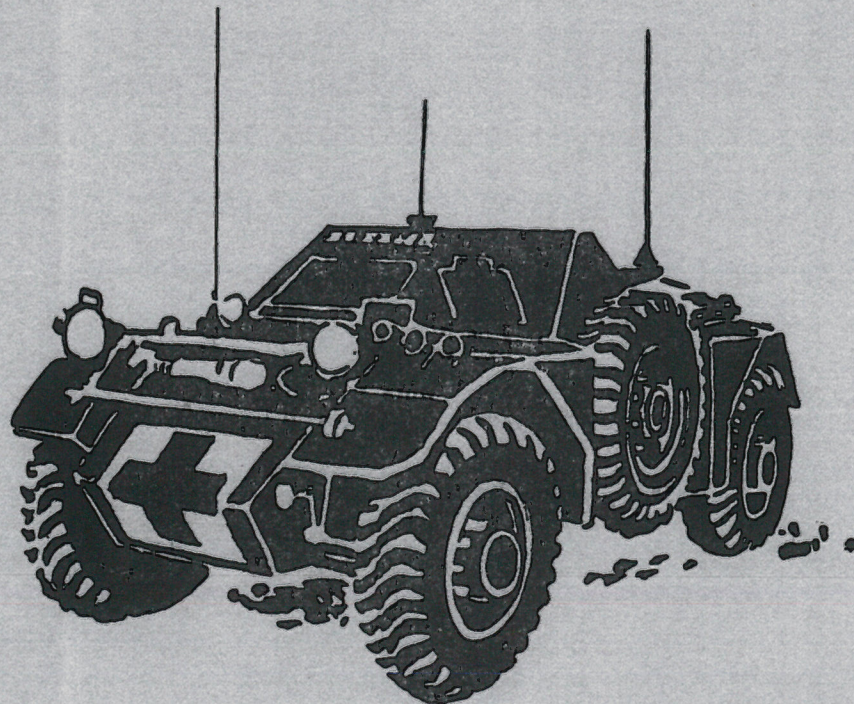


A REGIMENTAL MEDICAL OFFICER IN ARMOUR

By Captain GP Mitchell MC RAMC



INTRODUCTION

The following editorial and article is extracted from an unidentified magazine apparently written at the end of War World 2.

The tactics and equipment may be different today. However the need for initiative and quick thinking, the flavour of the fog of war and the experience of being injured probably differs little. Students are recommended to read the article in order to gain an impression of the environment that they may be expected to work in.

EDITORIAL

In "A Regimental Medical Officer in Armour" the Editor has at last obtained just what he wanted - a picture of what life is like at a Regimental Aid Post in battle. The picture differs materially from that of a RAP in the last war. The pace of the modern battle, with its kaleidoscopic resorting of the different pieces at short intervals, obviously makes the task of the doctor an extremely hazardous and strenuous one. As Captain Mitchell frankly says, much of their organization and methods of working was not quite according to the book, but it appears to have been eminently successful in saving life and relieving pain - and that is all that matters.

A REGIMENTAL MEDICAL OFFICER IN ARMOUR
DURING THE BREAK OUT SOUTH OF CAUMONT

By CAPTAIN G P MITCHELL, MC RAMC

On the 22nd of July we pulled back from that dismal battlefield east of the Orne and harboured at St Germain la Blanche Herbe some few miles outside the battered city of Caen. Here we spent our time in resting and refitting; we had had our noses bled and had lost many friends in the previous battles. My own medical crews were three short and we had to replace them with untrained men from reserve tank crews. Apart from some distant night bombing, the only sign of warfare was a doodle bug landing in Caen in our immediate rear.

I attended here my first civilian patient - a little girl suffering from a grenade wound in the head and a revolver wound in the shoulder, both of which were caused by SS soldiers who had also raped her mother and killed her father. Where the SS had been the French were markedly pro British!

I had been modifying my kit several times since D Day, and had by now evolved a fairly practical packing which enabled me to go out on "Shank's Pony" carrying enough for a dozen cases without replenishment from my Scout car.

I found that I could get into an American tank First Aid box, surgical scissors, artery forceps, a scalpel, some chloroform and morphia, burn dressings, catgut ligatures and sterilized linen. This I carried in an old-type respirator haversack.

In a shell dressing haversack, I managed to pack a number of bandages, some compressed cotton wool and gauze, a supply of elastoplast and some triangular bandages. With a haversack full of shell dressings and a packet of wires cut for box splinting I was fairly heavily laden but could still walk.

In addition my three half tracks each carried three 2 inch smoke boxes, containing more burn and shell dressings, a spare artery forceps, extra chloroform and morphia ampoules and some cotton wool. We had also collected a lot of German burn dressings - impregnated gauze packed in small round tins and these were later found most effective.

