

MEDICAL RECOLLECTIONS

OF THE

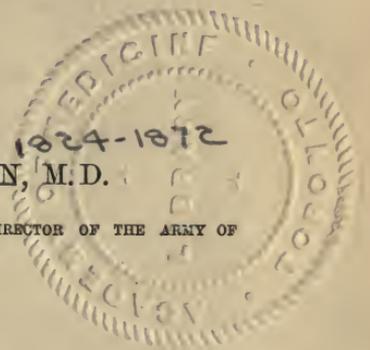
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ARMY OF THE POTOMAC.

BY

JONATHAN LETTERMAN, M.D.

LATE SURGEON UNITED STATES ARMY, AND MEDICAL DIRECTOR OF THE ARMY OF
THE POTOMAC.



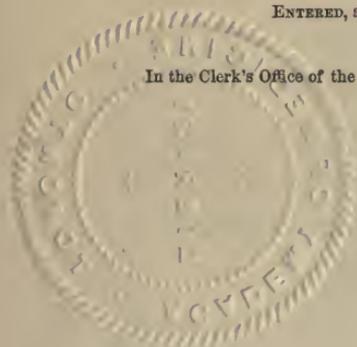
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P R E F A C E .



THE following account of the Medical Department of the Army of the Potomac, has been prepared amidst pressing engagements, in the hope that the labors of the Medical Officers of that Army may be known to an intelligent people, with whom to know is to appreciate; and as an affectionate tribute to many—long my zealous and efficient colleagues—who, in days of trial and danger, which have passed, let us hope never to return, evinced their devotion to their country and to the cause of humanity, without hope of promotion, or expectation of reward.

Near SAN BUENAVENTURA, CAL., }
February 1st, 1866. }

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IN obedience to orders from the War Department, dated June 23, 1862, I reported on the 1st day of July to Major-General McClellan at Haxhall's Landing, on the James River, for duty as Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac, and on the 4th took charge of the Medical Department of that army.

On arriving at the White House, June 28th, I found there was no communication between that depot and the headquarters of the army, then *en route* for James River. At the former point I met Mr. Olmstead and several other members of the Sanitary Commission, whose labors, here as elsewhere, were arduous and successful. It was necessary that the medical supplies and the transports for the wounded

and sick should be sent up the James River to meet the wants of the army. And as it was impossible to obtain the requisite orders from Dr. Tripler, then Medical Director—as the telegraph wires had been cut—and feeling sure that that experienced officer would approve my exerting authority in such a case, I directed Assistant-Surgeon Alexander, U. S. A., and Assistant-Surgeon Dunster, U. S. A., the Medical Director of Transportation, to proceed up that river with their supplies and vessels with all possible despatch. They reached Harrison's Landing in time to be of the greatest service. The troops for several consecutive days and nights had been marching and fighting among the swamps and streams which, abounding in this part of Virginia, render it almost a Serbonian bog. The malaria arising from these hotbeds of disease began to manifest its baneful effects upon the health of the men when they reached Harrison's Landing. The labors of the troops had been excessive, the excitement intense; they were obliged to subsist upon marching rations, and little time was afforded to prepare the meagre allowance. They seldom slept, and even when the opportunity offered, it was to lie in the mud with the expectation of being called to arms at any moment. When it is remembered how short a time this army had been under discipline, we are surprised that it should have

submitted so cheerfully to the orders of the commanding General, and endured the sufferings which, for the sake of the country, those orders of necessity entailed. This marching and fighting in such a region, in such weather, with lack of food, want of rest, great excitement, and the depression necessarily consequent upon it, could have no other effect than that of greatly increasing the numbers of sick after the army reached Harrison's Landing. Scurvy existed in the army when it reached this point. The seeds had doubtless been planted by want of vegetables, exposure to cold and wet, working and sleeping in the mud and rain, and the inexperience of the troops in taking proper care of themselves under difficult circumstances. This disease is not to be dreaded merely for the numbers it sends upon the Reports of Sick: the evil goes much further, and the causes which give rise to it undermine the strength, depress the spirits, take away the courage and elasticity of those who do not report themselves sick, and who yet are not well. They do not feel sick, and yet their energy, their powers of endurance, and their willingness to undergo hardship, are in a great degree gone, and they know not why. In this way the fighting strength of the army was affected to a much greater degree than was indicated by the number of those who reported sick. All these hardships reacted upon the Medical officers in common with the

