

Account of the Field Relief Corps, of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, in the Army of the Potomac / by Lewis H. Steiner.

Contributors

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SANITARY COMMISSION.

No. 72.

ACCOUNT

OF THE

FIELD RELIEF CORPS,

OF THE

U. S. SANITARY COMMISSION,

IN THE

ARMY OF THE POTOMAC,

By LEWIS H. STEINER, M. D., Chief Inspector.



NEW YORK:

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1863.

SANITARY COMMISSION.

WASHINGTON, *September 19th*, 1863.

TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE,

SANITARY COMMISSION:

GENTLEMEN,

Thinking that the present organization of the Field Relief Corps of the Army of the Potomac, would be a subject of special interest to your Board, I propose to make a short report on the subject. The outlines of the plan were prepared by Mr. Olmsted, July 17, 1863, and an effort was made to organize the corps immediately. The army was then resting at or near Berlin, Maryland, and it was thought that our corps could be put in such form as to move with it on its entrance into Virginia. Mr. Johnson, of Philadelphia, consented to act as Field Superintendent, and labored most assiduously in perfecting arrangements. After considerable trouble, we succeeded in starting off from Boonsborough, on Sunday, July 18th, four wagons under charge of as many relief agents—Mr. Johnson himself accompanying the train. On Monday, they crossed the Potomac, and proceeded to join the Army. Since that time, many alterations have been made in the original plan, the spring wagons originally employed have been removed, and substantial four-horse army wagons introduced. Indeed, the plan of this corps

has shaped itself from circumstances, until it has acquired its present form.

There is a Field Superintendent and an Assistant. These offices are filled by Mr. J. Warner Johnson, of Philadelphia, and Capt. Isaac Harris, of Brooklyn. These gentlemen have had much experience in this kind of work, and bring with them an honesty of purpose, a quiet enthusiasm and maturity of judgment which make me feel confident of the best possible results under their management of the corps.

In each of six corps of the army, we have a substantial army wagon, which is kept filled with an assortment of such supplies as are likely to be needed by the sick or wounded in the field. This wagon is in charge of a Relief Agent, who has his tent, and lives in the corps to which he is attached. For convenience, his headquarters and stores are usually with the Ambulance Corps. The agent makes himself acquainted with the wants of the different division, brigade and regimental hospitals, and endeavors to supply their wants from the contents of his wagon. He becomes one of the family, and makes common cause with its interests. It was believed, that, in this way, an agent would become more interested in his work. Sharing the toils and the perils (to a certain extent also) of his corps, he would find himself thoroughly identified with it. Thus there would be super-added to his general desire to aid the army at large, the anxious feeling to aid those who had become his friends through a community of feelings and daily intercourse. This idea has been fully sustained by the results of nearly two months active operations.

The agents at present on duty, are W. A. Hovey, (of Boston,) 1st Corps; N. Murray, (of Elizabethtown, N. J.,) 2d Corps; Col. Clemens Soest, (formerly 29th N. Y. Vols.,) 3d Corps; E. M. Barton, (Worcester, Mass.,) 5th Corps; David S. Pope, (Baltimore, Md.,) 6th Corps; and Rev. Jno. A. Anderson, (California,)

12th Corps. They are educated gentlemen, who have accepted their respective positions with full reference to the responsibility resting upon them, and are animated with an anxious spirit to aid the medical officers of the army as far as may be in their power.

Now, as to the mode of distributing stores, some may say, why not give at once to patients, instead of issuing *through* the medical officers? To this I answer, that of the two modes of distribution, the latter is preferable, because it prevents interference with hospital discipline; and the danger of private appropriation on the part of medical officers, is, by no means, as great as is supposed by the public. The constant supervision really exercised over hospital officers, by medical directors and the public, would make the matter of misappropriation of stores, a source of constant disgrace, and would peril their own reputation and position in the army. That such misappropriation has taken place in some cases I would not dare deny; but let not these be put in the balance against the multitude of cases where honest patriotism and professional pride have stimulated the officers to use all means to advance the interests of the sufferers, and to hasten their convalescence. One of our field relief corps speaks on this point as follows: "In every instance of my dealing with the surgeons of this corps I have found them gentlemen, and must reiterate my belief, that ninety-nine one-hundredths of all the supplies drawn from my wagon have been honorably used by them. I have talked to patients in two hospitals, and they told me they had received both the brandy and wine that I had sent to these hospitals. In Dr. Ohlenschlager's Art. Brig. Hospital, one of the patients who was just recovering from an attack of intermittent fever and required stimulants, told me that he had had every drop of the wine sent over, and that '*it did him a power of good!*'" Another agent writing of his visit to a hospital, says, that "the Doctor was loud in his praises of the Com-

