

Report concerning the aid and comfort given by the Sanitary Commission to sick soldiers found at the railroad station / by Frederick N. Knapp.

Contributors

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SANITARY COMMISSION.

No. 29.

REPORT

CONCERNING THE

Aid and Comfort given by the Sanitary Commission

TO

SICK SOLDIERS FOUND AT THE RAILROAD STATION.

BY FREDERICK N. KNAPP,

SPECIAL RELIEF AGENT.

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Office of Sanitary Commission,

TREASURY BUILDING, Sept. 23, 1861.

TO FRED. LAW OLNSTED, ESQ.,

Secretary of the Sanitary Commission :

SIR : In answer to your request, I submit the following report, as Special Relief Agent of the Sanitary Commission :

The main purpose had in view in this agency has been to lessen the hardships to which the ignorance of the sick volunteers and their officers of the forms and methods of government make them subject while in the city of Washington, and to provide for certain wants of the volunteers, when detached from their regiments, for which the government arrangements had been inadequate, and which the regular inspectors of the Commission, in their visits of camps and hospitals, could not attend to.

Practically, the chief duty has been—

First. To supply to the sick men of the regiments arriving here such medicines, food, and care as it was impossible for them to receive

in the midst of the confusion, and with the lack of facilities, from their own officers.

Second. To furnish suitable food, lodging, care, and assistance to men discharged from the general hospitals, or from their regiments, but who are often delayed for a number of days in the city before they obtain their papers and pay.

Third. To give assistance and information, and secure transportation to men who arrive at the station house in small numbers, and want to find and join their regiments. Some of these are men accidentally left behind; some are men who have been detained by order for a few days at hospitals in Philadelphia or Baltimore.

The facilities for carrying out this aim of the Commission have been, until recently, very deficient. There was no fit place at the reception buildings where sick men could be made comfortable; no means near at hand for providing such food as was needed. Government did not recognize the necessity or fitness of such provision.

On August 9, General Mausfield issued an order, directing the officers in charge of the reception buildings to furnish all facilities in their power to members of the Sanitary Commission who wished to give comfort to the sick soldiers. But the facilities in their power were small, as, at that time no cooking was permitted there; except hard bread, only uncooked rations were supplied; and there were no beds allowed in the building, as its object was simply for "reception" of troops.

The most that we could do, therefore, was to have a place assigned us—part of the smaller building, the "Cane Factory"—where we put the sick as they came in, separate from the crowd of the other building; and here we had a pile of blankets, from which we made such beds as we could, and then brought tea and coffee and supplies for the men from the restaurant in the station house, or, more often, from a boarding-house on Pennsylvania avenue.

When the regiments whose sick men we had charge of went to camp, they usually carried their sick with them, unless the men seemed too feeble to go; in which case we saw that the men were taken to a gene-

ral hospital, or else we kept them in charge a few days longer, until the regimental hospital could be put into comfortable condition.

Sometimes the sick of a regiment just arrived occupied a separate passenger car, and remained in the car until the regiment moved; in that case we supplied them with tea and coffee and needed refreshment in the car.

Often the surgeon of the regiment had no medicine at hand for the sick, it being locked up in his chest, which could not be reached in the baggage car; in that case we obtained for him such medicines as immediate needs required.

When we found men from general or regimental hospitals waiting to get their discharge papers filled out, and for their pay, we took them in charge, sheltered and fed them, and if they needed the help, went with them to the different offices where their papers had to be presented.

When we found men who were too weak to bear the fatigue of going with their papers, we took charge of the papers ourselves, had them filled up, obtained the signature of the men to blank receipts for money due to them by government, and thus, by consent of the paymaster, received the money, and paid it over to the men. This privilege could only be granted in cases of absolute necessity.

When we found men seeking their regiments, we directed them (from a record of the location of the various regiments kindly furnished us by Major Williams;) if they needed a little money, we gave it to them; if they were weak, obtained an order for an ambulance, or an army wagon, or a railroad pass, by which they were sent to their respective stations.

