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Special Articles

THE SANITARY ASPECT OF A BESIEGED TOWN

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There is no condition of circumstances where the medical situation, both civil and military, has such an important bearing upon the general military issue at stake as when a town, city, or fortress is besieged.

All wars do not produce sieges, but the experience of recent wars shows that sieges may be expected, and will have a most important strategical value.

When a town or city is surrounded, cut off from the outside world, and forced to depend on its own resources the sanitary situation becomes one of immense proportions.

The locality may have been sanitary. All that modern device or knowledge can do may have been done to bring about sanitary perfection. Everything changes under these altered conditions till eventually the safeguards of sanitation cease to exist or become ineffective, and, as a result, we have sickness and death, not only amongst the military, but also amongst the civil population, including the old, the women and the little children.

We might find it profitable, as officers of the Sanitary Service of the Militia, to

study the subject of sieges from the standpoint of public health.

Siege warfare is primitive warfare—differing only in the character of weapons and engines of destruction used in various ages. There is only one weapon that never changes, the weapon of insanitation. The besieger endeavors now, as he has always endeavored, to render the besieged town so insanitary that existence will no longer be possible for the civil and military population of that town.

This state of affairs may be brought about by cutting off the water supply, or by making it impossible for the besieged to get rid of excreta and refuse of all kinds. As a result of the siege a general state of misery, discomfort and poverty may be produced, predisposing to epidemics of all kinds.

During the past fifty years the civilized world has seen many sieges. Read the personal accounts of these and you will see no difference between them and the sieges of the middle ages. The same sickness and dire distress; the same object of the besieger, to make the particular area of land represented by the beleaguered town unfit for human habitation. All classes and all people suffered, the guns were not levelled