The Origin of the Volunteer Medical Staff Corps in 1885

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On 1st April 1985 the Territorial Army Medical Services celebrated the Centenary of the official establishment of the Volunteer Medical Staff Corps which was to develop from small beginnings into the Royal Army Medical Corps of the Territorial Army.

The study of the origins of the Volunteer Medical Services of the Army brings to light a remarkable set of coincidences.

A military surgeon develops an interest in First Aid and produces the manuscript of a manual on the subject but dies on an African Campaign before it can be completed and published. He has however entrusted the manuscript to a friend who is an Aberdeen graduate and who has migrated South to Charing Cross Hospital. This Aberdonian, while at University, had developed a friendship and shared lodgings with a native of Banffshire whom he eventually attracted to the surgical staff of the Charing Cross Hospital.

This young man from Banff was encouraged by his old friend of Aberdeen days to take on the task of bringing to publication the draft first aid manual of the deceased Army Surgeon. This he did with an enthusiasm that fired his imagination to establish a group of first aiders drawn from the ranks of the medical students at his hospital.

In his spare time our young surgeon devoted some of his unbounded energies to serving the medical needs of the London Scottish Volunteers and so became aware of the lack of medical support for the Army's Volunteer Units. He found a ready solution by marshalling the resources already available to him in the shape of first aid oriented medical students at his hospital and with them laid the foundations of what are now the Territorial Army Medical Services.

The following account is based on and quotes extensively from *James Cantlie, A Romance in Medicine* by Neil Cantlie (one of his sons) and George Seaver published in 1939 and *The Quality of Mercy, the Lives of Sir James and Lady Cantlie* by Jean Cantlie Stewart (his grand-daughter) published in 1983.

James Cantlie first saw the light of day on 17 January 1851 at Keithmore in the Parish of Mortlach by Dufftown in the County of Banff. He commenced his university career in the Faculty of Arts at the King's College of Aberdeen University in October 1866 and during his early days struck up a friendship with John Mitchell Bruce, a more senior student who was studying medicine. They came to share the same lodgings and it

was Bruce who led him to the study of medicine and later planned the first steps in his life's career.

Vacations for Cantlie were spent at Keithmore working on the farm, fishing in the Fiddich burn or the Spey, or roaming over the hills in search of rare plants. Combining his interests in arts and science at the University he graduated MA with Honours in Natural Science in 1871.

His actual medical studies in Aberdeen lasted but one year, for in 1872 Mitchell Bruce, who had joined the staff of Charing Cross Hospital, asked Cantlie to join him in London. They shared lodgings in Gray's Inn Place and Cantlie attended lectures at Charing Cross Hospital Medical School. It was not unusual for students of medicine to divide their studies between medical schools and Cantlie took his friend's advice and followed the classes at Charing Cross Hospital Medical School, but out of loyalty to his alma mater, he sat the examination of Aberdeen University. Characteristically, he undertook the journeys to Aberdeen by sea.

James Cantlie was appointed Demonstrator of Anatomy, at the Medical School of Charing Cross Hospital in 1873, the year he qualified MB CM of Aberdeen. He was appointed Assistant Surgeon in 1878 and became Senior Assistant Surgeon in 1880, the year in which he developed an interest in first aid.

Mitchell Bruce, an Aberdonian on the staff of Charing Cross, had attracted Cantlie there and Surgeon-Major Peter Sheppard, also an Aberdonian and friend of Mitchell Bruce, was preparing a text-book on "First Aid to the Injured" for the St John Ambulance Brigade. Ordered unexpectedly to the Zulu War, Sheppard called on Bruce and dumped some pages of the unfinished manuscript on the table and, after explaining he was leaving for South Africa within the hour, he asked Bruce to keep the papers for him, or to finish the book if he never returned.

Sheppard was killed at Isandhlwana, gallantly sacrificing his life for a comrade, and the manuscript was left on Cantlie's hands by Bruce.

His interest now thoroughly aroused, Cantlie began to give public lectures on First Aid at St John's Gate, the Headquarters of the St. John Ambulance Brigade. The success of the lectures was proved by the wave of enthusiasm which, spreading from St John's Gate as a centre, swept over London. Lectures and meetings were arranged at various centres, while a ripple even penetrated to the strongholds of officialdom in Whitehall, for we hear of him addressing an ambulance class at the Admiralty!