On the 29th of July, we suddenly had orders to move immediately to Bayeaux and thence south to Caumont and into the bocage - such apparently bad tank country with its high hedges and thick woods. The following morning at 3 am the Regiment advanced carrying the Monmouths up. The medical half-tracks as well as the regimental dingoes had great difficulty in keeping up with the tanks during the first few hours of cross country work as the hedges were just too high; but with the help of axes, spades and a towrope and with the expenditure of a lot of effort, we caught up with the Battle Group just in time to evacuate the first casualties, some fifteen of the Monmouths who had been caught in the open by artillery fire.

These we evacuated in the infantry jeeps, keeping the half-tracks for closer work. There were several cases of severe bleeding from jagged wounds of the buttocks and the only practical way to stop the haemorrhage was to bury catgut sutures and leave the ends long - no doubt the surgeons would criticize but it was quick and the casualties evacuated with bleeding arrested. Later on that day we encountered mines at Sept Vents which held us up, but only one tank went up. I thought it expedient to make a detour and walk along its tracks!

Subsequently we indulged in a pleasant running battle with only light opposition and it was a grand sensation to get into a canter again after the trying battles across the Odon and east of the Orne. That day we tried working with one medical officer forward, organizing evacuation and the other - the infantry - one acting as a mobile Regimental Aid Post. This is the ideal organization for an armoured regimental group, but doubtless the Central War Direction of Man Power Committee hold other views! Another very successful experiment was to have the second-in-command of the Light Field Ambulance in a brigade scout car on a roving commission. He did a lot to ease the situation on many occasions and allowed us to get on with our regiments.

During the afternoon the leading squadron reported a German hospital which I took over. The wounded were in a most shocking state, and had been abandoned by their doctors. Some rabbits in wire enclosures, however, were beautifully looked after! After this delay we had lost the regiment and as my wireless batteries were low, I could not make contact. However, we pushed on and eventually caught up with armour only to find it was not ours and that we were on the wrong "centre line". It was midnight by this time and to make matters worse we were attacked by enemy fighters. But we went on and at last bumped into our own tanks, more by good luck than by good management, and were just in time to join in a real gallop on a dark night with no lights. We had no idea where we were going, but after passing through a burning village with sparks flying all over the road we came at last to rest in a field and stayed there until 2pm the next day. I personally was heartily glad of the rest as I was one of the unfortunates who had developed acute enteritis - probably caused by the numerous flies round Caen. The diarrhoea and the colic with a temperature of over 100 were not conducive to the best of spirits. However, with doses of chalk and opium, and liberal sips of "Mist. John Barleycorn" I managed to get over it.

Our advance took us next through the Foret L'Eveque with enemy resistance still light. During the afternoon, at the village of La Ferriere, we received our first welcome from the liberated populace - the welcome being mainly large quantities of cider and calvados, the potency of the latter being soon noticeable. When night fell we crossed the River Souleve and harboured just south of it, surrounded by thick woods which might well have concealed large numbers of enemy but, luckily for us, didn't. I had to push up to our advanced quadron to collect a casualty and found myself at the end of a tricky lane with a large hill on one side and a precipice on the other. It took us a good half hour to turn my long ambulance and there was a very strong rumour of a Jerry tank in the vicinity which made the delay unpleasant. Thereafter I went to collect ~~some~~ casualties from the Household Cavalry, who were acting as our reconnaissance regiment, and got them away in good shape.

At dawn on the 1st of August, we moved on the Bery Bocage and harboured at 5pm. There were rumours of a few days rest and the atmosphere was one of excitement, as we thought (rather too prematurely) that the Boche was on the run at last. But orders came through to move on again at 5am next morning, and this time we had with us our old and trusted friends the Rifle Brigade. Down the road we went towards Presles and on the way I saw, a war correspondent typing furiously in the morning sun; I glanced over his shoulder and was amazed to find what an exciting spot we were in!

We kept on encountering a few roving enemy tanks and armoured cars and had a few casualties. The position was definitely confused and our second-in-command, doing a reconnaissance on foot to a cross-roads, suddenly came face to face with a Panther. Luckily the Panther was just as surprised as he was! Whilst I was trying to catch up with the Regiment I came to a "Y" road junction. The occupants of a scout car which was accompanying me insisted on taking one road while I insisted on taking the other. They, unfortunately, were wrong and only one survivor came back to tell the tale.