mission, and the men, who had evidently been informed of the source from which many of the delicacies had been received, seemed very grateful." I might multiply quotations of this kind, since every agent has felt it his duty to look into the subject of the alleged misappropriation. I have reason to conclude, therefore, that such cases are rare, and I come to this conclusion, although a letter has reached us this morning, containing the statement that a wounded officer of a Massachusetts regiment, has declared that "the surgeons and officers were bountifully supplied with delicacies" from our stores, that "the surgeon of his regiment, or one in his brigade, boarded the entire winter from Sanitary stores," and that "the officers were well supplied" last winter "with patchwork bedquilts bearing the Sanitary Commission stamp." If this statement be correct in the individual case of this regiment, whose shame is thus proclaimed by one of its officers (I say its *shame* because the finger of scorn will find out the men who may have done this, and will super-add to the reproaches of conscience the denunciations of a people, liberal and zealous for good, but with no sympathy for those who pluck succor, when extended by the hand of benevolence to the sick, and use it for their own luxurious comfort), if this report be correct as to this *one* regiment, thank God! we have thousands of cases where honest men are not guilty of such conduct, and tens of thousands of gallant sufferers are willing so to testify. I introduce this statement although it refers in the main to a period in the history of the campaign, when the Army of the Potomac was not under my charge, and although the report has been fully met and refuted by the facts of the case.

The depot of stores for renewing the supplies was established at Bealton, Va., by Charles S. Clampitt, under orders from the Chief Inspector, and has since been transferred to the charge of Sanford Hoag. It is kept supplied from the Washington receiving storehouse, the goods being forwarded tri-weekly in charge

of reliable messengers. Major J. C. Bush has been assigned to duty at this storehouse, acting in conjunction with Mr. Hoag in issuing thence to the cavalry hospitals, and those regiments on duty as railway-guard.

In its present form, our work proves to be of decided acceptability to the medical officers. Our agents are received kindly, courteously, gladly, wherever they may go; and are now acknowledged to be real helpers to the medical department of the army. One agent writes, on his entrance into a corps: "The morning after my arrival, I introduced myself to the Medical Director of the Corps, and to the Division, Brigade and Regimental Surgeons. I was everywhere received in the kindest manner, and all the surgeons were glad to learn that a permanent agent of the Sanitary Commission had been assigned to the corps; expressing themselves, at the same time, in the highest terms about the assistance of the Sanitary Commission to the sick and wounded during the Pennsylvania Campaign." "A Division General in speaking to another agent, said "the Sanitary Commission had done great good; that every facility in his power should be given, and that if at any time an obstacle was met with he would remove it if possible."

Others have borne like testimony to the good works which the Commission is doing throughout the army. From the very inception of this work, it has asked only to be allowed the privilege of working along with the medical officers, supplementing their work and bringing such succor to the needy of our great army as a liberal public is desirous should be extended. The field is great, but with trained laborers an earnest effort is made to cover the whole!

The Field Relief Corps has distributed during August, shirts, drawers, handkerchiefs, bedsacks, pillows, pillowcases, blankets, quilts, sheets, socks, brandy, whisky, wine, crackers, chocolate,

tin-cups, lemons, tamarinds, pickles, condensed milk, beef stock, farinaceous food, &c., &c.*

The service in the field is becoming popular, and numerous applications are being made for admission as relief agents. On the whole, I regard the Field Relief Corps of the Army of the Potomac a perfect success, and find no cause to regret the amount of labor which has been expended on it, or the expense incurred in bringing it to perfection.

Through its agency we will be able quietly to execute our charitable mission with agents, carried to the field, not by any sudden spasmodic fit of patriotic sentimentalism, but urged on by strong abiding impulses to do whatever their hands may find to do, laboring through sunshine and shade, fair weather and foul, to aid the poor soldier who has shouldered his musket at his country's call. Not glory, not notoriety, but patriotic benevolence, is the motto of the Field Relief Corps.