In many cases, men who were discharged left their regimental hospitals sadly in need of clean garments, especially shirts, stockings, and drawers; in such cases, before they started for home, we made the men clean and comfortable.

When we found men at the reception buildings in need of medical treatment, but not sick enough to be sent to the general hospital, we called in a physician, unless their own surgeon could be obtained.

As a general rule, we were each day at the station—early in the morning, late in the evening, and at mid-day, and whenever the arrival of a regiment was expected.

The men in charge of the reception buildings, and of the rations, and those who had in charge the locating the newly-arrived regiments, were kind, attentive, and ready to co-operate with us, so far as it was in their power, and in accordance with their instructions.

About the 20th of August, government ordered cooked rations (cold meats and bread and hot coffee) to be ready for the regiments on their arrival at the station. This afforded some relief to men who were not well, but did not furnish the food needed by the sick, leaving to us still most of our work to do.

On Friday evening, August 30th, the provost marshal visited the reception buildings, and issued orders that no men going or coming be allowed to remain in the buildings longer than six hours, as the buildings were for the reception of troops, not for hospital purposes. This obliged us to provide immediately some other place where we could take such soldiers as, from the necessities of the cases, required more than six hours of shelter or care.

We fortunately obtained part of a house near the station, on Capitol Hill, (the second house from the railroad, on the street running from the rear of the station to the Capitol,) and on Saturday night it was furnished with beds and all conveniences for the accommodation of thirty to forty men; and that night there were twenty-one invalid soldiers resting there.

The rooms of this house are large and high, and are well ventilated. One room is 19 by 33 feet, and 10 feet high; the other room 19 by 33 feet, and 13 feet high; each room with four windows opening to the floor. There is a broad piazza to each room. There is a front entrance independent of the rest of the house, and stairs have been built from the rear window down to the out-buildings beyond. It is hired by the month at a reasonable rent; and an arrangement has been made with the woman who lives in the house—a most judicious, worthy, and kindly person—to take care of the rooms, and to furnish such board

and general supplies to the men as we may order; also to furnish all additional care to those who may require it. We have a store-room there, with such clothing and comforts as may be demanded. An arrangement has been made with Dr. Grymes, an experienced physician living near by, to call at the house every morning and evening, and prescribe for such men as require treatment. Rules in regard to neatness, behavior, &c., have been prepared, to which the men received there are obliged to conform.

Our own store-room furnished much of what was needed to fit up the rooms.

Some of the men taken to this house require only the shelter and beds for the night, and then in the morning take their rations with their regiment at the reception buildings. Others, more seriously sick, or just out of hospitals, need to remain and be cared for longer.

It is not the plan to consider this, in any sense, a *hospital*, but only as a place where the weak can rest and be cared for, and the sick remain awhile until they are otherwise provided for; and also where those returning home, who have no claim upon hospital or camp or station-house, may be sheltered if obliged to remain near the station more than six hours. Therefore, as a general thing, men will remain in the house but one, two, or three days at any given time. We call the place "The Soldiers' Home."

I will note down in brief some points from the journal which I have kept.

Friday, Aug. 9th. Go early to the station-house. Find in a passenger car 36 sick men of an Indiana regiment, which had arrived in the night; found the car hot and very dirty, of necessity; water close beyond use or endurance; one surgeon is absent up town for medicine, (medicine chest is under baggage,) the other surgeon has gone to get leave to take to the hospital some of the sick. The men had eaten nothing for 24 hours, except hard bread and water; nothing else could be obtained.

As the first work, I employed a black man to reduce the water closet to a sanitary state, and some other parts of the car likewise; then got at

a boarding-house two pails full of tea, and a half bushel of bread and butter, for distribution, with some other little comforts for those most sick. These men were left in the car from no neglect, but because the reception buildings were too much crowded for the sick to be put there. In about an hour the surgeons returned; they were attentive to the men, and seemed grateful for our kindness to them; they desired themselves to have provided for the comfort of their sick, but did not know which way to turn. Soon the army wagons and ambulances took the sick men to join in the move toward an encampment. But the poor fellows were fed.