In 1882 Cantlie joined the London Scottish Volunteers as an Assistant Surgeon, and delighted in the chance to wear the kilt once more, whilst Easter marches and camps gave him a welcome change from the atmosphere of the wards and the dissecting room. This appointment was fraught with far-reaching consequences and was to lead him to the most important issue of his life, for it was during a camp on Wimbledon Common that he first made the acquaintance of Miss Mabel Barclay Brown, his destined wife. Her father, Robert Barclay Brown, was in the Regiment, a large-framed and large-hearted Scotsman with curling beard, magnificent in the kilt. On July 30th 1884, his marriage to Miss Barclay Brown took place at the Church of St Martin's in the Fields. She proved to be, in the truest possible sense of the word, a helpmate for him.

In March 1883, Mr Andrew Maclure of the London Scottish Volunteers, who realised the importance of placing the responsibility for organisation and training of stretcher bearers upon the Volunteer Surgeons, asked Cantlie to deliver first-aid lectures to a class of volunteers. He also invited him to witness the subsequent stretcher drill. "While I was instructing and watching stretcher drill", wrote Cantlie,

"I was struck with the usefulness such instruction would be to medical men. The medical curriculum gave us no such knowledge, the lifting of patients, the

carriage of the injured by road and rail formed no part of our instruction. One night whilst trudging westwards through sleet and slush after the class was over, the idea of teaching medical students stretcher drill came into my mind. Gradually the vista opened. I saw those medical students applying their knowledge to the movement of patients in hospital. I saw these young men scattered throughout the country . . . carrying with them a practical knowledge of ambulance (sic.) and becoming Volunteer Surgeons and instructors of stretcher bearers in the battalions to which they belonged. I believed also saw a connecting link whereby the surgeons might be gathered together into a coherent body instead of existing as separate units; the genesis in fact of the Volunteer Medical Association."

Cantlie proceeded to invite the Regular Army Sergeant Instructor to come to Charing Cross Hospital and teach the students. He told them of his plan and asked them to join the drill. Seventy-two joined that afternoon and for the first time orders of "Attention", "Lift Stretcher", "Lower Stretcher" echoed around Charing Cross. The drills took place three times a week and their popularity increased as well as their efficiency.

One day, at the end of his anatomical demonstration Cantlie was presented a card bearing the name of Surgeon Major Evatt from the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. Evatt had experience of Field Ambulance work in the Afghan Wars and had been sent by Maclure because he too was interested in developing a volunteer ambulance movement. The two men repaired to Romano's and there, over a steak, decided to call a meeting of the Volunteer Surgeons in the Board Room of Charing Cross Hospital. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Volunteer Medical Association with General W G Hunter as Chairman, Surgeon Major Evatt (later Surgeon General Sir George Evatt) as Vice-Chairman and Cantlie as Secretary. By June, fifty-one surgeons had joined and all the medical schools had representatives.

fresh from his 1883 Egyptian triumph; the success of the parade; the glorious weather which favoured it; the hopefulness of the future of the movement; all combined to render it a period on which memory loves to dwell."

Lord Wolseley proved to be one of Cantlie's staunchest allies. At the distribution of prizes in Charing Cross Hospital Medical School after the inspection, Lord Wolseley spoke in eulogistic terms of the parade. What, in Cantlie's view, was more important still, he unfolded the idea to the large assembly present, and next morning the Volunteers throughout the Kingdom read the words 'Volunteer Medical Staff Corps' in the press.

The significance of this publicity was not lost on Mitchell Bruce, who remarks in his diary of July 8th –

"This movement which promises to be of national extent and importance originated entirely with Cantlie. He has fought the battle single-handed and we now can say that he has won it."

As with all new movements, success was not certain until finance was assured. Offers were not long in coming. On 25 July Sir William McCormac sent for Cantlie and told him that the National Aid Society had granted £250 towards the training of ambulance companies. Cantlie now realised with gratitude that, should the Government not receive the Corps into the Volunteers, the NAS would allow them to enlist under its auspices and train an ambulance of medical men and hospital assistants ready to help in national emergencies. 'The Globe' newspaper welcomed such a plan, pointing out that the 'funds of the NAS, instead of lying idle, would be usefully employed in supplying the ambulance material for the bearer companies, which the new organisation seems able to enlist.' Cantlie knew however that, while appreciating the moral and financial support, the volunteer surgeons would wish to stand, if it were possible, side by side with their regular brethren in the Army Medical Department.

