CAVALRY SURGEON

BY

Major J. B. NEAL

Royal Army Medical Corps

During recent reorganization in the Library of the Royal Army Medical College, four journals were found which had been kept by John Francis Smet, Surgeon of the 8th Light Dragoons, between 1815 and 1830. Two contain only copies of periodical returns—"Remarks and Observations" (on the health of troops) from October 1815 to February 1819, with daily meteorological observations over the whole of this period, and an intermittent series of half-yearly "Reports of Medical Transactions," Quarterly Dissection (i.e. Autopsy) Reports and Summary Observations on Prevailing Diseases from January 1819 to October 1821. A third is taken up, partly by copies of his claims for Medical Allowance (a per capita sum for the troops under his medical charge) from April 1815 to November 1821, and partly by copies of his outgoing letters. The fourth is wholly a letter book.

John Smet (he refers to his brother as Smith) graduated M.B. at Louvain in 1793 and joined the 8th (King's Royal Irish) Light Dragoons as a Regimental Mate (a Warrant Officer) on October 3, 1794. In this capacity he served in Belgium and Holland in 1794–5 and at home 1795–6, and embarked in August 1796 for the Cape of Good Hope, where on Christmas Day 1796 he was promoted Assistant Surgeon. At the end of 1802 the regiment moved to India, where Smet was promoted Surgeon on August 9, 1808, after having been once superseded for advancement.

Here he served, always with the same unit, until the end of 1821 when he came home on sick leave—the only leave, he tells us, which he had taken during his service. He rejoined the regiment at Norwich in November 1823, and retired on half-pay on December 2, 1824. He died on September 21, 1840.

None of the books available contains statistical returns, but it is possible to build from the reports a picture of the conditions and methods of military medical practice in India in the early nineteenth century, and to amplify it by extracts of the correspondence. Of the six years covered by the returns, the first five were spent in Meerut and the last in Cawnpore.

No numerical incidence of sickness can be quoted, but the Regimental Hospital contained one hundred and twelve cots, for a unit of upwards of 600 men, while the Quarterly Dissection Reports record up to fifteen necropsies in one three-monthly period. The reports describe well-sited and constructed barracks, while the tents used while the regiment was on the march were "high
and roomy, with double cloths with a space between to keep off the direct rays of the sun." No indication is given of the size of a barrack building or tent, nor of the number of men accommodated in each, except that "each troop has a barrack to itself."

Mr. Smet considered the "rations very ample, consisting of good bread and one pound of meat daily," mutton from April 1 to September 30, and either beef or mutton during the remainder of the year, together with half a pint of arrack daily per man, "generally new and distilled from sugar" and served out undiluted, "this being left to the men's discretion." (The constantly repeated references to hard drinking, excess of spirituous liquors, dissipation and drunkenness would indicate that discretion was not a universal virtue.) The report adds that "the regular rations are not however the only food the soldiers use, as their ample pay in a country where provisions are so very cheap enables them to have a variety of additional dishes on their tables daily."

Clothing during the five or sometimes six months of the cool season was as in Europe, while during the hot weather white calico, provided by the men at their own expense, was worn.

Living conditions are best described in Smet's own words: "The Europeans have native cooks and native attendants of every kind attached to them, and indeed it is not likely that soldiers enjoy so many conveniences and comforts, not to say luxuries, in any part of the globe as what they do under the Presidency of Fort William." This is borne out by a strength state dated October 25, 1817, while the regiment was engaged in a march beginning and ending at Meerut, which lasted from October 1817 until April 1818. This return shows a European strength of 611, with 4,433 natives, made up of: quartermaster's establishment 571, syces and grass-cutters 1,504, dooly bearers and hospital attendants 442, bazar followers 963 and "servants of all descriptions" 953.

For such a march, Smet states that "movements of troops (when not near an enemy) always take place in the hot season at so early an hour as to bring the Corps to its new encamping ground shortly after sunrise, and in the cold weather, the march is in general over by 9 o'clock."

Prevalent diseases include diarrhœa and dysentery (ascribed to the moist atmosphere and walking in wet shoes in long grass), febris continua communis ("frequently following dissipation"), synochus (a continued fever), hepatitis and pneumonia. Christmas and New Year are constantly accompanied by an increased incidence of diarrhœa and febris continua, and "dissipation on return from the siege of Hattrass" is blamed for an outbreak of diarrhœa and dysentery in March 1817. Venereal diseases are uncommonly mentioned: except when the regiment was marching, the "public women" were inspected weekly, always without warning, to prevent their taking steps to conceal any disability.

