The Friends' Ambulance Unit
1914 - 1919

A RECORD

Edited by
Meaburn Tatham and James E. Miles

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If the career of the Friends' Ambulance Unit had ended in the spring of 1915, its history might have been told in a single chronological narrative. The enterprise which began with the work at the station sheds in Dunkirk and culminated in the days of the Second Battle of Ypres was sufficiently compact to be treated as a comprehensible whole. But from that time onwards, the more the Unit grew in numbers, the more divergent both in place and in kind its activities became. Civilian relief work spread throughout uninvaded Flanders; the Ambulance Convoys played their part with French Divisions fighting in the Champagne and the Argonne; the Ambulance Trains threaded their way about the vast network of lines behind the British front. Its members staffed many hospitals abroad and at home; they worked in offices and in recreation huts; they ploughed the waters of the Mediterranean, and they helped to gather the harvests of England.

We have divided the history into two main portions. The first and major portion deals with the original Unit which went to France in 1914, and traces its work and expansion over a period of nearly four-and-a-half years. It includes also an account of the two Hospital Ships. The second part records more briefly the work of the Home Service Sections. Even in the case of the Unit in France, which was a coherent body under a central administration, we have been compelled after the first chapter to abandon the consecutive narrative, and, at the risk of some overlapping and repetition, to tell the stories of its component sections in isolated chapters. The result has been, we know, to make the Unit appear less unified than it really was, and perhaps to lose sight of many interesting aspects of its constitution. But for a consecutive story to have been intelligible it must have discarded large masses of important detail. Much of what we have included will no doubt make plain reading, even as much of the work the Unit undertook was in itself monotonous. Nevertheless, it was by what it accomplished for the relief of suffering that the F.A.U. justified its existence; and, however inartistic the result may be, we have been content to follow what we believe to be the only method by which an adequate record of all its achievements can be preserved.

For our material we have relied partly on great quantities of documents brought to London from Dunkirk and elsewhere—documents bewilderingly profuse in the case of some sections and periods, in the case of others regrettably sparse. Among them have been many valuable reports written by members of the Unit from time to time during its existence. We have also been greatly
helped by the individual French Convoy and Ambulance Train histories, which have been prepared or published during the present year; on their pages we have unblushingly made frequent raids. We were fortunate, too, in having the Unit's collection of drawings and pictures available for purposes of illustration, and we must acknowledge especially the permission of Ernest Procter to reproduce some of his work done for the Unit's records.

Finally we have to express a very great debt of gratitude to all those who have so ungrudgingly responded to our appeal for accounts of those portions of the Unit's work with which they were specially familiar. One or two of these contributions appear practically in the form in which they were written; most have been modified to fit in with the general scheme. The list of all our helpers, is, we fear, too long to reproduce here. Suffice it to say that collectively they are responsible for a large share of any merit which this volume may possess.

Balliol College, Oxford.

October 31st, 1919.

Meaburn Tatham.

James E. Miles.
to time raised much controversy within the Unit: the adoption of the standard B.R.C.S. service jacket in preference to the open-collared tunic worn by voluntary Red Cross workers in kindred organisations. Some of these problems were important in themselves and demanded the careful consideration which they received; others were important rather as demonstrating the solvent value of a sense of humour. But throughout his tenure of office, during which the Unit had developed almost beyond recognition, Captain Maxwell bore his heavy responsibilities with a steadiness of purpose which put the Unit under a great personal obligation to him. It was not surprising that when, at the end of 1917, he decided reluctantly to return to England to resume his medical studies, interrupted by the outbreak of war, there was a very sincere and spontaneous regret throughout all sections of the Unit. It found some measure of expression in a presentation and an address of farewell, signed by all members serving under him. This took place on the last evening of 1917, and the next morning he made his departure down the familiar road to Boulogne.