In October 1883 Evatt put into action his plan to raise recruits from medical students of other London hospitals by means of a lecture tour. This brought into the movement University College, the London Hospital, St Bartholomew's, St Thomas's, the Middlesex and Guy's – St Mary's joining the movement when it became established as a Corps. During the winter, meetings of the Association were held on 13th February; Sir Trevor Lawrence, M.P., introduced a deputation of Volunteer Surgeons, civilian doctors, teachers in London medical schools and members of the ambulance association to Lord Hartington, Secretary of State for War. The deputation said that, while the Volunteers possessed regimental surgeons, they had no medical department or hospital corps to organise divisional bearer companies or field hospitals. The deputation stated that there would be no difficulty in starting such a medical corps which would stand in the same relation to the volunteer forces as the Army Medical Department did to the Regular Army, but that it would need a capitation allowance and ambulance training material. Lord Hartington expressed his favour, but promised nothing until Parliament debated the Army estimates. He allowed the deputation to hope, however, that the idea would be favourably entertained in the next session, and he spoke so encouragingly that Cantlie and the other members left with firm hope of recognition and confidence in the future.

While awaiting a decision from those in authority, the obvious next step was to bring together the seven hospital companies in which there was an understratum of feud and rivalry. The trouble was, as Cantlie recounts, that

"Every Hospital wanted their own separate company, and, with but a few exceptions, the prejudice seemed insurmountable, not only with the men themselves, but with the members of the Hospital staff at many Schools, who had set their faces against amalgamation. Under these circumstances, I believed that a uniform was the only means of breaking down the barrier and bringing about cohesion in one battalion. But how was the money for such a uniform to be raised? I happened in these straits to come across Mr McGill of the firm Pipe and McGill in Maiden Lane. I informed him we wanted a uniform and asked him to supply patterns of cloth similar to that worn by the Medical Staff Corps of the Army. Gradually it came about that I made a proposal to this effect; (like all north-east Scots Cantlie thought it bad manners to ask directly for something; instead he cast a fly and waited for the fish to rise) I said that my object was to get Government recognition for the Corps, and in the meantime I wanted them clad in uniform for two reasons; first to induce the various hospital companies to come together, and secondly to make so good an appearance that the Government dare not

refuse us recognition. I pointed out to Mr McGill that the sum I meant to spend for the good of the nation was more than I dared risk, and that, did we not get recognition, it was a question of my going bankrupt on principle. I believed that, did the public come to know how such a catastrophe came about, it was certain a question would be asked in the House and the matter brought up. Mr McGill saw my arguments, believed their cogency, and pushed on the clothing of the men with all speed. Nor has he lived to repent it. He got, thereby, an introduction to every Medical School in London and extended his private business accordingly."

The uniform was modelled on the Army pattern, but there were some points on which there was discussion: the Regular Army Medical Staff Corps undress uniform cap was the ordinary forage cap worn by the line regiments, while the scientific Corps, Engineers and so forth wore the round cap.

"The War Office, I was told, would not allow the round cap. It was not allowed for the Regulars, and therefore would be vetoed for the Volunteers. However, as we were not yet under military authority we got the round caps and wore them. When the time came for laying them aside the same story was repeated, and then came the tussle. I pointed out to the authorities that . . . its not being allowed in the Regular Army was no reason why the Volunteers should not have their just due. That rather than give way, we would enrol ourselves under the National Aid Society. . . . Whatever the reason may have been the round cap was allowed us. As the summer wore on, the drills were attended by more men in uniform, until only recruits appeared in civilian dress at Battalion Drill. There was, however, still friction; the old separate hospital notion had not died out. Companies had to be equalised in Battalion Drill and men had to fall out of their own hospital ranks and join those of another with fewer men. Hospitals with large numbers asked what was the good of getting sufficient men together to form a Company when at parades their numbers were bled to supply the efficiency of less energetic officers and students of other hospitals."

Cantlie decided that what was needed was

"to inculcate into the students a higher loyalty, an *esprit de corps* more binding than even their respective hospitals could prove. . . . In such circumstances my mind turned again to an inspection by some prominent person as the only means of diverting the thoughts of the students from themselves and infusing the battalion with a feeling of common interest. Who was the great one to be procured? . . . After Lord Wolseley's inspection, when we were elated with the success of the parade, I had determined to infringe further on his Lordship's good nature, and accordingly wrote asking him if he