It is somewhat surprising to read that "cutaneous diseases are very rare, at least in this part of India. . . . I have once observed a few cases of lepra in a Native Battalion. . . . Psoriasis is not often met with amongst the natives,
and still more seldom amongst the Europeans. No other cutaneous disease (in so far as I can remember) has ever come under my observation.” At the time he wrote this, Smet had served thirteen years in India.

During the period covered by these reports, three outbreaks of cholera are described, though in little detail. One is the basis of a lengthy report to the War Office, but as it is in the form of answers to a questionary, and the questions are not given, the answers lose something of their value. In the first, July-October 1819, the number of cases is not stated, but all but one recovered on treatment by “bleeding, hot baths, fomentations and very large opiates.” In 1820, 4 cases out of 8 died, while in 1821, the disease broke out on May 21 and continued to the end of the year. The reports here are deficient, and no figures are available for the April-July quarter: the only evidence for July-October is the Dissection Report, in which seven necropsies on cholera patients are recorded; while in the quarter October 1821–January 1822, 7 patients died out of 19. The report for this quarter ends: “The cholera morbus has now left us.”

Mr. Smet’s treatment of cholera has already been noted. For dysentery and diarrhoea he relied upon purgatives, followed by either a mixture of castor oil, gum arabic and tincture of opium, or pills of calomel, ipecacuanha and opium. Febris continua communis was met by cold affusions to the shaven head, blisters, leeches and venesection, while intermittent fevers received decoction of cherayta (a “kind of gentian”) mixed with “moderate quantities of neutral salts”: quinine was not well regarded owing to the frequent symptomless “obstructions of the liver” encountered in those who had spent many years in India.

The remedy for piles is unfortunately illegible, but oil of wheat is noted for ringworm, and for gonorrhoea “kabaub chinee, a name of a seed resembling black pepper. About a tablespoonful of this seed powdered and mixed with a pint of water is recommended.”

In March 1820, there is a reply to the Secretary of the Medical Board on a therapeutic trial of Aluminous Chalybeate Water, which Smet found a “very powerful medicine, which consequently requires very great circumspection in ordering it for soldiers, who are generally addicted to excesses in spirits and whose stomachs are often very irritable.” He speaks of its “good effects in debility of the stomach and that general languor which follows great dissipation,” and proposes to give it a full and fair trial “should any cases occur of spleen, rickets or gleet” and “in the complaints women are subject to.”

Vaccination against smallpox was conscientiously carried out, “vaccine matter” being sent from Calcutta at the beginning of each cold season and propagated as long as possible by inoculating only a few children each week. When the supply of available children failed, dried crusts were kept and used until they lost their potency.

Necropsy was performed in every fatal case “except when, from the funeral party being in waiting, or the time taken in dissecting some other body, it was not found practicable.” In one quarterly report, three necropsies only are
recorded, occupying together less than one foolscap page. In view of the pencilled note at the foot of this sheet, "... the manner of drawing up the post-mortem reports is concise yet descriptive, and cannot easily be improved upon," one of them may be quoted in full as written:

"Philip Murtaugh, a large strong man seldom in hospital, though like the foregoing one a very hard drinker, died on 2nd April [1820] of Hepatitis Acuta. In this case the thorax was not examined as the state of the abdomen made that unnecessary, and which from want of time was impracticable (the funeral party being in waiting very soon, almost as soon as the body was quite cold), the liver was of a very large size the right lobe of which adhered to the short ribs and contained an abscess which broke on turning it the amount of pus in it amounted to at least 11 oz. the whole abdomen was filled with water, the intestines were healthy."

To complete this general survey, we may quote the "Commissary-General's statement of the number of camels allowed for the Hospital of a regiment of Dragoons":

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camel loads of clothing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camel loads of bedding</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camel loads of medicines</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camel loads of wine</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking utensils and such things as bazaars don't supply</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plates and mugs, etc.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close stool pans</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spare Camels</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
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Turning now to the letter books, we can see from Smet's day-to-day correspondence something of the problems of a Regimental Surgeon. On July 15, 1815, he writes to the Commanding Officer, Lieut.-Colonel Westenra: "Sir, I beg leave to represent to you that a considerable proportion of the hospital cots are out of repair, and require to be new bottomed, and request that you will have the goodness to take the necessary steps to render them again serviceable for the patients on them. . . ."

