

The Organization of the Army Medical Service in War Time.

BY

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IT is highly desirable that every Nurse in the Nursing branch of the medical profession should have a clear idea of the system of the medical aid to the wounded soldier in war time. Nurses from their professional training are better able to appreciate the needs and the difficulties of the Military Medical Service than ordinary persons who know nothing of the strain and wear and tear of looking after masses of sick and wounded on the battle-field far away from England.

With what pleasure, therefore, do I accept an opportunity of explaining, in a very brief and meagre manner, the broad outline of our war system.

No shot was fired in Europe by the English army from the 18th June, 1815—Waterloo Day—up to the 20th September, 1854, when Alma was fought.

In these forty forgetful years of peace England and the army had never experienced the shock of European battle, nor felt the difficulty of dealing with hundreds of broken-down and wounded soldiers in a campaign.

The Crimean war was a most bitter awakening. 22,000 men perished in the campaign, viz. : 18,000 by disease and some 3,000 by wounds.

Our arrangements, in 1854, for dealing with wounded and with the sick were both wretched, unorganized, hopelessly undermanned, and ended in bitter failure and loss of life.

Our arrangements for wounded failed at the Alma; our arrangements for sick failed at Scutari, the great Base Hospital opposite Constantinople, where all the sick from the Crimea were sent.

Both places failed because the Medical Service of 1854 was a weakly organized, subdivided corps, without authority, without any trained staff of subordinates, and quite ignorant of the needs and demands of how to clear a battlefield of wounded, and how to organize a Hospital to treat 4,000 sick at one time.

In those days all medical officers were subdivided into regimental groups, and were under the command of regimental commanding officers; they were themselves without command power, and had no Medical Staff Corps working under their orders to carry out their wishes.

Hospitals were then small Regimental Hospitals, where 20 or 30 men of a single regiment were cared for, and resembled more a series of small Cottage Hospitals than the general Hospitals needed to meet the demands of war. This regimental subdivision enfeebled the medical service and rendered it powerless on the battlefield.

Wounded men at the Alma were carried back by men of their regiments to little Regimental Hospitals in the rear of each regiment.

Thus, although the total number of wounded was not great—some 1,500 men—all the regiments were burdened by the wounded, and a rapid advance after the enemy was greatly interfered with.

There was practically no organization whatever in the Medical Service ready to cope with the wounded. Had it not been for the fleet which was sailing along the shore of the Crimea, on the right of the allied armies, it is difficult to say what would have happened to the wounded. As it was they were put on board the fleet and were carried away to Scutari for Hospital treatment.

Four hundred Russian wounded were left on the field in charge of one medical officer and his private soldier servant—this officer was Dr. Thomson of the 44th Foot. Can any one imagine what that officer's feelings must have been when he was left on the field and the whole army marched on towards Sebastopol.

At Scutari, the great Base Hospital affairs were in a terrible plight. There were not more than 10 doctors for 2,500 sick and wounded; and, in January, 1885, 1,000 patients died in the Hospital. There was no corps of orderlies, a defective commissariat, no transport, and a body of medical officers accustomed to small Regimental Hospitals endeavouring to deal with 4,000 sick and wounded.

So long as England lasts, the name of Scutari will never be forgotten, and, in the darkness and gloom of its early failure, one name stands out through all the ages, viz., that of Florence Nightingale, who, with a band of Nurses, came to nurse the sick and wounded. Her coming may be looked on as the uprising of the whole nation against the inefficiency and wretchedness of the official help given for the sick.

Gradually, after months of suffering, order and method began to exist; and, by the summer of 1855, the Hospital became a model of organization. This, however, could not recall the thousands of lives lost in the early days of the Campaign.

After the Crimean war, reforms began, the medical service was improved in pay and power, a corps of orderlies was raised to act as Nurses and staff in the Hospital; and, after the campaign of Sadowa in 1866, and the Franco-German war in 1870, a complete remodelling was made of the English Medical Service. This reform began in 1873, and is still in progress.

All regimental appointments were abolished, and the Medical Service was unified as a single corps, and the Regimental Hospitals abolished. Command power was given to the medical officers, and a complete system of hospital and ambulance arrangements introduced into the army.

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