could bring it about that the bearer company he had inspected could go to Windsor and appear before Her Majesty the Queen. Lord Wolseley had replied with his wonted courtesy that he did not think the time had arrived for such a step, but that on a future occasion when we were better equipped, he would consider it. . . . I therefore wrote now to Lord Wolseley concerning the matter, and reminded him of my request and of his reply the previous year. Day after day went past and no reply came. The middle of July was approaching and still I heard nothing. A few days more and the fulfilment of my scheme would be impossible owing to the breaking up of the Schools. The horizon was dark, when it was suddenly lit up by a letter from Lord Wolseley announcing that he had forwarded my letter to Windsor, but that Her Majesty the Queen found it impossible to grant my request for the present year. However, at Her Majesty's request, he had sent on my letter to Her Royal Highness, the Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne, to whom he had spoken on the subject previously. Accordingly I had a letter on July 16th from the ADC announcing that Her Royal Highness had consented to see the Hospital companies, and that the only day possible before the 24th when the Schools broke up was the following day, the 17th at 2.30 p.m. Here was a dilemma! The intimation that Her Royal Highness was coming was most gratifying, but the time! The men were not in barracks to be called together by a bugle. They were attending at different hospitals and living in houses and lodgings scattered all over London. It was 9 p.m. on the 16th when we got the news, but as moments were valuable we did not discuss the matter, but set to work and dispatched letters and telegrams in all directions. I enlisted a number of Charing Cross Hospital students for the evening and their willing hands did giant work. At 1 a.m. I went round the various daily papers and had it announced in the notices for the day that Her Royal Highness, Princess Louise, would be present in St. George's Barracks to see the Ambulance Companies paraded for inspection. The inspection came off, not entirely satisfactorily, but the men looked well in their new uniforms and went through their work creditably. There was a fair gathering of onlookers and after the parade the Marquis addressed the Companies and in a capital speech gave an account of the possibilities of ambulance work. With a hearty cheer in honour of Her Royal Highness the inspection ended and once again the members dispersed for their holidays."

Cantlie was now told by the War Office that it would be necessary to find lay recruits, for a Corps formed only of medical students would not meet with approval since they would only be in the ranks for about two-and-a-half years. 'But where to find such recruits?' Cantlie asked himself.

"I had lectured for a good many years in ambulance work at the Birkbeck Institute (now London University) and got well acquainted with a few of the more prominent students to whom I unfolded my plan. With enthusiasm they set to work to spread the idea, so that within three weeks fifty men were enrolled. After careful thought I decided to take advantage of the cordial atmosphere of a smoking concert to unfold the news. I therefore asked the Birkbeck Company to come to the students' room of Charing Cross Hospital Medical School half an hour before the time of the concert and to stay to the concert afterwards. As the medical students assembled with their friends from the other Schools they found stretcher drill proceeding, but did not recognise the Birkbeck men. I enlightened them and tried to get the onlookers to admire the drill, but my announcement was received coldly. The students began to whisper among themselves and retired out of view to converse. . . . At last one or two spoke out and said that were any but medical men to belong to the contemplated Corps they would resign. I knew this was coming, it was no good pointing out to the lads of seventeen that the Corps was an impossibility unless laymen belonged to it. . . . When the drill was over and the concert began it was difficult to get harmony. The Birkbeck men sat in one corner, the medical students in another. At last one of the former gave a capital song and proved an excellent musician; affairs went on more smoothly and at the end of the concert the two sets of men were favourably impressed with one another."

Thus the most critical moment in the life of the Corps was successfully passed and a further company of lay recruits was later enrolled at Woolwich. Meanwhile, the War Office had also advised that the movement must include hospital medical schools and universities all over the country and Evatt had set out on a lecture tour to bring these students in as recruits. Cantlie accompanied Evatt on almost all of these tours. Owen's College, Manchester, and the Yorkshire College, Leeds, were accomplished in an afternoon and evening, with the two men returning on the midnight express. Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dublin and Belfast involved more time. In Edinburgh, the Principal Medical Officer of the Forces in Scotland was Lord Wolseley's brother, and the medical students already made up two of the finest companies of the Queen's Edinburgh, of which the Lord Advocate was the Colonel. This did not prevent him from encouraging the students to join the new Medical Corps which he promised to present with an ambulance wagon. The result was 'a magnificent body of men in the blue uniform of the VMSC'. Leaving for Aberdeen, Cantlie's alma mater, at 5.00 a.m., they met a committee already formed to raise a branch of medical students for the Volunteer Medical Association. At Trinity College, Dublin, where Evatt had trained, the doctors were well

received and Evatt's words drew much applause on account of their remarkable powers of address and persuasion. Cantlie records that as a result of this visit the medical students of Trinity enrolled as a company of the VMSC, a great achievement, as Ireland had no volunteers and at Queen's College, Belfast, there was the same satisfactory result. A further company was also raised at Maidstone. Press reports in these towns commented on Evatt's talks on military ambulance and Cantlie's lectures on peace-time first aid, in which he pointed out how much civilian doctors could learn from the military about the movement of patients and organisation of hospitals, and 'The Lancet' made particular mention of the evils of separating military and civil medicine.

