Some Account of the British Military Hospitals of World War I at Etaples, in the orbit of Sir Almroth Wright.

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SUMMARY: A group of British Military Hospitals was established between 1915 and 1918 along the estuary of the River Canche on the northern French coast. Their positions, now obliterated, can be identified from a plan of the time. With the growing realisation of the importance of bacteriology in the treatment of wound infection, the laboratory of Sir Almroth Wright in neighbouring Boulogne-sur-mer had a strong local influence.

Introduction

The German army invaded Belgium on the 4th of August 1914 and by the autumn was approaching the English Channel. With the first Battle of Ypres in October in which there were nearly 100,000 British casualties, the French port of Boulogne-sur-mer was transformed into an important British military hospital base (1) and by degrees numbers of hospitals were set up in the surrounding country, notably at Etaples and Camiers, along the estuary of the River Canche some 15 miles SW of Boulogne. Three of the Etaples hospitals have left records of their histories, one Imperial Service Hospital, the No.26 General (2), and two lavishly equipped Voluntary Hospitals, the No.6 BRCS, or Liverpool Merchants’, Hospital (3,4) and the St John Ambulance Brigade Hospital (5,6).

The wartime achievements of Sir Almroth Wright

Sir Almroth Wright is known to have regarded the development of bacterial vaccines as his most important work (14), but looking back, it can be argued that his greatest achievements really lay in the stimulus he gave to wartime bacteriology and in his efforts to make the War Office improve the organisation of medical services in France. Statistical analysis of Wright’s method of immunisation against typhoid fever by the injection of killed suspensions of typhoid bacilli showed that it was far less effective than he assumed (15) and his faith in ‘therapeutic vaccination’ (treatment of established infections by injection of killed suspensions of the bacterial strain isolated from the patient) was quite unjustified. However, with the help of the simple experimental techniques he had earlier devised (16), whose economy in the use of materials was so well suited to a wartime laboratory, he conveyed clearly and unremittingly to others an understanding of the essential nature of war wounds, infected from the outset by every sort of microbe driven in by the projectile. ‘We are wont to classify the patients in our military hospitals into sick and wounded. In reality, all, or nearly all, are suffering from bacterial infections’ (17). He was repeatedly to stress that a wounded man under a lengthy treatment should not be ‘hustled’ to a hospital in England (18), because the base hospitals in France were rarely full; the opinions of the medical man should be followed instead of those of the hospital administrator; methods of
ETAPLES 1917

Fig 1. Location of the Military Hospitals at Etaples in 1917, from a plan of military establishments prepared by the CRE of Etaples District (kindly provided by the Western Front Association). The scale is taken from Carte Topographique No. 2105 Est of the Institut Géographique National de France, revised 1980. Although there has been much building on the northern side of the village of Etaples, and the crossroads at the 'Brick Bridge' has been modified, the area where the hospitals were situated remains mostly scrub land. Neither a Carte Topographique of the same series of 1929, nor an aerial photograph of the area, scale 1:5000 taken in 1947, and kindly provided by the Photthèque National, Institut Géographique National de France, show any remnants of the hospitals. The photograph merely shows numerous shell-holes presumably from the war of 1939-45.
The treatment should be standardised under advice from a medical intelligence department staffed by scientists (9); and medical officers should be given organised instruction, since most had been recruited from civilian life and were therefore faced with unfamiliar problems. The ultimate arrangements in France (19) did largely conform to what Wright advocated although his advice was by no means always gratefully acknowledged (18). The inexperience of the medical officers was to some extent compensated for by the existence of medical societies, of which the Boulogne Medical Society (11) was one and the Étaples Medical Society another (20).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Hospitals at Étaples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. No. 24 General Hospital, 21 June 1915 until 4 November 1919. Incorporated Villa Tino Hospital 3 December 1915-13 May 1919 and Sick Sisters Hospital 12 April 1917-1 July 1919. Admitted German prisoners. No. 28 Étaples Isolation Hospital became No. 24 General Hospital Isolation Block 27 July 1915-March 1917, before becoming No. 46 Stationary Hospital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. No. 46 Stationary Hospital.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. No. 26 General Hospital, 21 June 1915 until 17 July 1919.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. No. 23 General Hospital, June 1915 until 15 November 1916. Staffed by Chicago Voluntary Medical Unit, 4 July 1915. Retitled No. 7 Canadian General Hospital, 15 November 1916.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. No. 6 BRCS, or Liverpool Merchants’ Hospital, 4 July 1915 until 1 June 1918. Located 19 April 1915-3 July 1915 in the Grand Hotel, Paris-Plage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. No. 51 General Hospital, 10 August 1915 until 29 June 1918. Also known as Allied Forces Base Hospital, it began in Hotel Christol, Boulogne, on 23 October 1914 with an annexe in Étaples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. No. 1 Canadian General.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. No. 56 General Hospital, 23 May 1917 until 26 April 1919. Also known as 2nd Southern Territorial Force Hospital because it was formed from the 2nd Southern Territorial Force at Bristol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Hut, June 1917 until the Air Raids of May-June 1918, when it moved to Rouen.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electro-therapeutic Hut attached to No. 6 Convalescent Camp, 1 October 1917.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Cross Ambulance Convoy, with dormitories, mess huts and workshops.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The hospitals

