EXERCISE “MEDICAL RUBICON”
D.G.A.M.S. Annual Exercise, 1952

BY

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The subjects of this exercise were withdrawal and the assault crossing of a major river. The first choice was dictated by the subject of the War Office exercise “Cassius,” and the Director-General made the second because he felt that it was time we turned from defence and withdrawal to the attack, and because he wanted to take advantage of our good luck in having Mytchett Lake on our doorstep at the Field Training School. Only a general account of the exercise is given here, and, as I did in my article on “Medical Mushroom,” I would recommend you to read the detailed report which will be sent to those who attended the exercise, and to various units and H.Q.s (1).

A series of playlets and demonstrations dealt with the withdrawal at G.H.Q., Corps and Divisional level, and Lieut.-Colonel John Watts gave a thought-provoking lecture on surgical problems of withdrawal, which were amongst the points thrashed out in the interesting discussions.

When the curtain rose on the first playlet we realized that the Army Medical Directorate can claim at least one expert—Captain Alan Critchley, a make-up magician who had most beautifully disguised Colonel John Crosse for the part of General Predecessor, the D.M.S. of our Army Group; and Scrooge’s friends the Spirits of Christmas, abetting Captain Critchley, seemed to have transformed the colonel’s cautious soul, as we listened to the generous provision which he expected the War Office to make for the medical order of battle of the army group. He was a dignified and attractive old character, poor Sammy Predecessor. Even his critics agreed that he was no fool. One felt that he was not thinking only of himself and of the bottom of page 3 of the Army List when he assured his D.D.M.S., Colonel John Douglas, that he was fully covered. But that saturnine if slightly sycophantic staff officer clearly began to “hae his doots”—Scots
expression for “if the old man thinks he’ll get away with all this he’s nuts”—and soon the ‘phone bell rang. It was the D.G. and from one end of the conversation we knew that the D.M.S. had come unstuck, and as soon as we met his relief, General Successor, we realized that we still had our old hard-headed Crosse to bear. Fortified by a personal letter from the D.G., who reminded him of the needs of other theatres, he proceeded, as directed, to prune Sammy’s orbat. Clearly he agreed with Napoleon that if success in war could be attained without taking risks military glory would be at the disposal of very mediocre personality; and clearly he was no such personality as he strode over a large cloth model of most of Europe explaining his plan, with his D.D.M.S.—the same obliging Douglas—riding him on a cautious snaffle. The ‘phone bell rang again, but this time the curtain beat it in a photo finish, and the Director-General, opening the discussion, asked the audience to decide which of the two D.M.Ss. they would have sacked.

This important and difficult stage of the exercise—pre-mobilization planning—was written and acted by these two experts. Lieut.-Colonel Ahern could never quite decide if it were “better SD” to refer to them as “the colonels John” or “the Colonel Johns.” They had gravely doubted if so stodgy a subject could be made interesting. Colonel Douglas compared it to the checking of a laundry list. But the lively discussion was the reward of their hard work.

When in due course we met the D.M.S. again it was seen that neither general was considered to have got all the answers right. The D.M.S.—General Survivor was the name suggested for him by Colonel Walter Moursund—was none other than that cold, calculating character Douglas, who had presumably picked the brains of both and produced an acceptable compromise.

Many familiar actors from past stupendous productions at Mytchett appeared in the withdrawal playlets. About sixty inches of the 6 ft. 2½ in. of our star performer Staff-Sergeant Michael O’Sullivan were on view in startling nudity when he appeared in lederhosen as a F.S.S. sergeant disguised as a Bavarian waiter, with Major Jack Irvine in rouge and long blonde plaits as a ravishing Bavarian madchen. If this is not enough to make you all read the report, then the art of advertisement has no place in military training.

In the withdrawal demonstration we saw what a bulldozer could do for us in three hours’ work, and we caught a glimpse of the Quartermaster, Captain Ted Gillard, as the chaplain, looking, as his Commandant said, more like a padre than any padre possibly could. The sort of treatment which a field ambulance company might have to undertake if cut off for several hours was being carried out and the casualties being embarked not only in storm boats and assault boats but on improvised rafts and floats, such as have been described in previous numbers of this Journal. (2) The simplest float of all was just a few bundles of hay or brushwood wrapped in a tarpaulin, which will remain buoyant for hours and can be used to take a cable across the river, or even to ferry casualties across in emergency. Some of the spectators were as surprised by the efficacy of this method as I was myself when it was first shown to me during the war. Yet those of us who had to read Xenophon’s *Anabasis* at school should have known all
about it, for it is related there how men of Cyrus' army crossed the Euphrates to forage for provisions. "They took the skins which they used to cover their tents and stuffed them with hay, then folded and sewed them up to keep the water from the hay." (3) The upholders of a classical education tell us that it is good brain training, but I must say that I wish they had not stuffed the *Anabasis* into me at a time when the sufferings, dissensions, and glories of the immortal Ten Thousand were merely a boring recital of stades and parasangs. The brilliant little portraits of those contrasting types of military leaders, Cyrus, Clearchus, and Proxenus, and Xenophon's unassuming, almost casual revelation of the development of his own outstanding qualities of leadership in difficult desert and mountain campaigning were quite lost on a preparatory schoolboy. Careful attention to Xenophon at a more receptive age might also have been of actual material advantage to me; for had I read his advice on buying horses before I met a certain blarneying, horse-coping greenjacket I might have saved myself quite a lot of money and sweat.

Getting back to "Rubicon"—it was when we turned from the withdrawal to the river crossing that the significance of the title became plain. In 49 B.C. the Rubicon was the scene not of a major battle but of a political decision—it was a turning point. In any future war before we could mount an offensive involving the passage of a great river we should have to have tipped the balance of military power decisively in our favour. It would be a turning point and there would be no looking back. So in the exercise, having withdrawn behind our river line and got our breath back, our thoughts turned to the great day when we would attack and drive back the Saturnians behind their frontier.