The difficulty of choosing a successor to Leslie Maxwell had been no small one, but finally the choice of the Committee fell on Meaburn Tatham, whose selection had been approved by the officers of the Unit in France, efforts having been made to gauge the wishes of all parts of the Unit abroad. Although originally unconnected with the Society of Friends, he had joined the Unit in March, 1915, and after service at the Sacré Cœur, Poperinge and Caestre he had become the leader of the second Search Party. This work he had had to give up at the end of 1916 owing to ill-health, and had left the Unit to take up sedentary work in England, under the Ministry of National Service. From this department he was released in order to rejoin the Unit, was gazetted temporary honorary Captain, and left for Dunkirk two weeks before Captain Maxwell’s departure.

The difficulties which the new O.C. had to face were not perhaps comparable to those which his predecessor had overcome. The Unit’s position was established, the broad lines of its policy were securely laid down, and except for the inevitable diminution of work in the winter months the various sections were assured of continuous employment. It had become an institution, and was accepted as such by all authorities. Such problems as existed were of an internal nature, and resulted chiefly from the change of leadership itself. The situation is partly explained by saying that at the end of 1917 the Unit was suffering from the prevalent disease of war-weariness, an epidemic which reached its height after the disappointment of a summer campaign and with the dreary period of comparative stagnation till the next spring. It was remarked earlier that the process of establishing the Unit on a firm basis had created some mistrust on the part of those who expected a more democratic constitution. It was not unnatural that, with the departure of one leader and the arrival of another, a solution of their troubles was looked for. To many it was a disappointment that a new O.C. had not been chosen from among the members of the Society of Friends, though the Committee had several other considerations to take into account. To Meaburn Tatham fell the task of guiding the Unit through the last
fourteen months of its existence, months which included some of the most strenuous periods of its work, and of carrying out its demobilisation and the general winding up of its affairs. Let us add—in delicate parenthesis—that after his own demobilisation he became jointly responsible for the editorship of the book in which these words appear, and the absence of comment on his administration will be understood.

Foremost among the initial difficulties which lay before the new O.C. was the proposal for an advisory committee, outstanding at Captain Maxwell's departure; and this was the first to be taken up under the new régime. It was the outcome of that desire for more democratic control which sprang naturally from a body with such a composition as the Friends' Ambulance Unit. It resulted from the almost anomalous position of the Unit as a formation, placed within the military machine, yet composed largely of men directly opposed to Army methods and Army traditions. The solution was not a simple one, for the O.C. and his chief officers knew, on the one hand, the measure of their responsibility both to the Committee of the F.A.U. and to the Army authorities for the maintenance of discipline and efficiency, and realised how important it was to avoid anything that would have jeopardised the Unit's position. A false step might easily have demolished the laborious building of the three preceding years, and innovations, however innocuous in essence, might on the surface have appeared dangerous to the ever-watchful eye of the Intelligence. On the other hand it had to be recognised that, quite apart from the few who would always have resented control in any form, there was a large and weighty body of opinion based on the high ideals of the Society of Friends, which earnestly desired such a constitution as would be a better testimony to those ideals, and should at the same time recreate that spirit of unity which had been so nearly lost sight of in the process of disintegration into scattered sections. The proposal for an advisory committee was really an honest and serious attempt to make the Unit, as a whole, a more living example of the beliefs held by the individual members who composed it.

The whole matter was dealt with at Headquarters towards the end of January, 1918, at a meeting at which the O.C., while insisting on the fact that any committees which might be formed must necessarily be advisory in character, and devoid of any powers challenging his and other officers' authority, formulated a scheme for the creation of such committees as individual sections might wish to institute. Nevertheless it had to be laid down that a joint committee representative of all scattered sections throughout the Unit was an impossibility, because of the obvious dangers involved by the strictness of the censorship. At the same time, as a partial remedy for the Unit's lack of cohesion, a better system was devised of circulating throughout the Unit information regarding the doings of all its sections. The result of these deliberations was that a committee was formed at Headquarters, composed of one representative from each of the eight main departments, and four from all stationed at Headquarters, elected by proportional representation. Simultaneously committees were
also formed in other sections, as at the Queen Alexandra Hospital and one or two of the trains and Convoys.

