

Volume 1 Section 166

Medical Facilities

The RAMC and Nursing Services

Introduction

The Army has its own medical services and an ability to both treat men in the field and establish a network of hospitals behind the lines geared to restoring a man to fighting condition as soon as possible.

The doctors and surgeons, together with medical aides and stretcher bearers are organised by the Royal Army Medical Corps. The nurses were organised by the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) which was established in 1902, assisted by the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and by volunteers from both the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance.

The RAMC - A brief history

Following the restoration of Charles II in 1660, the Standing Regular Army was formed. For the first time, a career was provided for a medical officer, both in peacetime and war. The Army was formed entirely on a regimental basis and a medical officer with a warrant officer as his assistant was appointed to the regiment which also provided a hospital. The regimental basis of appointment for medical officers continued until it was abolished in 1873.

It was in Queen Anne's reign that the great Duke of Marlborough instituted what were known as "marching hospitals" and "flying hospitals" (somewhat comparable to the present day field ambulance or medical regiment) to accompany his armies. But it was not until about 1812 when the Duke of Wellington was commanding the army fighting Napoleon's forces in Spain and Portugal (portrayed in the TV series "Sharpe") that some kind of organised medical service was born.

During the 40 years, which followed Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo on 18th June 1815, the British Army forgot the lessons it had so painfully learned during the Peninsular War. This neglect culminated in the disastrous medical scandal of the Crimean War when provision of medical support were entrusted to members of the wealthy and aristocratic classes who regarded soldiering as a hobby, wore highly exotic uniforms and gave no thought to the medical or logistic support to the army. As a consequence the responsibility fell to "Civil Departments" who were largely untrained in war. Emerging from this fiasco was the formation in 1855 of "The Medical Staff Corps" composed of "...men able to read and write, of regular habits and good temper and of a kindly disposition". In 1857 the Medical Staff Corps was reorganised into the "Army Hospital Corps" a title it held until 1884 when it reverted to its former name.

It was in 1898 that all ranks became fused together into a single Corps. Queen Victoria, on the 23 June 1898 added her forthright signature to the top right hand corner of a Royal Warrant which signified her will and pleasure that a "Corps be formed styled the Royal Army Medical Corps". Thus on 1st July 1898 the Corps was born.

The Headquarters Company

Part of the Headquarters Company of each battalion was a medical officer (usually ranking as a Captain) assisted by an NCO and a staff of orderleys who usually doubled up as the regimental band. The way the system operated is described in section 164.

Hospitals

There were five types of hospitals run by the RAMC:-

First - each division had a mobile field hospital which was located in their rear area and commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel who had a staff of surgeons, nurses and orderleys. The nurses were commanded by a Matron who usually held an equivalent rank to Major and whose staff of sisters who held the rank of Lieutenant. There were also a large number of junior nurses and nursing assistants and heavy work was done by male orderley's. They operated in a network of tents and could move to a new location very quickly.

Second - there was a network of Base Hospitals, mostly located along the coast with a similar staff organisation but on a much larger scale and not mobile. They were usually located in large houses and hotels but occasionally took over former civilian hospitals.

Third - Back in England was a network of Military Hospitals which ranged from rooms in a country house or school to a fully equipped major hospital.

Fourth - Mostly in private country houses, there were a number of convalescent hospitals run by volunteers with a minimal medical staff.

Finally there were a number of highly specialist centres catering to a very specific condition or treatment

Also there were a number of hospitals run by the Red Cross or St John Ambulance or the VAD. (see sections 162 and 163)

Many orders of nuns also organised hospitals and many men were treated in ordinary French hospitals or by those run by Allied armies

Royal Berkshire Medical Officers

Although belonging to the RAMC most of the medical officers assigned to the several battalions of the Royal Berkshire Regiment were treated as if they belonged fully to the Regiment.

Their names generally appear in the War Diary

when they were appointed or left and occasionally in between. Those recorded are:-

1st Battalion

Lt F Batt
 Capt S D Large
 Lt Lovell to 8/7/15
 Lt Murphy from 8/7/15

2nd Battalion

Capt A P O'Connor

1st/4th Battalion

2nd/4th Battalion

Lt K D Bean

5th Battalion

Lt D H Stacey
 Capt W M Lonsdale killed 25/8/18

6th Battalion

Capt Harold Ackroyd killed 8/17

7th Battalion

Lt A K Barrett

8th Battalion

Lt P M O Gibbon
 Lt F Moor to 30/11/17
 Capt C H C Byrne missing 27/3/18
 Capt W H Ferguson (10/18)

Capt Ackroyd VC

One of the Royal Berkshire's Victoria Crosses was won by one of its medical officers, Capt H Ackroyd, who was attached to the 6th Battalion and who, on 1st August 1917, treated the wounded under heavy fire with great care and attention. He had already won the Military Cross and was killed a few days later.