

Medical Work

Evacuation work. April 21, 1917

The work of the last two or three weeks in connection with the evacuation of civilians from Reims and the neighbourhood seems best dealt with by a separate report rather than by partial mention in the ordinary summaries of the work of special departments. It has put to a severe test both the solidarity and the elasticity of our organisation, and we are glad to be able to record a very complete co-operation of almost all branches of our work in this interesting and urgent piece of relief. The whole staffs of the Car Department and the Maternity at Châlons, all the relief workers at Châlons, Sermaize and Paris and Bar, the hospital staffs at Bettancourt and Sermaize and a good many men from the Building, Agricultural and Maintenance Departments have been actively engaged in this piece of work, which we therefore think it better briefly to describe as a whole.

EVACUATION OF SICK AND WOUNDED FROM REIMS CIVIL HOSPITAL

On Wednesday, April 4th a telegram, marked urgent, from the Sous-Préfet, Reims to the Préfet, Châlons, was brought about 10 a. m. asking the Maternité to send at once to Reims to evacuate from the Maternity Hospital there. A special permit was obtained within an hour and we arrived to find that the authorities had decided to evacuate the hospital as completely as possible, and that a state of considerable apprehension prevailed. Finding on inquiry that there appeared to be no motors available for the purpose except M. Guichard's small touring car, after consultation we decided to offer M. Guichard the 4 available cars, capable of carrying five stretcher cases in all, together with a fair number of sitting cases; the offer was thankfully accepted and a note to the military authorities from him, asking for the cars was obtained. We were obliged to wait for an hour and a half owing to a fairly heavy bombardment near the hospital, but when it was over we loaded up with maternity cases, promising to return with the ambulance the following day and with three other cars the succeeding days. Mr. Steel took the message to Sermaize during the night, and was ready to start again for Reims by 2 p. m. on Thursday. We found that there was not much activity on hand that day, but the authorities of the hospital were in very great anxiety as the water mains had just been cut by the enemy, and should fires arise there would be no means of extinguishing them. They asked us to come back at the earliest possible moment with the four cars, as the quietest time was between 5 and 9 a. m. We loaded up with two stretcher cases (women with shell wounds) and one sitting patient, and arrived back at 12.30 after leaving them at the Hôtel-Dieu, Châlons.

On Friday the 6th the convoy started soon after 5 a. m. and reached the hospital about 7.30 where we received a great welcome. They instantly asked us if we could make a second journey as there were so many stretcher cases. While the first cars were loaded up, the others went into the town to pick up two helpless cases from their own homes. We left between 10 and 11, and a considerable number of shells had already fallen in the town though not near the hospital. The cases were taken straight to the Châlons

hospital and Hospice, and we started again about 2 p. m. for the second journey. When we arrived within sight of Reims we could see shells falling, and we were stopped on the outskirts by a short but very heavy shower of them, several of which exploded within a hundred yards of the convoy. A tyre went flat at this interesting moment, but it was replaced at once and by the time the road was passable the car was ready.

Loading up was more difficult this time, as the cars had to be kept under shelter while it was effected, and the shelling was very heavy all afternoon — but we got off with our second load about 7 p. m., making up 25 wounded and infirm evacuated to safety that day. When we left we saw flames springing up in two places and shells bursting steadily over the city. The medical cases and a great part of the aged and infirm had been sent on into the Interior by a special train sanitaire, so that there remained very few in the hospital, and we hoped to get most of the remaining patients out in one journey the following day.

On Saturday the convoy again started soon after 5 a. m., but one of the cars gave trouble, and was obliged to come on later. Two of us went on in the Ambulance, being the fastest car, and obtained permission to use a school-room at Champfleury, a village about 8 kilometers out of Reims as a temporary evacuation centre, the idea being to evacuate there all morning if necessary while it was quiet, and take two journeys from there to Châlons in the afternoon.

When we arrived at Reims we found the situation very much more serious. About 8,000-10,000 shells were said to have been sent into the city the previous day and the civil population were streaming out, military camions being used for the purpose. There had been many deaths and there was an indescribable atmosphere of apprehension and dismay. Avenues of trees had been mown down as with a sickle — whole streets destroyed, and people were running about aimlessly and trying to pick out their few remaining possessions from the ruins. There were 15 seriously wounded people in the hospital, but it was not at first proposed to ask us to take them as they were too ill, and the morning was spent in searching out helpless people in the town, which took a long time as many streets were impassable by the motors owing to the débris.

When we arrived back at the hospital, the Matron said it had been decided that all the wounded, however bad, must be evacuated, and as there were 14 stretcher cases, it was decided to load up the Wolseley and the Renault and send them straight to Châlons to return to Champfleury for their future loads, and to evacuate with the ambulance from Reims to Champfleury during the afternoon. As the remaining 12 cases were men, permission was obtained to place them temporarily in the improvised military infirmary at Champfleury, the military doctor promising to keep them for the night if necessary and to dress their wounds, which were of the utmost gravity.

The ambulance made six trips to and fro, but much time was unfortunately lost in waiting for any temporary lull in the hail of shells which were falling all round the neighbourhood of the hospital, and at the conclusion of the sixth trip the military doctor, who has been absent during the afternoon, returned and absolutely refused to let us keep our patients at Champfleury for the night, but said we must absolutely get them further back. Shells were falling not very far off, and as we had no doctor we could not take the responsibility of keeping them there and we reluctantly had to abandon the possibility of going back to Reims for our last load. We loaded up the three cars with the women on stretchers and the other patients, including a sick baby of 14 months, to go direct with a nurse from the hospital to Châlons. We decided to take on the two most seriously wounded and one sitting case in the ambulance to the Military hospital about 20 kilometres from Reims, the military doctor giving us a letter to the military authorities and to ask them to send up cars to Champfleury to take the other stretcher cases. Our patients were given a warm welcome at the military hospital, and we saw them safely into bed, and were assured

that the others would be brought there without any delay whatever. We brought out 29 patients, making 54 in two days, of whom 20 were stretcher cases.