When we reached Presles, the cross-roads was jammed with vehicles, but in the middle of the village green was a knocked out Sherman. Its crew - unwounded - were consoling themselves with local calvados. Suddenly a French ambulance arrived with some wounded civilians and brought the news that there was a Panther approaching from the west. This made the situation rather awkward as my three ambulances containing casualties was very exposed, and there was neither room to turn round nor to move up guns to bear. I heard a vehicle approaching, so decided to move along the ditch and investigate. Much to my surprise there was a German half-track careering down the road apparently out of control and from within emanated bucolically the strains of "Roll Out The Barrel". I gathered from the driver's story that he personally with a Sten gun had routed an entire Panzer Regiment and that this was his prize. I doubt if even French calvados could spur one on to such a feat, but was far too relieved to go into details.

That evening I had a temporary aid post in a field, and the tanks were just ahead with the Rifle Brigade on the road beside me. I had admitted six German wounded, and ten of our own when the 10th SS Panzer Division put in their first counter-attack on the road. It was most unpleasant; we had to treat some of the wounded behind the scouts and in order to get to others, had to crawl on our faces. I had a blood transfusion going with a bottle suspended from a rifle butt and the bullets were whistling uncomfortably close to the bottle. Some of our wounded came back in tanks and one was killed just as he was entering the aid post. I had to perform a small operation on an officer who was bleeding badly from a cut artery in the shoulder, and with an excellent anaesthetic from my batman, managed to suture and stop the bleeding. In this particular case the chloroform ampoules did not give complete anaesthesia and the patient kept up a running commentary on what he would give me to drink at the Berkeley when next he was in town. Afterwards, when it was over, he said he had felt no pain. Possibly his love of the Berkeley and other London haunts was partly responsible for his resistance

to chloroform. In all other cases the chloroform ampoules worked perfectly and were invaluable for enabling one to carry out good splinting without pain. My batman, became a really good anaesthetist and was always at hand and helping me the whole time. He was a very brave soldier. Unfortunately later he died of wounds.

That night we harboured in Le Bas Perrier, but at first-light the ambulances were sent to the rear slope of a hill for safety. While I was shaving that morning - the 3rd of August - I suddenly noticed an unfamiliar tank in the village behind, and looking through my glasses, recognized a Panther. The crew ran towards it and the gun swivelled in our direction, so I got to ground very rapidly. He fired a few rounds but our tanks replied and he made off. We then moved ourselves to the top of the hill again, but wherever we went we seemed to become a target and for the next forty-eight hours we were shelled incessantly with high explosive and armour-piercing shells, not to mention a plentiful supply of "Moaning Minnies" or "Sobbing Sisters". I once read in a newspaper that these German rocket projectors were of purely psychological value and of little military use, but that is very small comfort indeed when one is the target.

Earlier in the morning, thinking the centre line was safe, I had sent a car back for much needed medical stores. Just after the Panther had left the village we saw to our horror an orderly procession of regimental half-tracks coming up with petrol, ammunition and medical stores. We could do nothing to stop them and that lurking Panther hit every single vehicle except the echelon leaders jeep. Later on one of my chaps got back to us on foot. From then onwards we were surrounded and cut off, and as we could not get any casualties away, we had to dig them in on some very hard ground. Two of my crew were killed the first day, and another was wounded on the next, so we were rather short-staffed; also, our supply of drugs, dressings and water was rapidly diminishing. One of my ambulances had been hit and another set on fire by incendiaries, but we managed to put the flames out. Many of our tanks were being hit and "brewed up" and one had to go out and do one's best to remove the wounded to safety before the inevitable shower of high explosives which follows a "brew-up". The crews themselves were invaluable from the point of view of medical help, and were treating the burns and splinting the lightly wounded whilst I was attending to the more severe. How often in the dull periods of teaching "First Aid" to tank crews at home I used to think: "Is it doing any good"? I was amply rewarded on many occasions, but never so much as on Le Bas Perrier.

On the night of the 4th I had moved the wounded into a little valley at the edge of the perimeter and was therefore in a bit of a quandary when orders came for the tanks to form close circle at the top of the hill. It was clearly impossible to start trying to dig in all the wounded again, so we sat down to an all-night vigil and prayed that relief would come soon. I had used up all my supplies of blood and would have given a lot for a few more sets. The Padre came along and stayed with us all night; he was quite untiring and a most tremendous help. He was especially useful in handling an hysterical casualty and preventing him from disturbing the others. It did us all good to see him wandering around, usually minus tin hat, but with a pipe drooping from his mouth and saying with his famous stutter, "It's a b-b-b-bit n-noisy to-night, isn't it?" What a standby he was that night.

The other saving grace was a large supply of self-heating cocoa and horlicks which the Field Ambulance had given us a few days previously. We could not have brewed up tea in that position, but in spite of that the wounded had hot drinks all through the night; and owing to hot fluids, morphia and the untiring work of my "probationer" staff, we didn't lose a single life and all were finally safely evacuated. It was very eerie that night - enemy vehicles could be heard in the woods around us, and we were fully expecting Jerry infantry to appear at any moment.