At this time Smet was engaged in a law-suit in the local courts against an Indian. The origins of this do not appear, but in one letter he states that "the late Sibnarain Mozoondar of Cawnpore had been put in jail some days before his death for the sum of RS. 13,441-1-10." There is a copy of a letter authorizing John Crake, Surgeon of His Majesty's 67th Regiment, to receive on Smet's behalf such monies as might be paid by the Judge of the Zillah Court at Cawnpore, together with a formidable inventory of Sibnarain's property, but there is no record of whether the debt was ever settled.

Crake appears to have been a close friend of Smet's, and, after his death, Smet exercised an unofficial guardianship over his child, born, it appears, of an irregular local union.
On September 16, 1815, there is a letter to an unknown patient: "Dear Sir, I told you in my last note that your Fevers depended upon your way of living, and that it was of no use to take medicines for their removal unless you altered your mode of life, which I believe you either cannot or will not do. Under these circumstances, it cannot be very pleasant for me to attend to your complaints, unless attention is paid to my Directions, even if my time was not so much taken up as it is. . . . I shall not mention to the Adjutant that I have repeatedly urged your being on horseback every morning at 5 o'clock, the restoration of your health and keeping healthy depending thereon. It will depend on yourself to follow my directions given in the way of my Profession, or to act for yourself whatever the consequences may be."

Shortly after this there is a protracted correspondence between Smet and his Commanding Officer regarding the health of a young Cornet. Smet reports that he has had biles [sic] on his legs, several attacks of fever, and a contusion of the foot from his horse treading on it, but he pleads too short an acquaintance to express an opinion on his mental state. The Cornet is frequently found intoxicated, but Smet cannot decide whether from spirits or from drugs introduced into the hookah. We never learned the outcome of this unhappy case.

Reference has already been made to the daily ration issue of half a pint of spirits, and in October 1815 Smet records that this is increased to a pint when extra batta is issued. Plainly anticipating observations on his report of the death from drunkenness of two troopers, he submits a recommendation that, between March and October, spirits should be issued twice rather than once daily, and diluted with a double quantity of water. He also suggests that "it will be of material advantage to their health to impede, as far as is practicable, their obtaining any additional quantity of spirits to purchase, or their hoarding it up on the days preceding those on which they expect this extra allowance."

In January 1816, he writes to one of his Assistant Surgeons, who has sent for him from his bed in the early hours of the morning: "From the many disagreeable occurrences which have happened in my intercourse with the Assistant Surgeons since I am promoted, I can but conclude that an inclination to insult me exists. . . . You must know, in our relative situations, if an excess of wine makes you so unguarded as you have been, it will be your own fault if I am ever put to the necessity of taking serious notice of the like occurrence if ever repeated."

An attempted suicide on May 12, 1816, brings more trouble. On account of the distance—half a mile—of the hospital from the barracks, Smet had arranged for a doolie to be permanently available near the Serjeant-Major's Quarters. This could not be found when it was wanted for the suicidal trooper, and enquiries revealed that during the previous two years it had become the practice for the Orderly Serjeant to go daily for orders to Brigade Headquarters in the doolie. Serjeant-Major Ward writes to Cornet Stammers, the Adjutant: "Sir, the doolie is ordered to the hospital every morning when drills are over.
The Orderly Sergeant had to take his horse yesterday—there is no doolie for the Sergeant to go in today. The Colonel ordered they should go every day for orders in a doolie—please to let me know how the Serjt. is to go.” Meanwhile Smet writes to the Officiating Superintending Surgeon, asking to be relieved of the duty of managing the doolies and bearers, and concluding: “As everything which is directed from Authority must of course be done, and continue to be so, and I may not be relieved from the duties assigned to me by the 37th Article, how am I to conduct myself? or would Government not allow an additional doolie on application (an Adjutant’s Orderly Sergeant’s doolie) with which the Hospital Establishment would have no concern whatever.”

(The correspondence on this subject continues intermittently until September 1817, while in August 1819 there is a record of the Auditor-General disallowing the cost of additional doolies, then said to have been originally authorized in 1804.)

This is closely followed by two other letters, one complaining that seven new brass stool pans received from the Commissariat leak: the second explaining that the allowance of lamp-oil is insufficient to permit of the wards, cooking-room and “necessaries” being lighted all night.