Very truly,

Your obedient servant,

LEWIS H. STEINER,

*Chief Inspector San. Commission,
Army of Potomac.*

* When the Field Relief Corps started from Boonsborough, their wagons, four in number, were well filled with the usual assortment of sanitary stores. Of these no record was kept; they have, however, all been issued, and, in addition, the following articles, up to date of this report (September 19):

881 quilts and blankets,	754 bottles whiskey and brandy,
887 sheets,	776 " foreign and domestic wine,
702 pillows,	2,509 lbs. farinaceous food,
1,088 pillowcases and ticks,	1,640 " beef stock,
800 bed sacks,	43 " crackers,
2,445 shirts,	50 lbs. chloroform,
1,834 pairs drawers,	480 bottles extract ginger,
1,456 " socks,	804 tin cups,
341 " slippers,	568 lbs. chocolate,
2,186 towels,	250 gallons pickles,
2,374 lbs. condensed milk,	100 " tamarinds,
350 jars jelly,	500 lbs. sugar,
100 lbs. tea,	13½ bbls. dried fruit,
	144 cans tomatoes, &c., &c., &c.,

LETTER FROM CHAPLAIN QUINT.

(*From the Congregationalist.*)

The following letter from Chaplain Quint, 2nd Mass. Vols., is appended as the testimony of one who has had abundant opportunities for judging of the work of the Commission since the beginning of the war, having been attached to a gallant regiment, with which he has labored professionally, from its first organization.

CITY HALL PARK, NEW YORK, Sept. 5, 1863.

A few days ago one of our men (a faithful man, too, one who is detailed for special duty, but always takes his gun, and shares the dangers of his comrades when there is a fight) was told that his wife and child were just outside of the guard, and went to bring them in. As soon as he was in sight, his little boy, who had not seen his father since the war opened, rushed past the guard and over the tent ropes, and climbed up to his father's neck and hung there, while his father could not help the tears of delight. Wasn't it soldierly? Well, some of the guard themselves put on a very soldierly air—but they wiped their eyes. They are no worse soldiers for the memory of the little boys and girls at home, and much better men for it.

Camp-life has, indeed, been a good deal variegated (in the city) by the presence of wives and children. It is astonishing how much the dull mess-room, which has been made a kind of general parlor, has been brightened up by family groups. While I write, two active youngsters are daring to play marbles in the sacred precincts of camp; but the bayonet glistens still on the sentry posts.

The great feature which seems to distinguish this war from all others, is the great system of home help to the army. What other army ever had such benevolence poured out? What one, even, ever had such a mail system as ours—so wise as it is in its effect on the men? What other ever had the sick, the wounded, and the dying so ministered unto? The government has done wonderfully in this direction, itself. But such outside helps were never before witnessed. They are good. They do the army good. Every child that helps sew, on a garment for a soldier, is doing what our Lord

approves. Every stitch is a work of love. The old man who, poor, learned to knit so as to do something, in his chimney corner, for the soldiers, was a hero.

The chief among the links to home as an agency for relief is the Sanitary Commission. The more I see and hear of this institution, I am amazed at its wonderful efficiency. I regard it as chief, not as exclusive. But chief it is, I lately saw and heard more of its doings. Perhaps your readers do not know its plan beyond Washington, and you will allow me to outline it as it is in our army—merely for furnishing supplies.

The central agency is, of course, at Washington. Here supplies are accumulated, and large deposits are necessary for any emergency.

In the army, each corps is supplied with a Relief Agent, who *lives in the corps*. He moves with it. He has a four-horse wagon, supplied with sanitary stores—articles additional to those furnished by government. These wagons are generally with the ambulance train, and the Relief Agent has discretionary power to dispose of his articles. He issues them to Field Hospitals on requisitions from the medical officers there. New supplies are constantly sent, so as to have plenty on hand.

The whole arrangement is under the care (I have asked for the names) of J. Warner Johnson, (firm of T. & J. W. Johnson & Co., Law Book Publishers, Phila.,) and Captain Isaac Harris of New York. The Relief Agents are—1st Corps, W. A. Hovey of Boston; 2d, N. Murray of New Jersey; 3d, Col. Clemens Soest, formerly commander of 29th New York; 5th, E. M. Barton of Worcester, Mass.—a son, I think, of Judge Barton; 6th, D. S. Pope of Baltimore; 12th Rev. J. A. Anderson of California. Dr. W. S. Swalm acts as Inspector in the Field, while Dr. Steiner of Frederick, Md., has general charge at Washington for this army—a man of ripe experience and qualities for the post. These names are a guaranty for efficiency. These men work for little or no pay, but they are *permanent* agents.