rest of the army. A number of them became sick from the exposure and privations to which they had been subjected, and those who did not succumb entirely to these influences were worn out by the excessive labor required of them during the Campaign upon the Peninsula, especially by that incident to the battles immediately preceding the arrival of the army at Harrison's Landing. The nature of the military operations unavoidably placed the Medical Department in a condition far from satisfactory. The supplies had been exhausted almost entirely, or had from necessity been abandoned—the hospital tents had been almost universally left behind or destroyed—the ambulances were not in condition to render effective service, and circumstances required a much larger number of Medical officers to perform the duties of that portion of the Staff. It was impossible to obtain proper reports of the number of sick in the army when it reached Harrison's Landing. After about six thousand had been sent away on the transports, twelve thousand seven hundred and ninety-five remained. The data on which to base the precise percentage of sick and wounded could not then be obtained; but from the most careful estimate which I could make, the sickness amounted to at least twenty per cent. On the 1st of July I directed the "Harrison House" to be taken and used as an hospital. It was the only

available building in that vicinity, although entirely inadequate to meet the wants of the army. At that time only a few wall tents could be obtained with which to enlarge the capacity of the hospital—no hospital tents could be procured. The rain began to fall heavily on the morning of the 2d, and continued with little interruption until the evening of the 3d. A few wounded came to the hospital on the 1st, but on the 2d, and thereafter for several days, they came in great numbers. Relays of medical officers were required day and night, and continued to work faithfully until all the wounded who desired assistance had received it. In the absence of tents no shelter could be provided, and the vast majority, being slightly wounded, were obliged to find protection from the rain as best they could; the more serious cases were kept in the building. The greatest difficulty experienced at this time was to provide proper food, which very many needed more than any medical or surgical aid. Very soon large cauldrons and supplies of beef-stock were obtained from the Medical Purveyor, and hard bread from the Commissary Department, by means of which an excellent soup was prepared and freely issued, cooks being at first employed night and day. This hospital was afterwards enlarged by hospital tents so as to contain twelve hundred patients, and when the army left Harrison's Landing the tents

were removed to Craney Island, near Fortress Monroe, and an hospital established there by Surgeon Stocker, U. S. Vols., who conducted the removal and reestablishment of the hospital speedily and well. The transports for the sick and wounded, except those that had been sent North from the Pamunkey River, reached the army on the 2d of July. These vessels were fitted up with beds, bedding, medicines, hospital stores, food, with many delicacies, and arrangements for their preparation; every thing, indeed, that was necessary for the comfort and well-being of the wounded and sick. Surgeons, stewards, and nurses were assigned to their respective boats, and remained with them wherever they went. I doubt if vessels have ever been so completely fitted up for the transportation of the sick and wounded as these had been by order of Surgeon-General Hammond. The shipment of the wounded began on the 2d of July, and was continued day and night until a very large number had been sent away. The want of shelter and proper accommodation at that time rendered it necessary to send away many who, under more favorable circumstances, would have been retained with the army. The weather was so inclement, the mud so excessive, the shelter so inadequate, that there was an evident disposition on the part of Medical officers to look leniently upon any cases of sickness or of wounds. Had they not been

sent on board, they must have remained without protection from the elements, and without proper food. On the 15th of July about seven thousand had been sent to Fortress Monroe and the North. Much valuable assistance was rendered by a number of medical and other gentlemen who left their homes to alleviate the sufferings of the wounded. Some came apparently for the sake of notoriety, and did nothing; but their shortcomings were atoned for by the good deeds of many others, prominent among whom were Dr. Reed and Dr. McKennan, of Pennsylvania, and Mr. Clement C. Barclay, of Philadelphia, so well known throughout the Army of the Potomac for his active benevolence.