The British Base Hospitals at Étaples (Table 1) were established from June 1915 along the road and railway line bordering the estuary of the River Canche (1,19,21,22,23). A railway siding at Étaples could accommodate two ambulance trains either arriving with wounded from the Front or leaving for Boulogne with hospital patients to be evacuated to England (1). The sites where the hospitals stood are known from a plan of 1917 (Fig 1), but nowadays all traces of their presence are obliterated and the only surviving reminder of the war is the British Military Cemetery, one of the great war monuments of Sir Edwin Lutyens.
officers, one dental surgeon, 55 nurses, 23 VADs and 141
orderlies. The Commanding Officer was paid by the War
Office, the remaining staff, recruited by the Commanding
Officer, were paid by the St John Ambulance Brigade.
The hospital had 16 wards of 30, and 2 wards of 20 beds,
in specially commissioned huts (27) arranged in two lines
on either side of the administrative offices and connected
by covered ways. Although cameras were initially
forbidden, permission was given for a firm of commercial
photographers to record its much admired architectural
aspects. Its high degree of efficiency was considered to be
due to its having a permanent staff. On the other hand,
since it admitted only severely wounded cases, the death
rate was high (19). It had its own oil-fired electricity
generator, and plants for making ice and soda water.
There were two operating theatres and an anaesthetic
room, an X-ray department where almost half the
wounded men were X-rayed on admission using a
technique developed to show the position of foreign
bodies in three dimensions (20), an electro-cardiograph
(the only one in France at the time), and a pathological
laboratory frequently visited by members of Wright’s
laboratory in Boulogne. Visits from Colebrook were
especially welcome (Personal communication from the
author’s father, John McCloy: Who Was Who, 1940-
1950).

Opposing views on wound disinfection

Wright and his followers advocated a ‘physiological
method’ of wound treatment, in which the wound was
irrigated with a hypertonic salt solution to encourage the
release of fluid ‘charged with phagocytes’ (17). By 1916,
Wright had begun a vigorous campaign against the use of
antiseptics, which according to him would kill not only
the bacteria but also these phagocytes. Experiments in his
Boulogne laboratory, which seem initially to have been
mainly concerned with production of serum agglutinins
after vaccination, had moved on by then to examining the
efficiency of antiseptics in the presence of serum (28).

Wright’s antagonism towards the use of antiseptics
excited considerable controversy (29) and, of the Etaples
hospitals, No.26 General Hospital, in particular, did not
share his belief in the ‘physiological method’ of wound
 treatment. A ward of No.26 General Hospital had been
allocated to Surgeon-General Sir George Makins, with 2
surgeons and a bacteriologist, for study of treatment by the
so-called ‘Carrel-Dakin Method’ (2,19), a method
consisting of insertion of drainage tubes and irrigation
with buffered hypochlorite, or ‘Dakin’s solution’ (30). In
June 1917, a special ‘Observation Hut’, consisting of 2
wards, an operating theatre and a pathological laboratory,
was also set up in Etaples under Makins to compare
treatment of severe wounds by Carrel-Dakin, Bipp,
Dichloramine T, Flavine and simple aseptic methods.
Clinical trials suggested that the Carrel-Dakin method was
the best (1). But this conclusion was said to have been
later abandoned (11).

The end of the Etaples hospitals

The Etaples hospitals were destroyed by German air
raids which began on 19 May 1918 and continued until 10
August. There were grave doubts as to the wisdom of
having sited large military training camps and hospitals so
close together (21,26,31,32) but it was generally believed
that the enemy’s target was really the railway bridge over
the River Canche. This belief was confirmed when a
German airman who had been shot down said to his
rescuers ‘if you persist in placing hospitals beside railway
lines, they will continue to be bombed’ (33). In the first
attack of 19 May, in which 10 or 12 German planes took
part, more than 300 patients were killed or wounded and
incendiary bombs were dropped on the town of Etaples
(33). Further raids occurred on 27 and 31 May, 28, 29 and
31 June, 1, 25 and 31 July, and 10 August (34). The hospital
gardens were dug up for shelters (26). In the raid of 31 May,
the St John Hospital was rendered uninhabitable with serious loss of life (6). On 29 June,
No.51 Hospital was bombed (34). The Liverpool
Merchant’s Hospital received no direct hit but,
nevertheless, decided not to carry on and left Etaples for
Trouville on 1 June 1918 (3,4).

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