We had been obliged to say we could not make a trip on Sunday, as neither cars nor chauffeurs could do without a little time for rest and overhauling, and on Sunday night a soldier who had brought a load of healthy evacués, assured us that the military had evacuated every wounded person from the hospital, and that there would be nothing for us to do if we went on Monday. Very reluctantly we decided that perhaps we ought to await further information, which we deeply regretted when late on Monday night we received an urgent telegram from the Sous-Préfet to bring up the four cars as soon as possible. From information received at Rilly during the afternoon, it had been decided to take the ambulance up in the evening so as to be ready in case of necessity, and the other cars started as early as we could get off. In the meanwhile we had found out from the Sous-Préfet at Epernay that a canteen at Mont-Chenot, about six miles out of Reims would be of great benefit to those refugees who were leaving the city on foot, pushing their belongings with them on carts or barrows. Accordingly on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday (April 9, 10 and 11) a few workers kept going a supply of coffee, cocoa and soup in a stable by the road-side, found for us by the military authorities. Although the people had only come one third of their journey to Epernay they were most of them quite unfit to push the heavy loads they had with them, and arrived much tired and very glad of a rest and the rather indifferent refreshment our resources in the way of heating enabled us to offer. Some stayed the night, but the greatest use of our stable was on Tuesday morning when we were thankful to have a base for evacuation where patients could remain and be cared for while waiting for further stages of their journey. There were in all 10 stretcher cases, and at midday we started taking them down to Epernay as being nearer than Châlons. It was a very cold day with a blizzard at intervals and it took us three hours in Epernay before we could find hospitals to take in our 5 cases of which three were of the most serious possible nature. When we returned to Mont-Chenot, it was a great relief to find that M. Guichard had at last been able to secure military ambulances, owing to Mr. Trew's work on motor cycle, which had taken on the rest of the patients in our absence.

We decided to leave a car in the service of the hospital for the time being, which arrangement still stands.

During the work at Reims the cars surpassed the most optimistic expectations of those who have grown to know their many weaknesses either in design or age. Four cars formed the convoy working between Reims and the various hospitals, with a motor cycle to enable quick communication to be carried on between the various centres and authorities. One car was employed between Châlons and Sermaize and Bettancourt, and a sixth and the sidecar were engaged doing local work at Sermaize.

It is interesting to note that of these, three cars and the motor cycle were cleaned and put in working order within 10 days of the call being received. During the Friday and Saturday runs, two cars suffered temporarily, both while at Châlons, from water in the petrol owing to the use of an old filter, while a third was momentarily deranged owing to the heavy rain and mud. Otherwise no unforeseen trouble whatever occurred. During these two days the four cars covered a total of 1920 kilometers or 1200 miles and the car between Sermaize and Châlons 250 miles. Considering the very great difficulties under which we have been working during the last months, we think this is a very good record.

Since then several of the cars have been continuously in use either collecting or evacuating patients from Reims or the villages adjoining.

EVACUATION OF CHILDREN FROM THE VILLAGES OF VERZY AND VERZENAY

On the Monday (April 9th) we decided to go to Rilly to see if our patients had been all safely housed on the Saturday, and having received a letter from one of the mothers at Verzenay asking us to take care of her children, as she was in great fear of bombardment, we went round that way, and fortunately fell in with S. S. A. 13 of the F. A. U. They were very friendly but said they could do nothing to help with evacuation work without orders from Headquarters at Châlons. We found that two shells had already been sent into Verzenay, and that the people had been told that they would have an hour's warning, after which time they were to take to the woods, the cellars not being safe on account of gas attacks. We had six babies confided to our care on the spot and were begged to come back for more. We saw the Mayor who promised to take the names of any children whose parents wished to send them into safety, and having returned with the six, the rest of the afternoon was spent in obtaining orders from Headquarters for S. S. A. 13 to do the evacuation work for us, and the Préfet's approval. The next day two of the Châlons équipe went up with the necessary authorisation and found that over 240 names of children had already been inscribed at the two Maires (Verzy and Verzenay); 104 were brought out on that day, and with the help of all the relief workers from Sermaize and Châlons and the Director of the Asile were safely housed and fed as well as tickled and registered. Over 30 of the little people were under 3 years old.

The Prefecture having found places for 150 children at Lyon, we felt justified in making arrangements for bringing down another contingent. When, however, we approached the military authorities for the necessary help on Monday 16th, intending to bring the children down on Tuesday, we were told we had better get all the children who wished to come out, that very day. No time for elaborate arrangements: we went through the usual circuit of officials and got a convoy of about 15 British Ambulance Society's cars. As the villages had already been bombarded, and the hint as to danger the next day was too strong to disregard, we brought away all children under 14 who had registered themselves as anxious to come, and arrived at Châlons with a further 189 children. Twenty-four were sent off without warning to Sermaize, where the équipe transformed itself on the spot, at 10 p. m. into a boy's camp; the remainder we housed as best we could in the Asile at Châlons, sending a few to the Asile des Aliénés, whilst the Bar workers relieved Sermaize the next day by taking some of their flock at the Maison des Parents at Revigny.

By now 150 have gone on under the care of our workers, who have also made all the necessary arrangements in Paris, to Lyon; Bettancourt is housing 39, mostly tiny creatures; 3 boys are at Sermaize, and the Sermaize hospital has 5; 3 children have been placed with relations and the remainder are still at Châlons. A word of gratitude to the Director of the Asile must be added for the way in which he co-operated to the utmost in all our work through this difficult time.