Saturday, Aug 10th. After visiting the newly-arrived regiments, and giving some comforts to the sick, I found around the station-house on New Jersey avenue thirty-six men of a Massachusetts regiment, who had dropped out of the ranks the afternoon before, as they moved from below Alexandria to Bladensburg. It had been an intensely hot afternoon, and the march was evidently forced, (some of the officers were mounted.) I found upon enquiry that one man dropped out beyond the Long Bridge, and was left in charge of two comrades, (he died that night,) and the others fell out all along through the streets; no officer was detailed at the time to collect these men, or to care for them. Knowing that Bladensburg was somewhere on the railroad, the stragglers had all found their way during the evening to the station-house. They had eaten nothing since Friday noon, and were many of them quite exhausted. I brought them such supplies as I could, bread enough at least. One man I found apparently asleep, lying on the brick sidewalk in the hot sun with the others; but upon trying to arouse him, as his companions said he was very sick, I found he was entirely unconscious. A physician was called in, and after a half hour the man was restored to consciousness. From Dr. McLaren I obtained an order to send the sick men to the general hospital; from Gen. Mansfield an order to pass the other men to Bladensburg on the cars. Meantime, however, an officer of the regiment came to the station-house and marched twenty of the men to the camp. The others were left, they were too weak to march; and at 5½ o'clock, they were

sent by cars. During this time no surgeon of the regiment came to look after these men. The man sent to the hospital was in a very weak state for a number of days; except for timely aid, he, too, would doubtless have died.

Aug. 11th, a. m. Furnish tea and food to 10 or 12 men who arrived in the night, and remained in the *ambulances* on the freight cars. They were otherwise well cared for, but needed more than hard bread and water. Also "gave comfort" to the sick—some 15 or 20 of them—of another regiment, who spent the previous night in the Cane Factory. At 6½ or 7 p. m., a Pennsylvania regiment arrived in the train. The regiment marched into quarters upon the avenue, leaving their sick to spend the night in the baggage cars. We took them into the building, and gave them supper, shelter, and in the morning a breakfast. There were of these, sixteen men and six women. Three of the men were so sick that in the morning they were carried to the general hospital.

Aug. 12th. Look after these Pennsylvania men, and a few others.

P. M., at 6½ o'clock; thirty men arrive, belonging to the Wisconsin 5th, in charge of a sergeant. He left them immediately to go to headquarters to get wagons to transport them to their camp. They were men sent on from the hospital at Baltimore. They had no provision for supper. We supplied them, and at about 9½ they were packed into the wagons which had arrived. Had I seen the sergeant beforehand, he would gladly have let them rest for the night in the reception house. Meantime, at about 8 o'clock, thirteen men and one woman, of the Wisconsin 6th, arrive from Baltimore hospital, without any one in charge of them. They had been merely told to go to Washington, and join their regiment. We gave them supper, made them comfortable for the night, and after breakfast they were taken to their encampment.

Aug. 25th. Went to the Paymaster's department, by request of a sick man at the station-house who had his papers, but said he was so weak he could not push up to the window and get his pay. I found about 40 men waiting in the yard of the office, some apparently very feeble.

This was on Tuesday p. m. One man had been waiting since Saturday forenoon ; he was lame and weak, and the other new comers kept him back. Three others had waited since Monday morning ; one, who was there all day on Saturday, without getting his pay, had died on Sunday night in a house near by. Seeing the case from the outside, which the officers within the building, in their press of business, did not observe, I stated the facts to the proper officers, and immediately they made arrangements by which the men most sick were paid off at once, and facilities secured for the future.

I will turn now merely to the record of the few last days, though meantime we were enabled in various ways, by furnishing shelter, or food, or fresh clothes, to give comfort to many.