In the small hours of the morning, I heard a half-track stop a few hundred yards away, and then crunching of footsteps up the hill. I feared the worst and walked down a few yards to meet them, shouting out in my execrable German "Wir haben gewundet heir" (We have wounded here) - but there was no reply, not even a burst of Spandau fire. The morning mist cleared for a moment and I saw the enemy plainly - a wandering herd of Guernseys! Never have I felt such an idiot and was most relieved there were no spectators. The night had been pretty tiring, and it was a tremendous thrill, a few hours later, to see a convoy of ambulance cars coming up the supply route which had just been cleared. Most of the casualties were in urgent need of surgery and it was a marvellous relief to get them away.

One incident I shall never forget occurred that night, and example of real bravery that goes unnoticed and unsung. A young officer of the Rifle Brigade came in hopelessly wounded through throat and chest. We could do little for him and he knew he was dying. But through sheer grit and determination he lived through that night and when dawn came he made signs that he wanted pencil and paper (the poor chap could not talk). He wrote to ask that his company commander should be told how well his men had fought, and then added "please clean me up, I'm all bloody and messy". He died I'm afraid, a few hours after he had been evacuated, but that spirit of quiet bravery will never be forgotten.

Later on that morning I was trying to snatch a bit of sleep in an orchard on the edge of the perimeter when I awoke with a fearful head and the sensation of having been bruised all over. When the black cloud of churned up dust had settled down, I found we had just been dived on by our own Typhoons and three rockets had landed within ten yards. One of them had ricocheted off the ground and gone right through my scout car, destroying my precious tin of foot soap en route. The blast blew all the apples off the trees and shattered my windscreen to pieces. It was a lively morning, all told, and not long afterwards an 88-mm high explosive shell landed right in our midst - and failed to explode. One found it very difficult to remove oneself to a safe distance owing to a sudden weakness of the knees! Hats off to the saboteurs at the Skoda works. Later on still another of my cars was hit, and an orderly had his arm blown off. A short while afterwards I caught a piece of high explosive in the chest.

The immediate sensations of being wounded are most interesting; I felt a knock rather like a sharp body jab in boxing, and then I did the "100 yards in 10 dead" to the nearest trench and proceeded to take stock. It is curious the detached way in which the mind works - somewhat like the viewpoint of a bored student at a clinic. Apart from feeling very weak and finding it a bit difficult to breath, there was very little discomfort; certainly primary shock is a first class anaesthetic, and it was not until some twenty minutes later that the sensation of pain commenced, and at the same time a most intense desire to survive, and then the miraculous sensation of $1/3$ gr of morphia.

Way back in England before D-day our REME officer had suggested a small modification to the scout cars whereby a stretcher could be carried. This we demonstrated at an VIII Corps study day, and we subsequently modified all our dingoes in like manner, saying "Very nice, but will it ever be used". Well, all my evacuation vehicles were either burnt up or away, so I was put on a stretcher on the scout car and sent rapidly back. The journey I must say, proved far from uncomfortable. It was quite amusing going back through the various stages, unrecognized as an MO, as I had nothing on but my shirt. At one stage I had a furious and heated argument with a well-meaning orderly when I asked for a drink. He misquoted firmly "Sorry sir, chest wounds get cigarettes but no water, abdominal wounds get water but no cigarettes". Being short of argumentative breath I lost, but did manage to refuse the proffered cigarette!

During the first twenty-four hours the outstanding need of most patients is "Bottle please" - though whether this desire is due to nerves or copious draughts of hot sweet tea, I just don't know. In the Base Hospital, a Guards officer in the next bed shouted to the overworked sister "I've asked for a bottle six times, and if I don't b----- well get one, I'll wet the b----- bed"! He did, and he got a thorough rocket for it!

The following day I re-crossed the channel in a Dakota, which left me with tremendous admiration of the RAF Evacuation Staff. During the trip I had to give directions to the WAAF in charge as a head injury started throwing fits. It was with mixed feelings that I finally landed in the United Kingdom. So many people say "You must be so glad to be out of it". Well you are in a way, but you cannot live for years with a grand regiment and a division such as 11th Armoured without missing them tremendously when you are away. The Division became part of your life and it was like living in a large happy family. I find that my mind keeps wandering back to the grand companionship that comes of living and fighting with a regiment such as the 23rd Hussars, and I'm quite certain that all the chaps who have had to go away feel the same thing. On many occasions one heard doctors say "What a waste of time the Army is". But I'm certain that none of us would have changed places with our colleagues, who, for one reason or another have had to remain in civvy life.

The things that one has learnt about life and happiness and one's fellowmen, could never be learnt in 100 years of hospital teaching.