We now saw the D.M.S. of the Army Group dictating to a garrulous Irish clerk—Staff-Sergeant O'Sullivan again reverted to private at his own request to evade further training with improvised floats which didn't—a directive to the medical services ordering them to begin training for river crossing operations. They were to start by studying the lessons of past campaigns; and to the sound of "Soldiers of the Queen" the curtain rose on a very senior lady of the Army Nursing Service in Boer War days—Miss Honeysuckle. Into her sitting-room came the surgeon-general fresh from the trying experiences of the unsuccessful battle at the Modder river about which she keenly cross-examined him. Miss Honeysuckle, beautifully acted by Major Dorothy Hunt, was, except for four useful and decorative stenographers, the only contribution of the Q.A.R.A.N.C. to this year's exercise. They had no opportunity of explaining as they did last year how from C.C.S. level the work done by able-bodied R.A.M.C. nursing orderlies could be done much better by a slightly larger number of Grable-bodied Q.A.R.A.N.C. nursing orderlies. But Miss H. held high the standard, and showed that even in the last century, when they were still mere women, they liked to have a finger in the forward medical pie. With a few shrewd questions she revealed that the poor general's plan for the Modder battle, if indeed it could be called a plan, was most haphazard. He was quite glad to be recalled to action, and the scene closed with a little song, which our actors would I think agree could more justly be described as recitative with pianoforte continuo. As I knew that
Major John Neal, the editor of this Journal, is a very keen historian. I asked him to ferret out the facts for this playlet. He not only did this but wrote and acted in the playlet, which went with a swing and prepared the audience to endure a long lecture on river crossings in 1945—the Rhine and the Elbe—given by myself. The river crossing demonstration fully justified the D.G.'s faith in Mytchett Lake for aquatic sports, which was always much stronger than my own.

It was a high-light of the exercise to see our flotilla of stormboats, DUKWs, and a buffalo cruising about on the lake, the amphibians then beaching and driving past us into a field where the loads they could carry were demonstrated. The commentary during this demonstration was kindly given by Major J. A. G. Abraham, M.C., O.C. 116 Amphibian Company, R.A.S.C., who had brought the amphibians and had given us invaluable help in laying on the demonstration. Whilst the audience were being given trips in the various craft and amphibians a crescendo of din was traced to a stormboat in which a party of airborne types headed by Colonel Graeme Warrack were apparently searching for some sort of sound barrier to break through.

On the last morning a discussion on the planning of major river crossings in the future was introduced by a dialogue between two officers who had been involved in the planning at 21 Army Group H.Q. for the Rhine Crossing—Colonel John Douglas and Lieut.-Colonel John Smith, who now commands 155 (Lowland) Field Ambulance, T.A. This was followed by an entrancing lecture on “The Medical Officer as a Prisoner of War,” given by Major Alan Woolley. To be taken prisoner is a fate which every soldier must strive to avoid. Major Woolley showed us how for the doctor prisoner it can be made a rewarding and ennobling experience, because he alone can make an outstanding contribution not only to the physical but to the moral welfare of the prisoner community. You can read this most interesting lecture in the exercise report, and you will find it very well worth reading.

The last serial before the Director-General’s closing address was presented by a team of Territorial Army officers captained by Brigadier Alan Crockford, and representing the R.M.O., the field ambulance, F.D.S., C.C.S., General Hospital, and A.D.M.S.s. of infantry and airborne divisions. Each briefly explained their problems in training and the kind of help they had received and hoped to receive from the regular army. After some of the points had been answered by A.M.D. representatives, the D.G. assured the team that the whole subject would be carefully and sympathetically examined. Indeed, although the opening of what the War Office calls a “BM,” entitled “Territorial Training Troubles,” may not exactly herald the millenium for the T.A., the regular R.A.M.C. will continue to do all they can to earn the kind things which Brigadier Crockford’s Brains Trust said about them.

Compared with previous years many more officers attended with a much higher percentage of Territorial officers, and it was for that reason that the exercise was shorter and was held at a week-end. The extra numbers, of course, threw a bit of a strain on the Army School of Health, and we had to substitute a buffet supper for the usual exercise dinner. When these administrative problems
threatened to get out of hand a source of great strength to the organizers was the cheerful imperturbability of Colonel Harold Knott, who refused to admit that anything was impossible for the Army School of Health.

The staging of the exercise was another triumph for Lieut.-Colonel Ahern and the Field Training School, whose hard work began many months before the exercise.

An account in the Journal of the D.G.'s exercise, a practice started by my predecessor, seems likely to become a tradition. I am not at all sure that it is a good one. The official reports of these exercises must usually for one reason or another be classified as "Secret," and it is probably wiser that many of our doings should by that official label be shrouded from the prying eyes of wives and such. This word "Exercise" has a fine, manly, military ring, and as our loved ones wave us off to the wars they may so far have been able to suppress any unworthy doubts caused by the fact that we never seem to take our camp beds. At least one keen exercise attender (a surgeon not a hundred miles from Aldershot as we archly say when we are sure almost everyone will know whom we mean) strikes an occasional blow for freedom as he strides off in stout boots with map-board, compass, binoculars and shooting stick. But all too soon they may realize that we are merely required to convey ourselves from our office chairs to other seats more or less comfortable according to our rank and luck, and then to convey the impression that our brains at least are furiously active.

I am afraid that this account, with its references to playlets about this and playlets about that, may well bring closer the day when we return to our homes wearing our most top-secretive empire-building expressions, to be greeted with "Well, darling, did you enjoy the charades?"

REFERENCES