “sweet flesh” (dog-meat) and the consequent defensive attitude that had been kindled in the animals, before explaining the stringent anti-rabies precautions of the colony.

Different team leaders used different methods, but generally speaking that was how the subjects were tackled. The three examples shown had counterparts in the remainder of the syllabus, but no matter how the material was dressed up, the whole idea was extremely popular with the men. Beneficial instruction was given in an interesting way: in a way, in fact, which often raised considerable enthusiasm in the men, so facilitating their appreciation and assimilation of the important facts. As each course progressed audiences began to regard the team personnel as advisers rather than instructors and a relationship something akin to golfer and caddie sprang up between them. Questions were always encouraged. The men usually responded well although there was, occasionally, the megalomaniac who wanted to relate some highly coloured previous experience. The instructors tactfully contrived to show even this type of man that the future and not the past was the criterion.

During the massing of the force teams worked aboard 9 troopships. One of the teams lectured to troops from 5 other ships immediately after their arrival in Hong Kong, and to the complement of one troopship while she was delayed in Singapore. In all 14,056 officers and men were covered by the scheme.

It is difficult, at this stage, to form any definite conclusions as to the lasting benefit which the force derived from the work. Nevertheless, many interesting points were revealed and a great deal of useful data built up.

COMMENTS

- (a) The circumstances of this military movement provided a unique opportunity for mass health education to a very large force.
- (b) The methods used by the teams were original, but the success achieved justified any licence which may have been taken.

(c) There is a lamentable lack of general health knowledge among the troops. For example only about one man in 10 knows why he has been vaccinated or inoculated. The question "Why were you vaccinated?" produced such unexpected answers as . . . protection against Syphilis . . . Polio . . . Influenza and Diphtheria!! In addition to this factual ignorance it is obvious that the progressive public services of Britain are taken so much for granted that the average adolescent no longer troubles to enquire how or why they function.

(d) In spite of an acceptance of the circumstances in (c) it is certain that there is a big place—in fact a vital need—for general health education in military training.

(e) The significant factor in this education is the way in which the subject is put over to the men. It must never be drab, ex-libris, or a casual stand-by for filling in blank spaces in an otherwise well-planned programme. It cannot be handled by a reluctant or disgruntled stop-gap instructor. Only the enthusiastic lecturer, combining knowledge, showmanship, to a degree, and a genuine understanding of the man-in-the-ranks can hope to attain anything like maximum success. To strike the right note may require the preparation of a separate lecture for each different group of men, but the reaction which the individual touch promotes is well worth the effort. In other words talk "gunners' talk" to gunners—artisans' language to those of the R.E. and R.E.M.E., etc.—and with the infantry audience it is surprising how well hygiene and "fighting talk" can go together. In this scheme the interest of the men surprised everyone and it is instructive to investigate the reasons.

(1) Everyone aboard ship had to attend, and when the men saw the officers at the lectures they were convinced of the importance of the material.

(2) The instructors, boarding the ship in the East, brought with them an air of local authority, and the general view seemed to be, that as they were the men on the spot, they must be worthy of attention.

(3) The subject matter was skilfully dressed in a fondant of current topics.

(4) It was put over in such a way that it sounded like a consideration of the personal problems of each individual, and there is nothing the British soldier appreciates so much as someone to discuss his difficulties.

(5) The talks were usually illustrated by demonstrations and exhibits. These exhibits, which included specimens of poisonous reptiles, spiders, scorpions, and marine life, etc., never failed to raise a lot of interest. They may be regarded as "props" but they proved most useful. The feeling was that their value as simulants of interest was high—and of course such a display was not extraneous to the course for Hong Kong, after all, has a not insignificant reptile population.

(6) The talks were always given in language which caused neither embarrassment to the educated nor confusion to those of meaner intellect.

(7) Careful and thoughtful planning at every level can do a lot to ensure success. This was vividly revealed when, by chance, an all-Scots team went aboard the "Empire Trooper" to give instruction to an almost completely

Scottish complement. The fact was hailed as a triumph of thoughtful organization and the team in consequence started off with a big advantage.

(8) The attitude of the officers was variable in the extreme. Some senior officers were rather concerned that such instruction coming just before landing might tend to make the men over-cautious to the detriment of military performance—a circumstance not substantiated by subsequent events. Other officers—in spite of the lectures—obviously underestimated Hong Kong and quite openly said that they thought the preparations were over-elaborate. Fortunately both groups were in the minority and most officers were agreed that the scheme filled a most dangerous gap in the present troop movement organization—quite a number in fact declared it to be one of the most important developments they had encountered in recent years. Few of the medical officers going to the Colony in regimental appointments had been overseas before and they were particularly appreciative of the help and advice they could get from the teams.

The young junior officers were probably the hardest nuts to crack. Many of them were going overseas for the first time and an otherwise admirable spirit of adventure rather tended to dim their assessment of this aspect of life at their new station. A great deal depended on the lead they got from their senior officers—in other words, if the senior officer viewed the idea with enthusiasm then that view percolated to the different levels of his unit.

(9) It was, however, among the experienced warrant officers and senior N.C.O.s that the work found its most ardent supporters. They were the ones most closely engaged in the management of the men, and because they saw the talks as helpful advice for the troops—advice that they were not in a position to offer—they gave the teams every assistance.

(10) The move was spread over several months and it was possible to follow up the instructions by visits to units after they had settled down in Hong Kong. The fine reception which team members invariably received clearly showed the lasting appreciation of their work.

One warrant officer who had been required to take his company into a virgin area soon after landing said that his men had carried out their domestic, sanitary and health tasks in a way he had never experienced before, "Because for the first time, they knew why!"

(11) The efforts of the teams, who were after all performing a new task, gave rise not unexpectedly to much discussion and healthy argument. Many constructive suggestions were offered. The majority of listeners thought the scheme should be extended over a longer period than four days. Others asked that it be extended to include talks by "Education" and "Intelligence" on their particular aspects of the new stations. Not everyone was in complete agreement with the syllabus and wanted certain subjects gone into more fully, even to the sacrifice of others. The suggestions were many and varied but probably the greatest justification of the syllabus as written was in the fact that not a single accusation of persiflage was received.

(12) One highly significant factor emerged. Whilst the ideal men to

handle a job like this are doctors who are good lecturers, it is definite that a high standard can be reached using trained laymen instructors who know their subjects and have the ability and showmanship to impart them effectively to others. Outstanding success was attained by a young Scots corporal who without aspiring to brilliant vocabulary, got his audiences round to the right points of view by exploiting the "common touch" and by using the colloquialisms and language which the men understood best. One outstanding example of his ability in this direction is particularly worthy of mention here. For his first lecture aboard a new ship he found himself confronted with a company of hardy experienced Scots. Climbing on to the packing case that was to serve as his platform he was apparently unaware of the passive hostility in his audience. Straightening himself up he looked at them quietly and then said: "Right! Put the razors away." The effect was excellent, and the instructor established, by the use of a few well chosen words. He knew his subject, but just as important, he knew his men.

This paper has been prepared within a few months of the completion of the scheme. It is intended only as a record of the work undertaken, the methods employed, and the reactions and comments of the students as they were noted by the instructors.

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