In July 1816, whether to the Commanding Officer or to the Superintending Surgeon does not appear: “Dear Sir, I am sorry you have disapproved of the state the hospital was in yesterday, and that I had not better understood the Regulations. Had I known I would not be allowed to fill in the old Prescription Books, though drawn out in the new form of the Diary, I should certainly not have done so. The boards to paste the Diet Tables on will be ready today. I trust that experience will show you that there is no good will wanting on my part to follow up your Directions.”

At the end of 1816 there is difficulty about Hospital Stoppages. Smet, strongly supported by the Superintending Surgeon, has been marking as excused only those patients whose disabilities are covered by the strict wording of the regulations, namely, Fracture, Dislocations, Severe Bite of a Horse and Dangerous Contusion of the Head. The Colonel, however, favoured a more liberal interpretation, to cover any injury sustained on duty, and apparently obtained the approval of the Commander-in-Chief for his view, as Smet is required to furnish a list, retrospective from December 19, when the order was published, to August 1, 1816, of men exempted under the new ruling, in respect of whom a refund was to be claimed.

In August or September 1817 we find a conflict of professional opinion: “I find myself sufficiently warranted in approving of Capt. Williams’s proposal to improve the use of Howley’s arm, which does not appear to me to be done as the man in question is deemed a malingerer, nor do I object to his being shown to the Superintending Surgeon, provided the information and opinion of Surgeon Macdowall is first applied for, as that officer can give as much information on the original injury as I can on the present state I find it in. . . .”
In October 1817 Smet, in Camp Agra, has medical charge of the 1st Troop or Battery of Native Horse Artillery, and from his claim for Monthly Medical Allowance the pay of a “Native Doctor” appears as ten rupees a month.

A letter of October 1818 to an unknown officer is worth while quoting in full: “Dear Colonel, I had proof a couple of years ago of your regard for the 8th Dragoons in a letter you wrote to the late Sir John Floyd [Colonel of the Regiment] where you spoke so well of the Extract of the Regimental Record Book referring to the memorable 18th May, 1794, which letter was communicated to me as being the Author of this Record Book. I therefore claim your former acquaintance and venture to introduce the bringer of this letter to your favourable notice as being an old and faithful Dragoon who was in the field on that dreadful day—it is Patrick McKeon, whom you will undoubtedly recollect: this old and regular soldier is now invalided, and has requested me to say a word explanatory of how he has conducted himself these many years, should he fall in with Sir John Ormsby Vandeleur or with you. I hear the General Sir John lives abroad, and therefore address this letter more particularly to you in this man’s favor, who has always been a very clean Dragoon, for ever a duty man, keeping himself sober (a great wonder in India) with perhaps a very occasional omission—he hopes that if he can wait upon you with a favorable character he may get by your assistance some employment amongst the gentlemen you may be acquainted with, if he is found not altogether undeserving of it.”

(The Regimental Record Book refers to an “Historical Record of the Regiment from its being Raised until 1803” which Smet had written, and which forms the subject of a later letter. The action of May 18, 1794, refers to an engagement at Bousbecque (Rousbeck according to Cannon: Bouslieke in Smet’s own book) on the river Lys during the war against the French Republican Army, in which the 8th Light Dragoons had played a gallant and effective part.)

On October 21, 1818, he writes to a fellow-officer: “You found me some days ago in the midst of new forms of Returns of a very perplexing kind which Surgeons are directed to send quarterly to Europe [i.e. to the Army Medical Department] and a strict uniformity is enjoined.” He goes on to invite his correspondent to arrange with the surgeons of all the King’s (i.e. as distinct from the East India Company’s) regiments for the new form to be taken into use for the following, rather than for the current, quarter. (It later appears that in February 1819 the orders were amended to require the return to be made in duplicate, while in July 1819 a fresh form again is prescribed.)

In April 1820 Smet writes personally to Sir James McGrigor (then Director-General) enclosing two subscriptions which he has collected for the Medical Officers’ Widows’ Fund, with a request that the donors’ names should be printed in the Annual Report.

On May 7, 1821, there is a request for the use of an Electrifying Machine on loan from the Medical Depot, “to which it shall hereafter be carefully returned.” There is no indication of the disability for which this apparatus,
which was demanded at the instance of the Assistant Surgeons, was required.