Aug. 28th. Eighteen men arrive at station-house, from a Massachusetts regiment, to go home discharged ; but there is some defect in their papers. The surgeon, who has care of the men, is obliged to go up the river twenty-eight miles, where the regiment is in camp, and he is grateful to us for taking the men under our charge until his return. Those who are well enough have eaten army rations (provided them, by order of Capt. Beckwith, abundantly) at the reception house ; those more unwell have been furnished by us with comforts. They were here, in need of care, from Wednesday noon until Monday afternoon. And when they left, they were very grateful.

On Sunday night, Sept 2d, we had in the new Home eighteen Massachusetts men, and ten sick men of the Tammany regiment, who were delayed here two days through some defects in their papers of discharge. There were also three other sick men, who came with a Pennsylvania regiment on Saturday, and one Maine man, who came from the hospital at Annapolis with his surgeon's certificate of inability, but was too much exhausted by the journey to go over to Alexandria, where his regiment was located, to get his papers made out. He is resting here.

Monday night, Sept. 3d, there were 18 in the house ; the Massachusetts men having left, and four new men having come in ; the Tammany men still remaining.

Sept. 9th. Thirty men arrive at the station-house from Annapolis

hospital; some of them to join their regiments, some to be discharged. They receive from Capt. Allen passes, so that they need not be arrested as they go through the city to report themselves at headquarters; but they have not a cent of money, and it is a long walk—a mile or more—for sick men to take; and they must carry their knapsacks, too. Therefore I furnish to each man money enough to pay his omnibus fare up there and back again, so that he can return for the night to the Home if he is delayed. Some ten or fifteen of these men returned; their regiments were too far off to be reached that night.

The next day, (Sept. 10th,) a number more—some twenty men—arrived from Annapolis hospital; we give aid to these as to the others, receiving some of them for the night. It is a little thing thus to give to a man enough to pay an omnibus fare, and to buy a meal; but when that little aid is given to each one of fifty or a hundred weary men each week, the aggregate of fatigue and anxiety which is relieved is not small in its sum; and I am sure that if the friends at home could purchase it at tenfold its cost for those who are weary by the way, they would consider it cheaply bought.

Sept. 11th There were last night in the "Soldiers' Home," as we now call it, twenty five men resting. Among them were a number of Berden's sharpshooters; none of them were sick enough to go to a hospital, but some of them will doubtless be saved from serious illness by two or three days of rest and care. These men represent a large class of soldiers now arriving, who come in companies of fifties or hundreds, not yet organized into regiments, and therefore having no surgeon with them. To such we feel that we can render especial service.

Sept 12th. A number discharged from a Maine regiment, but who arrived in the city too late to get their pay, after wandering about for some time found their way to the Home. They were without shelter and without money, for they had expected to arrive from their camp in Virginia in season to receive the money due to them, and start for home in the evening train. At first these men seemed unwilling to accept what they thought was charity; but I assured them that we

were only supplying to them some of the very comforts which their own friends, perhaps, in Maine had sent on "for the soldiers," (for Maine has not been unmindful of the call made upon her;) I fancied that they rested better that night for the assurance; they did not feel so far away from home.

Sept. 13th. Last night we sheltered thirty-eight men, and furnished fresh clothes to some who were sorely in need. Among those to whom we gave comfort was one man whose earnest tone peculiarly impressed me; so I note the particulars. When I went to the reception house in the evening I found there this man who looked tired and worn. I asked him if he was one of the men to be discharged. He said no, but that he had walked over twenty miles, and had hurried most of the way. Some two weeks ago, he received the news of his mother's death and his father's sickness, but he could not obtain leave of absence; yesterday it was telegraphed to him that his father had died; he now obtained a furlough for six days; but he had twenty-two miles to walk before he could reach the cars; he started early, but arrived here a half hour too late for the train, and consequently would not be in Philadelphia in time for the funeral of his father. His wife was not living, but he had a little girl, three years old, in aid of whose support the city of Philadelphia paid fifty cents per week. He showed to me some of his letters from what was once his home. Realizing, as I thought, in my own heart the sad loneliness and weariness and disappointment which I knew he must experience, I said to him, Now, tell me honestly, for I want to know, just how a man feels when he is situated as you are; do you not wish you had never enlisted, and so were not obliged to start for camp again in three days after you reach your child? He answered, "No, sir; you can't make me say that. I enlisted because I loved my country, and I was determined to fight for her, and if every friend I have got in the world dies while I am away, I will not wish I had staid at home." This man had borrowed of his captain barely money enough to pay his railroad fare both ways. I added something to this, but he was unwilling to take it till I told him it was for his little girl.

