

HEART OF CONFLICT

THE 25TH FIELD AMBULANCE OF THE ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS

The Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) was a distinct corps of the army with the standard army uniform, but its own insignia. It served in all areas of the conflict during World War One.

On enlisting in the Army at the outbreak of war, all volunteers – even if they wished to join the medical corps – were subject to all the usual army rules and regulations. They also underwent basic training including using firearms, although they did not carry a weapon during the course of their duties.

The Cornishman on 5 November 1914 talked about ‘Camborne men in camp’ who were part of a contingent based at Winchester before deployment. It only gave the names of the men from Camborne, but the regiment, which was to become the 25th Field Ambulance, attached to the 8th Division, British Expeditionary Force, was made up of men from all over Cornwall and some from Devon.

No further details about their orders were printed, as was the secrecy rule under DORA (Defence of the Realm Act). However, on the day the paper came out, the men were already in France, having marched to Southampton on 4 November and arriving in Le Havre at 6pm the following day. They continued to route march across France until they reached their first base camp at Estaires, 12 miles south west of Ypres, on 18 November 1914. Within a matter of a few days of setting up a hospital and dressing station, they received nearly 300 cases of frostbite. They remained at Estaires until March 1915, but were to return again as the war yoyo-ed back and forth along the Western Front.

Overall within the RAMC there were around 110,000 personnel that served in one of the hospitals classed as either Stationary, Field, Ship or Train or one of the Field Ambulances, which acted as the first aid (Advanced Dressing Station) and patient referral positions (Casualty Clearing Station) based perilously close to the front lines. This kind of medical intervention has evolved into ‘first responder’ and ‘triage’ in emergency care today.

Their duties within the Field Ambulance ranged from stretcher bearer, cyclist (an ‘ambulance’ that had a stretcher attached to it – and probably was as primitive as it sounds), driver, first aider, nurse, ward orderly, doctor or surgeon, plus any other duties that became necessary for the comfort of the fighting men as the war progressed; setting up bath houses in local breweries and wineries for instance – the vats and barrels making perfect facilities to warm-up, wash and delouse the men.

The RAMC, like most regiments that received volunteers in 1914, was made up of a series of ‘pals’ regiments. Many a St. Johns Ambulance brigade from the Redruth and Camborne areas enlisted together into what became the 25th Field Ambulance. Sadly, the War Office did not keep records of each of the subdivisions of the RAMC, and many of the men’s war records were destroyed in a German bombing raid in WWII. It is believed that the 25th Field Ambulance initially numbered around 71 personnel, and were mostly from Cornwall.

Being in the Medical Corps was not a ‘safe option’. Nearly 5,500 men (5%) were killed in action, many more were very seriously wounded. Medical staff (including nurses) also suffered what is now termed post trauma shock due to the nature of their work. Several committed suicide, thought to be directly attributable to the horrors they had seen, and felt perhaps, they could never un-see.

Although they were not armed, or ever fired a weapon, stretcher bearers were every bit as brave as the soldiers. Thousands of members of the RAMC won medals for gallantry. Men of the 25th died trying to save the men of the 8th Division, to whom they were attached throughout the war.

However, because of their non-combatant status, they were not entitled to the 'one penny a day pension' for every day that they served when it was introduced in 1917.

When going to collect the wounded from no-man's land, the stretcher bearers were far more exposed than the soldier they saved as they battled, often through thick mud, carrying the heavy wood and canvas stretcher. They were routinely knowingly fired upon by the enemy forces, despite the red cross armband making them 'protected personnel' under Article 9 of the Geneva Convention (1906). Sometimes their billets, being necessarily so close to the trenches, were hit by shells; whether these medical stations were deliberate but illegal targets is not clear. In one incident in June 1915, the shells fell amongst the horse lines, killing two and injuring 13. One member of the 25th, Lieutenant Meade King, rushed in to save the horses at great risk to himself. Several soldiers were also injured and died four days later of tetanus – a simple thing to prevent nowadays, but a sad and common cause of death in the fields of Flanders.

The men of the 25th tried to keep their spirits up, and often the letters they wrote home took a cheery tone. They were lucky to be sent a rugby ball from Camborne Club and played a three match Cornwall vs. Devon series in May 1915. Following the first match, Thomas Penhorwood was killed during the disastrous Battle of Aubers Ridge. The British Army suffered heavy losses due to a severe lack of shells. This led to David Lloyd George's Ministry of Munitions. Just for the record, Cornwall won the series 2-1...

25th Field Ambulance

The dedicated, brave, conscientious and kind men of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) endured a particularly arduous War. They were sent to the front time and again in advance of a British Offensive, where they 'rendered devoted service' to their task.

Worse was to come. A century on, the International Red Cross is still undertaking the mammoth task of digitising all the records of prisoners, but we know from their families that many of the Cornishmen in the 25th Field Ambulance were taken prisoner of war despite their protected non-combatant status.

According to international law, once the status of the RAMC personnel was confirmed, they should have been returned to their parent nation. Quite why the members of the 25th Field Ambulance were not released by the German Army is not clear.

Possibly, they were held and made to work behind enemy lines without ever making to a camp to be processed. Perhaps, during such a long bitter war, rules were ignored. But, another very plausible explanation is that the members of the 25th Field Ambulance Pals Brigade voluntarily stayed with their comrades to help the sick and wounded as best they could – as they had always done since 1914.

Written by W. Norton/Bridging Arts