During the first week the shipment of the wounded was in progress, the troops began to feel the effects of miasmatic and other influences, as evinced in the prevalence of malarial fevers of a typhoid type, diarrhoea, and scurvy. My attention was then directed to the most expeditious method of improving the health of the army. The means considered proper for adoption (some of which had already been enforced with great benefit), were set forth in a communication I addressed, on the 18th of July, to Brigadier-General S. Williams, Assistant Adjutant-General. An extract from this communication was, by order of the Commanding General, published to

the army in orders, and from this I quote the following:

“The diseases prevailing in our own army are generally of a mild type, and are not increasing; their chief causes are, in my opinion, the want of proper food (and that improperly prepared), exposure to the malaria of swamps, and the inclemencies of the weather, excessive fatigue, and the want of natural rest, combined with great excitement of several days’ duration, and the exhaustion consequent thereon. I would recommend, to remedy these evils, that food with abundance of fresh vegetables, shelter, rest with a moderate amount of exercise, be given all the troops, and general and personal police enforced. To accomplish this I would suggest that an abundant supply of fresh onions and potatoes be used by the troops daily for a fortnight, and thereafter at least twice a week, *cost what they may*; that the dessicated vegetables, dried apples, or peaches, and pickles, be used thrice a week; that a supply of fresh bread, by floating ovens or other methods, be distributed at least three times a week; that the food be prepared by companies and not by squads; and that there be two men detailed from each company as permanent cooks to be governed in making the soups, and cooking by the enclosed direc-

tions; that wells be dug as deep as the water will permit; that the troops be provided with tents (or other shelter) to protect them from the sun and rain, which shall be raised daily, and struck once a week and placed upon new ground—the *tentes d'abri* also to be placed over new ground once a week; that men be required to cut pine tops, spread them thickly in their tents, and not sleep on the ground; that camps be formed, not in the woods, but a short distance from them, where a free circulation of pure air can be procured, and where the ground has been exposed to the sun and air to such an extent as to vitiate the noxious exhalations from the human body, and from the decaying vegetation. Sleep during the day will not compensate for the loss of it at night, and I suggest that as far as possible the troops be allowed the natural time for rest; that not more than two drills a day be had, one in the morning from quarter past six to seven o'clock, one in the evening from half past six to quarter past seven o'clock; that the men be allowed to sleep until sunrise, and that they have their breakfast as soon as they rise—this with the labor required for policing will be sufficient during the present season; that when troops march they should have breakfast (if only a cup of coffee) before starting, and after their arrival in camp each man be given a gill of whiskey

in a canteen three-fourths filled with water. I would also recommend that the strictest attention be paid to policing, general and special; that all the troops be compelled to bathe once a week, a regiment at a time being marched to the river from a brigade, one hour after sunrise or an hour and a half before sunset, to remain in the water fifteen minutes; that sinks be dug and *used*, six inches of earth being thrown into them daily, and when filled to within two feet of the surface, new sinks be dug and the old ones to be filled up; that holes be dug at each company kitchen for the refuse matter and filled in like manner; that the entire grounds of each regiment be thoroughly policed every day, and the refuse matter, including that from stables and wagon yards, be buried two feet below the surface, or burned; that dead animals, and the blood and offal from slaughtered animals, be not merely covered with earth, but buried at least four feet under ground; that the spaces between regiments be kept policed, and no nuisance whatever be allowed anywhere within the limits of this army; and that regimental commanders be held *strictly* accountable that this most important matter is attended to. I think if these suggestions be carried into effect, that we may with reason expect the health of this army to be in as good a state as that of any army in the field. Every effort is

being made by the Commissary and Quartermaster Departments to provide such articles as I have mentioned belonging to their departments."