Sept. 15. Last night there were only twelve men in the Home. But early this morning we received sixteen men from a Michigan regiment, which arrived in the night. None of these, excepting four who were sent to the general hospital to-day, were very sick; but with slight illness at first, they were entirely worn down and prostrated by the fatigue of a long journey, without rest, from Michigan. Just at this point of time, a day and night of sleep, and some little care, will probably save them from a serious illness. Tuesday or Wednesday their regimental hospital will be ready, and they will then go there.

Sept 16. Although four thousand troops have arrived in the last 24 hours, there were but four sick men among them, except those of the Michigan regiment. The other regiments were from New Hampshire, Maine, and Rhode Island. The inspection of troops, previous to their enlisting, is evidently more thorough than with the earlier regiments.

Just before night I met ten of the Garibaldians, who arrived in the city too late to get their pay. They are from the regimental hospital—sick and discharged. I told them how to find their way to the Home; and, after a comfortable supper, they are now resting.

Sept. 17. Last night there were forty-five men in the Home, more than half of them needing medical treatment. This morning one poor fellow left, who has been here anxiously waiting ten days for his papers, which had been sent to Poolesville to have a correction made in them. He is very sick with consumption, and every day of his unnecessary delay seemed a wrong to him.

Sept. 18. This morning all but twelve men left for their regiments, or for home; to-night thirty more of the sick came in from the four regiments that arrived. This afternoon I went to a regiment over the river, and obtained from a captain twenty dollars, which he had wrongfully or carelessly charged to a young man when his papers were made out. Three other cases similar to this have previously claimed our attention.

From the 19th until the present time our chief attention has been given to the newly-arrived regiments—some seventeen regiments having

come in during the five days. The number in the Home the past week has been from forty-five to fifty each night. Meantime, some men have been sent to us from regiments already in camp, but who were not provided with hospital tents. Most of these we transferred to the general hospital.

The number of soldiers who have thus received care at the hands of the Commission (some more, some less; some a single night's lodging; some five or six days' shelter and support) is not far from seven hundred. This covers the time from August 9th to September 23d.

In this connection, it may be proper to say that these facts give increasing evidence of what a vast amount of delay, and consequent fatigue and anxiety, would be saved the soldiers who are sick and discharged, if the officers, whose duty it is in the various regiments to make out the discharge papers, could be led to feel the importance of making themselves thoroughly acquainted with all the forms required, and then would carefully regard them. Humanity, as well as official faithfulness, demands this. The paymaster, of course, is not authorized to give a man his money upon a discharge that has a single flaw in it; so the man has to go back to the regiment again with his papers, and the delay is certainly a wrong to the sick man, who thought he had fairly started for home.

I may also state that there is now established by government a much more perfect system for sending to their respective regiments the soldiers who arrive without officers.

Allow me, likewise, to add, that in this formal report no record is made of what, after all, is one of the most valuable and most grateful methods by which "aid and comfort" are given to these soldiers, namely, by the expression of the sympathy which they receive at our hands, by the word of good cheer, by the assurance that some one is waiting to help them on. And this has a tenfold value to them when they receive it, not as from one individual, but as from a thousand hands reached out from a thousand hearts, that bear with them constantly the thought of helping and strengthening our soldiers who have left their homes.

In conclusion, I would say, that we hope to accomplish still more good, and render aid and comfort still more effectually, as by degrees system and methods for greater efficiency are worked out. In an undertaking of this kind, one cannot mark down a plan of operations so much as follow the lead of circumstances.

Respectfully.

No. 29.

SANITARY COMMISSION.