The experiment was not a complete success, possibly because the main object of the committees, which was to keep the O.C. in close touch with the views and feelings of members of the Unit, was better attained by less formal methods. Much useful work was done, but it was very largely of a domestic nature, the Headquarters Committee especially being chiefly occupied with suggestions and complaints in connection with the arrangements for feeding and billeting. It became in fact very largely an advisory committee to its chairman, the Superintendent of H.Q. billets. It was, moreover, hampered by the frequent changes in its personnel which became necessary as work developed and its members were sent to stations away from Malo. In some degree the scheme did create a sense of responsibility in the individual member and quicken his interest in the Unit's affairs. But it started as a compromise, and that perhaps explained much of its failure to perform all that its supporters had hoped.

There was, however, to be little time for the readjustment of these domestic troubles. The period of hibernation was soon over, and the German offensives of the spring of 1918 created work which gave the Unit little time to think about itself. Early in the year arrangements were completed for the removal of the Queen Alexandra Hospital to a site on the other side of Dunkirk less liable to bombing and shelling. The actual move on March 24th, which is described in the chapter dealing with the hospital, called for the utmost energies both on the part of the hospital staff and of the members of the Works Department. Very shortly afterwards, the sudden and dramatic recrudescence of civilian work, first in the Hazebrouck-Bailleul district, and later in the Poperinghe area, absorbed all the available personnel. Not only did the French and Belgian Civilian Evacuation Sections need every driver and orderly who could be spared, but the Headquarters car department and garages were strained to the full to supply and keep in order the cars and equipment needed. Large quantities of stores were required for civilian relief, and new services for postal communication had to be maintained. All departments in the Dunkirk area were stirred into full activity, and even those not directly affected, such as the recreation rooms, were called upon to supply men for the new sections and had to carry on their normal work with reduced staffs. The Deputy Adjutant, on whom fell the task of supplying personnel, was hard put to it to satisfy the clamorous requests of the heads of the sections. Leave frequently had to be curtailed, and at times stopped altogether. Sections not directly administered from Dunkirk, such as the French Convoys and the trains, were involved in the general activity, and casualties from overwork, sickness, and wounds continually had to be made good.

There came, too, a serious anxiety during April for the safety of Dunkirk itself, as the German advance threatened to sweep through the resistance at Locre and pour down on to the plain. For it was clear that any further Allied retreat at this point must have involved the abandonment of Ypres and the
APPENDIX

COMMITTEE OF THE FRIENDS' AMBULANCE UNIT,
1914—1919.

Sir George Newman, M.D., Chairman.
Wm. Charles Braithwaite, LL.B., Hon. Treasurer.
J. Raymond Little, Hon. Secretary.
Percy Alden, M.P.
The late J. Allen Baker, M.P.
Edward Cadbury, J.P.
The late E. Richard Cross, LL.B.
*Dr. Leonard Doncaster, F.R.S.
*George M. Gillett, L.C.C., J.P.
Sir Rickman J. Godlee, Bart., K.C.V.O.
William Harvey.
T. Edmund Harvey, M.P.

R. Borrough Hopkins.
*Ernest Jones
Alfred J. King.
John Henry Lloyd, J.P.
J. Coleby Morland.
Dr. Humphrey Nockolds (P.M.O., 1914—19).
Arnold S. Rowntree, M.P.
Arthur Rowntree.
*Meaburn Tatham (O.C. 1918—1919).
Rt. Hon. J. W. Wilson, M.P.
*Herbert G. Wood, M.A.
*L. Hollingsworth Wood (New York).
Geoffrey W. Young.

*Joined the Committee subsequent to 1914.