This extract will be sufficient to explain the views I entertained on this subject, so vital to the army and the country. On the 2d of July I addressed a letter to Surgeon-General Hammond, asking that one thousand hospital tents, and two hundred ambulances, might speedily be sent for the use of the army. I felt convinced that great destitution in tents would be found to exist, that many ambulances had been lost, and that it would be necessary to replace both these articles. The tents, I considered, would be especially needed to shelter the wounded and sick, whom it would be desirable to keep with the army.

Nothing so disheartens troops, and causes homesickness among those who are well, as sending the sick to the Hospitals outside the army to which they belong; such was the experience of the armies in the Crimea—and it is that of all armies. On the 7th of July the Quartermaster-General at Washington informed me that few hospital tents were on hand, and on the 9th that he had ordered two hundred ambulances from Philadelphia, and two hundred and fifty hospital tents from Washington to Fortress Monroe; and that

the remaining seven hundred and fifty hospital tents would be forwarded as soon as they were made. Three hundred of these tents reached Harrison's Landing on the 18th of July, and on the 1st of August a large number arrived, which were used for the sick—the ambulances were distributed before the army left. Before the communication of July 18th was written to Brigadier-General Williams, the existence of scurvy attracted my serious attention. I consulted with Colonel Clarke, the chief commissary of the army, who ordered large supplies of potatoes, onions, cabbage, tomatoes, squashes, and beets, and fresh bread. The first arrival of antiscorbutics was on the 7th of July—potatoes and onions arrived on the 20th—and thereafter the supplies were so abundant that potatoes, onions, and cabbage rotted at the wharf, for want of some one to take them away. The fresh bread was eagerly sought for by the men, who loathed the hard bread which they had used for so many weeks. This loathing was no affectation, for this bread is difficult to masticate—is dry and insipid—absorbs all the secretions poured into the mouth and stomach, and leaves none for the digestion of other portions of the food. In addition to the vegetables and fresh bread procured by the Commissary Department, fifteen hundred boxes of fresh lemons were issued by the Medical Purveyor to the various hos-

pitals and to the troops. The beneficial effect of this treatment soon became perceptible in the health of the men, and when we left Harrison's Landing scurvy had disappeared from the Army of the Potomac. In consequence of the authority given me by Surgeon-General Hammond to call directly upon the Medical Purveyors at New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, for all that I considered necessary, the Medical Department of this army was fully supplied with every thing requisite for the proper treatment of the sick and wounded.

Ice was freely supplied to the hospitals and transports. Instructions on the important subject of police were issued, and inspections frequently made by medical officers in the different corps, by officers sent from the Medical Director's office, and by myself, to see that they were enforced. This duty was very laborious during the excessive heat prevailing in July and August. In a few regiments the sickness increased, in others it remained nearly stationary, and in others it decreased one-half; the cases became less severe, yielded more readily to treatment, and on the whole, the health of the army was rapidly improving. It is impossible to convey to any one, not mingling with troops, a correct idea of this improvement. The number reported sick on the regimental returns cannot be taken as the true condition of the health of the army,

upon its arrival at that point. The want of proper nourishment, the depressing effects of the climate, and of the labors and anxieties endured, undermined the strength and spirits of a great many who apparently were well, so that the effective strength of the army when it reached Harrison's Landing, and for some time after, was less than the returns would indicate. On the other hand, there are many ways in which improved health manifests itself, which cannot adequately be described. There is so much in the appearance, in the life and vivacity exhibited by men in their slightest actions, even in the voice, which conveys to one's mind the impression of health and spirits, of the presence of vigorous and manly courage, which to be understood must be felt—it cannot be told. The real strength of the army when it left Harrison's Landing was greater than the number reported sick would make it appear. It was agreeable to notice that the measures adopted were so ably and so cordially carried into effect by the Medical Directors of Corps, and their subordinate officers, for to their exertions the improvement in the health of the troops was principally due. From the 15th of July until the 3d of August the transports fitted up for carrying the sick and wounded were employed chiefly in bringing from City Point our wounded who had been taken prisoners during the "Seven