

Ambulance Work during the Franco Prussian War of 1870-71.

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It is not my intention to take up any special cases of military surgery but rather to give a slight description of the actual life and experience of a surgeon on active service during a modern war.

When war was declared between France and Prussia I had the good fortune to be at St. Thomas' hospital. I made up my mind at once that I should see some active service and believing as all the world did at that time, that France would defeat Prussia, I crossed over to Paris but although I had the very best of influence I failed to get an appointment. The French would not look at a foreigner.

After witnessing the most tremendous excitement in the streets of Paris and preparations for war, I returned to London and with the aid of friends,—notably the senior physician to St. Thomas' hospital, Dr. Peacock, whose clinical clerk I had been, I was introduced to Count Bernstorff the Prussian ambassador at London, and through him I ultimately got an appointment in the Prussian service, though not without difficulty as there was considerable jealousy and suspicion of foreigners. I was at first sent to different hospitals in the rear, and finally joined the army at Sedan, just after the battle. Everything was still smoking and as I approached the scene of actual hostilities I began to realize more fully the seriousness of what was transpiring. On the way down we saw at every station long trains loaded with infantry, cavalry and artillery being hurried to the front, nearly all of the trains decorated with flags and covered with evergreen branches. The soldiers were cheering, laughing, singing "The Watch on the Rhine," and having a good time generally, but while our train, which had a particularly jolly and noisy lot of fellows, was waiting at one station, another train from the opposite direction drew slowly in. The cheering and singing suddenly closed, the loud laugh was hushed and many faces that but a moment before looked so ruddy and jolly, now assumed a very different expression. Here was a page from the other side of the story, and here too, was probably the first real intimation these new troops had got, to convince them that it was a business trip they were on and not that of a holiday excursion. The long incoming train of flat cars was literally covered with wounded men being sent back from the front, heads, arms, legs or other parts of the body roughly bandaged and blood stained. Some slightly wounded, some more seriously and others even in a dying condition. From this on I need not tell you there was not quite so much fun going on.

On coming nearer to Sedan the signs of the terrible struggle began to present themselves on all sides, large trees lopped off in all directions by shot and shell, great furrows torn up in the ground, houses in ruins, broken down and abandoned field pieces, mitrailleuse, rifles, knapsacks, helmets, cuirasses, swords, lances, ambulance waggons, medicine chests, saddlery, drums, bugles, band instruments, dead horses and men. The whole country for miles around was strewn with these. On reaching Sedan, inside of half an hour I was hard at work, with any number of cases, enough to delight the heart of any young man hankering for a chance of a surgical operation. It looked pretty hard to me at first, so many poor fellows dying in all directions, and shocked me considerably, but I soon became accustomed to it and got my hand in first extracting bullets, splinters of wood, dirt, stones, fragments of shells, and in one case the shattered pieces of a silver watch, and dressing these cases. Here we had an outbreak of Typhus fever and the only cases of that disease I saw during the war. I may mention in connection with this that a French prisoner, a sergeant, was ordered to prepare a lot of mustard plasters. He was given a large pail, mustard, and hot water and told how to mix it. He took it outside, rolled up his sleeves above the elbows, filled the pail half full of mustard and pouring the water on proceeded to mix it with his hands and bare arms. He continued stirring it about and working it up nicely until a sharp burning sensation caused him to desist and made him hustle pretty lively. His hands and arms to above the elbows were frightfully blistered, blood poisoning ensued and he died. I mention this as few would consider it neces-

sary to warn a person against such proceedings. A few days after my arrival in Sedan I met some of the Surgeons of the Anglo-American Ambulance, with whom I was acquainted, and as they were short handed for the amount of work they had to do I was invited to join their ambulance, and after getting the consent of the Commandant I changed my quarters to a large fortification and barrack overlooking the town. Here the Anglo-American Ambulance had over 500 wounded men, not over half of whom had been attended to, a great many were dying, and fresh arrivals were coming in constantly with wounds of every conceivable description, some with both arms off, some with both legs and perhaps bullet wounds on other parts of the body. Amongst some of the wounds that came under my own observation I might mention one where the ball entered the eye and escaped at the ear, recovered. Another entered the ear and escaped at the eye, fatal. One through the neck from front to rear, grazing trachea and artery, lived a week, several cases shot through the lung, recovered, one case through the abdomen, recovered, quite a number had the gentee muscles and parts of the buttocks carried away with shells. Another interesting case was that of a Prussian Uhlan, ball entered near the upper margin of the occipital bone a little to one side of the median line passing downwards; a probe could be passed in for a distance of 3 inches. He was perfectly sensible, did not appear to suffer much inconvenience, was placed on his back in bed with the hope that together with the discharge and the balls own weight it would gravitate towards the surface, but it did not. He remained in the same condition for about ten days, eating well, pulse very slightly increased, bowels and kidneys regular, appetite good. At the end of that time he insisted upon getting up and then began to talk with and wait upon the other patients, even carrying pails of water from a well one hundred yards away, finally doing as much work as a man in health. Overworked as we were, anyone being able to take care of himself was allowed to do so. One morning three weeks after he came into the hospital he had been assisting as usual, he came to me and said he didn't feel very well. I told him to go and lie down. I finished dressing the case I was engaged upon and then went over to his bed. He was lying quietly with the blankets drawn up over his head. I turned them down and found he had expired.

Another interesting case was that of a French Zouave, whose thigh I assisted in amputating; immediately after the operation he was carried to his bed and another subject for amputation placed on the table. In the midst of this operation imagine our surprise on looking up and seeing the old Zouave who had just been carried to his bed standing on one leg, leaning over the shoulders of some of the assistants and watching the operation with the utmost interest. He had got out of bed hopped and shuffled himself along to the table, said we hadn't hurt him and he wanted to see how it was done. The number of our patients soon began to grow less, partly through death and partly through removal to hospitals in the rear, they being snipped back into Germany as rapidly as possible. I therefore seized the first opportunity to look about the battlefield.

Sedan, an old walled town in Champagne district, about 10 miles from the Belgian frontier, beautifully situated at the foot of a succession of hills which tower up immediately behind; and winding gracefully along the front of the town is a smooth clear stream of water, the river Meuse, on the opposite side of which broad flat plateau stretches a distance of five or six miles in each direction, this is girt about with high hills and upon its plain was fought the fiercest part of that fierce battle of Sedan. It was into his plain and walled town that the Prussians aimed at pressing the French army, which willingly retreated to this point as it was strongly fortified and in case of defeat here their way was clear for retreat on Paris, but old Von Moltke had arranged things otherwise. Prince Frederick Charles's army encamped that night nearly 60 miles away, camp fires were lighted and the men all settled down for the night, but were aroused quietly immediately on the approach of darkness. The cavalry, of which he had a very large number, mounted and started in hot haste to cut the French army off from Paris, which they did so successfully, that the French who had been posted as to where this army encamped the previous evening could not understand where this new army that appeared in their rear in the morning had come from and believed for some time that they were reinforcements from