That this system ensures success there can be no doubt. I think I wrote you that at Chancellorsville the hospitals were well supplied with even luxuries, by the Commission, while the battle was still in progress. I am now told, on most reliable authority, (that of the surgeons,) that on the Thursday and Friday, the great days of the Gettysburg battles, the Sanitary Commission were distributing their stores *under fire*. In two corps (one is ours) that this was done, clear evidence also exists in the receipts given by the surgeons at the battle ground. I was somewhat astonished at this, as, while at home, I had read statements that some other agency was *three days in advance* of all others with supplies at Gettysburg. But as the Sanitary Commission was there while the battle was still in progress, this latter statement is evidently a mistake.

One great reason why the Sanitary Commission works so well is, that it works in and by means of the regular authorities. It does not set itself up as independent of the medical officers. It distributes through the surgeons. The wisdom of this plan is evident at a glance. The surgeons know what is

needed, and how to use it. An indiscriminate administering of relief by independent helps, is subversive of all order. A case just in point happened—no matter where, but I know. A soldier had turned the critical point of disease, and was doing well. A benevolent individual, distributing supplies out of a basket, gave this soldier some pickles—and I know not what else—which he ate. The surgeon discovered it, and informed the philanthropist that the charity had probably ensured the death of the patient. In fact, it did—with in forty-eight hours.

The independent method is bad. The medical authorities are the only ones who ought to be, in general, entrusted with supplies. It sounds pretty to say, "We place the article in the hands of the soldier himself"—very pretty, but very ridiculous. While this course could do good occasionally, as a system it would be bad. The surgeon knows what the sick man should eat, and what he should wear. And an institution which furnishes things at the time needed is invaluable.

The independent system showed itself in hospital at Gettysburg. In one corps hospital (I have the best authority for this) some five or six men were discovered drunk. Inquiry was made, and it was found that certain individuals who had come as volunteer laborers, or what that excellent book *Hospital Transports* calls "an indiscriminate holiday scramble of general philanthropy," (I quote from memory,) had been giving away liquor at random to whomsoever wanted it, with the result here mentioned. Difficulties also ensued from the great trouble with which needed articles could be obtained from these agents. And when certain other irregularities occurred (which I do not wish to mention), the whole band was ordered out of the lines,—the second occasion on which the same agency had met that fate in the same corps. The whole trouble arose from the impossibility of harmonizing an independent, outside management, with the methods which government has established. The Sanitary Commission avoids all such complications. Another agency or agent has just written (as I read), "The Chaplains, what few there are, work with us." It would be equally cool for the Sanitary Commission to say, "The surgeons work with us," instead of taking the sensible ground which they do, that *they* work with the *surgeons*.

While the Commission was thus harmoniously acting with the authorities in relieving the suffering, several Chaplains were, as I have learned from others, working night and day in corps hospitals at Gettysburg. I am informed that they were invaluable. They ministered to the wounded and the dying like brothers. I know how it was, for I know these men. Such men are not praised in newspapers. Other agencies turn up their eyes in sanctimonious mourning over them. But while disgusting puffs employ mail and telegraph over holiday laborers, these men do the steady, every-day, heavy work. When others at Chancellorsville ran away—being asked again and again, "Chaplain, is *this* a safe place?" these men risked shot and shell, and some found captivity in doing their duty. No letter-writer tells about somebody "bending over a dying man in prayer," as being a nobler sight than a

"mitered archbishop" doing something or other, because it is the *regular business* of those men.

The Sanitary Commission has shown true wisdom, also, in its plan of employing regular and *permanent* agents. Sudden spasms of work do little. The Commission knows that. It takes time for men to learn their business. When taught, one man is worth twenty temporary volunteers. The work which the Tract Societies are doing in the army is effective because they employ permanent managers, and work in harmony with the recognized religious workers of the army. Mr. Alvord, for example (I refer to him because I know his work), accomplished wonders because he used all existing facilities. Finding a chaplain, or (in case there were none) some other religious man in each of (say) a hundred regiments, he had a hundred permanent agents all his own for Christ's sake. Gathering them together, and thus exciting new fervor, holding meetings for prayer of those hundred laborers, each of whom had his own field, in which none could do the work that laborer could, a life was sent through the whole, when *outside* workers could only have made a slight impression on the circumference.

The Sanitary Commission works through the proper channels. There is therefore no outside work which in the matter of supplies can rival the Commission in cheapness, directness, or usefulness. It does a work which fathers and mothers and wives at home ought to be thankful for. It ministers to the helpless. It succors where suffering and death would often be the result of absence of succor.

A. H. Q.