On July 24, 1821, Smet places his apothecary under arrest, notifying him and the Major of Brigade in writing, accompanied by the charge: "Crime, Mr. George Daly, Apothecary doing duty in the Hospital of the 8th Light Dragoons by order of Major-General Sir G. Martindale comg. the Field Army, put under arrest by me with the sanction of G. Reddie, Esqre. Superintending Surgeon at this station, for being drunk in the Hospital on the night of the 22 of July and bleeding a patient while in that state about the hour of half past nine p.m."

Shortly after this begins the end of a chapter. Smet had left England with the regiment in August 1796, and after six years at the Cape of Good Hope, had served in India since the end of 1802 without, according to his letters, having taken any leave whatever. Now, in September 1821, he sees "a fair prospect of being able to get ready by the first of November, to proceed upon sick certificate to Calcutta, and thence to Europe." He applies for a sick leave certificate on the grounds of acute ophthalmia which has troubled him in hot weather for three successive years, and receives:

"I do hereby certify that Mr. J. F. Smet, Surgeon, His Majesty's 8th Rt. Light Dragoons, is in a bad state of health, and I think it highly advisable for him to return to Europe by the first opportunity."
Calcutta, (Sgd.) James Meik,
31st December 1821.

This is forwarded to the Brigade Major, with an application to take with him as his servant George Connolly, a private of the 8th Light Dragoons who is to be invalided to England, and a request for passage in the East India Company's ship "Princess Charlotte of Wales."

He arranges for receipt and disposal of his pay, and executes a power of attorney in favour of Messrs. Alexander and Co. of Calcutta to manage the 69,400 rupees-worth of East India Company stock which he holds. And so, after little less than twenty years' continuous service in India, he sails on February 23, 1822, on two years' sick leave.

While Smet was on leave, the regiment returned to England, leaving Cawnpore by march route on October 2, 1822, embarking in the "Dorsetshire" on January 11, 1823, disembarking at Gravesend on May 5, and proceeding to Norwich and Ipswich.

During his leave, spent in Guernsey, Smet replies, on August 23, 1822, to a letter from the Army Medical Department dated February 20, 1821, and containing observation on his half-yearly reports of as far back as July 1819. These are answered, and he goes on to express himself "happy to find . . . notice taken of the excessive labour in India which surgeons have to bear . . . the mass of writing to be attended to, or written by the surgeon himself alone is excessive. It refers to a great variety of documents for the Military, Medical
and Commissariat Department in India, exclusive of what is required in the
Hospital and for the Europe returns.”

November 7, 1823, finds him recalled to duty in consequence of the
death of Assistant-Surgeon Carter, and several pages are filled with letters of
protest, including a petition to the Commander-in-Chief. But all these are
deleted, the petition is marked “Not presented;” and nothing remains but two
notes saying that he will “set off with the utmost expedition.”

Smet rejoined his regiment at Norwich, but at the end of April 1824 he
applies for, and is granted, the four months’ leave which he had foregone on
recall. Assistant-Surgeon Farnden is brought in from detachment to head­
quarters, and Smet arranges at his own expense for a Militia Surgeon (Nash)
to take charge of the detachment in Ipswich. This virtually closes Smet’s
military career, and the remaining letters are largely concerned with personal
affairs—his daughter Louisa (his wife is nowhere mentioned), Crake’s orphan son
and family financial matters.

Two only call for mention here. One, a long letter of August 1825 to
Adjutant Glanville explaining the origins of the Regimental Record Book which
he had compiled, stating how when he joined in 1794 there were officers still
serving who had entered in 1762 and whose reminiscences, edited by a Captain
of Invalids whose father had served in the regiment during the ’45 Rebellion,
formed the basis of his work. The original of this letter may survive, for
passages from it are quoted in Murray’s “History of the VIII King’s Royal Irish
Hussars” published in 1928.

The other, of April 2, 1826, is to his agents, arranging for the drawing of
his pension, and enquiring, quite inexplicably in a man who had served for over
thirty years in one regiment of cavalry, during which he had seen them
converted from Light Dragoons to Hussars, whether he should style himself
“Retired Surgeon” or “Half-pay Surgeon of the —th Regiment of Infantry.”

The reading of a one-sided correspondence leaves many matters of interest
unexplained or unfulfilled, and not least this belated suggestion of an infantry
association.

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The following have been consulted, in addition to the journals from which the material
has been drawn:
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1928.
Cavalry Surgeon

J. B. Neal

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