The last qualifying step having been taken, Cantlie was told in February that a grant for the VMSC was in the Army estimates for the year and throughout March he was in the War Office daily. On 3 March a request was made to General Hunter from the Medical Department of the War Office to nominate an officer for the command of the new Corps and Hunter returned Cantlie's name. On 1 April 1885 the Volunteer Medical Staff Corps was gazetted with a constitution of four companies, an adjutant, a quartermaster and a surgeon commandant.

On the evening of Wednesday 1 April 1885, the day the Volunteer Medical Staff Corps was officially gazetted, the outpatient department and board room of Charing Cross Hospital were in effect converted into a military equipment store containing greatcoats, side arms, belts, water bottles, haversacks. The men were 'sworn in' in the Board Room. After assembling in front of the hospital, the Corps marched to the Chapel Royal, Savoy, where the Chaplain 'in an earnest address and service, baptised the infant corps and sent it forth with his blessing for a long life of usefulness.'

One last obstacle had to be overcome, the procuring of a band. Cantlie decided that, although the Regulars still had no band, the VMSC who, according to the Press after a military camp at Aldershot in August, showed considerable musical prowess, would endeavour to secure one. "At their first annual inspection," he wrote, "they had marched past to the 'tuck o' the drum' and the effect was not exhilarating and the marching not steady".

"I made up my mind to have a band by next year. I found out, however, that permission for its formation was not likely to be forthcoming; in fact there was not the slightest hope. The Medical Staff of the Army had eight years before subscribed between £8000 and £9000 for a band, but when they asked permission from the War Office the petition was refused. Nothing daunted, I not only found a bandmaster, but also a band ready to hand, and it was merely a question of clothing them in our clothing and the thing was settled. Again, however, the War Office gave me no hope. Director General Crawford was

afraid the request was futile. General Elkington could find no precedent and the door seemed shut in my face. All the time I was getting the band into uniform. As a last resort I determined to go to the War Office, and with a map of the distribution of the Volunteer Forces in Great Britain, which I had drawn up, to boldly face Lord Wolseley, bent on attaining my end. The map I exposed to his scrutiny and in a few seconds he gave me valuable suggestions which I duly noted. I asked if the Volunteer Corps were allowed bands officially, and, when this turned out to be the case, I ventured to add that the VMSC was a Volunteer Corps, therefore we could have a band. 'Certainly', said Lord Wolseley; but, on further thought, he added, 'I cannot see what a doctors' corps wants a band for – and besides, the Duke of Cambridge won't allow it. He would not give it to the Regulars'."

Cantlie described to Lord Wolseley how useful the band would be at inspections, concerts, theatricals and social gatherings, pointing out that the Volunteers were only held together by the unity of good fellowship and that the band would act as a focus, whilst, in addition, a band in a hospital encampment would 'enliven the monotony of hospital life and cheer the weary patient'. To Cantlie's delight Lord Wolseley suddenly said, 'Well, put in your application and I will back it up'. "That very afternoon," says Cantlie,

"I sent in the application to the Director General, who promised to forward it. It was certainly urgent,

as the day was Tuesday, and on Monday I had arranged that the band should appear and play at St James' Hall, when our prize-giving took place. On this occasion the War Office put through the work speedily, for by Friday I had permission to raise a band. It was already at hand, and when the Director General and General Elkington came to the prize-giving on Monday, they were confronted by the band in the uniform of the Corps playing them welcome. Not only had we got our band, but, more important still we had established the principle of a Medical Corps having a band, and in 1887, although I was away in China, it would have been a great satisfaction to me to have been present at Aldershot when the VMSC band played the Regulars to Church."

In due course the Regulars acquired a band which was maintained voluntarily by the officers until 1938 when it was officially recognised.

Now in 1985, the Regular RAMC Band has been disbanded and ironically the musical tradition of the Corps has reverted back to the Territorial Army in the form of the Band of 257 (Southern) General Hospital RAMC(V). And what of the line established by Cantlie's original band of keen medical students? It can be traced "genealogically" right down from the original Volunteer Medical Staff Corps, through units of the Territorial Force and later Territorial Army, to the present day 217 (London) General Hospital RAMC(V).

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