

APPENDIX No. 5

EXTRACTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THE FITNESS OF RECRUITS SENT OVERSEA

THE report of Colonel Howse, as A.D.M.S., 1st Australian Division, upon the number of unfits found among the first and second reinforcements in Egypt before Gallipoli is referred to in *Volume I*. The reaction in Australia was the tightening up of examination of recruits. In October, 1915, the medical staffs of all Military Districts were instructed to exercise care

“that no man be allowed to pass the standard who is suffering from any disability, likely to be aggravated by service.

“The medical officers are personally held responsible for seeing that all questions on the attestation papers in reference to previous disease, fits, etc. are answered and the answers should be initialled by the examining medical officer. The whole liability is thrown on the medical examiners. This responsibility should be brought home to them.”

(Other steps taken in relation to recruiting will be touched on in *Volume III*.)

Concerning a large number of men returned to Australia for medical reasons at the time of the transfer of the infantry divisions from Egypt to the Western Front, General Fetherston wrote to General Howse, now D.M.S., A.I.F.:—

(30th May, 1916) “We have received a list of men returned on the *Karoola* and *Runic* and who have since been medically re-examined. Apparently exertion and climate of Egypt must have had considerable effect on some of the men because men noted by you to be suffering from certain ailments are by the very highest medical opinion we are able to obtain in Australia found not to be suffering from those conditions on arrival. Still we have not had time to examine all the papers and will let you know. Many of them prior to going forward from Australia had been used to very hard work but climate must have had a bad effect. Every man before leaving Australia comes before three and generally four medical men or boards.”

On August 16th General Fetherston informed General Howse that the question of fitness had been gone into. As to the unfits returned, excluding the wounded,

"reports of medical officers state that they consider between 60 or 70 per cent. should not have been returned, as they are quite fit for service. Every time a man is returned unfit he immediately swears that his condition did not exist prior to enlistment, was unknown to him, or was aggravated by service and claims a pension, which some manage to get—as you know the Defence Department has nothing to do with the granting of pensions."

(17th October, 1916) "Most of the men seem to have been enlisted towards the end of 1915 and early 1916. That was the time when large numbers of men were sent forward for the Remount Units, including officers also, whilst I was away. Large numbers of these were undoubtedly unfit. They were intended for employment as grooms in Egypt but were allowed to volunteer for other services. In this way they became mixed with general reinforcements. . .

"If we allow medical officers to reject every man in whom there was a suspicion of tubercle or other disease we would have rejected an enormous percentage and you would have been very short of reinforcements. As it is, under the voluntary system, of all applicants in Victoria about 55 per cent. have been rejected; Queensland stands at about the same; but in N.S.W. they have not been so high, *viz.*, about 40 per cent."

July 1916, General Fetherston to General Howse concerning Colonel Maudsley's report:—¹

"I would endorse his conclusions almost absolutely. Not only does he show men whom he considers have been wrongly enlisted in Australia but admits that many of the defects could not have been discovered at the examination here before they had had the stress of service."

In November, 1916, Lieut.-Colonel Gordon Craig, O.C. of the Hospital Ship *Karoola* reported:—

"We carried back a lot of men to Australia who should never have left it. This fact should be known by all those Medical Officers who examine recruits. A thorough examination of the feet is not sufficiently appreciated by some. Numbers of our troops have never reached the firing line because route marches and training have proved too much for their tired feet. Unless a man can hop and walk on his toes for about a minute he should be rejected. The number of blind eyes, inguinal hernias, incisional hernias from previous operations, stiff joints, and other obvious defects that have caused the return of soldiers, reflect on the standard of examinations at this end. A keen recruit tries to hide his defects; the examining officer should be keen enough to detect them."

¹ See Chapter xxv, p 843

30th March, 1917, General Howse to General Fetherston:—

"I am trying to arrange transport for two or three thousand "B" class men; they are absolutely unfit for service. Many of them do not disclose any organic disease upon a carefully conducted clinical examination, but are in and out of hospital, and are quite useless for front line, and practically useless for Home Service. . . . Far better no reinforcements be sent from Australia as they do no duty, and only cause congestion in our hospitals and Command Depots. The class of reinforcements you are sending are not up to the old standard.² Headquarters A.I.F. Depots report that 20 per cent. are unfit for the front line."

In May General Fetherston replied:—

"When in Egypt Birdwood put up a paper about the (in) advisability of employing 'B' class men who are Australians anywhere on account of high wages. Send back to Australia anyone you cannot employ fully. I wouldn't keep men in England who cannot do a full day's work for their pay. When they get back to Australia they will have to do some work, we will give them a pension but they will have to work. In my opinion it never pays with the high rate that Australians are paid to keep men who cannot give a full day's work for their pay. It is far better to let them be on pension. As you will see pensions are revised at the end of 6 months."

General Howse's letter of June 22nd has already been quoted.³ On July 20th he wrote:—

"To-day I have nearly 100 officers and 5,000 men who will be returned before the end of September, and God knows how many more will crop up. This winter will clear out all crocks who have got any chest troubles. We pulled many of them through last year with nursing them, but if this winter is as severe as the last one, they will be cleared in many thousands."

16th October, 1917, General Fetherston to General Howse:—

"If you are only to get first class men, it is good-bye to reinforcements. You would not get 1000 a month of the type you apparently want. Any number of the men that go forward to you have only been from 10 days to 3 weeks in camp. It is just a matter as to whether it is better to send them on to you like that and allow you to do the medical work for them or to keep them in Australia; of course it is a matter of the orders issued by the C.G.S."

² Not unnaturally, seeing that the height standard had been reduced from 5 ft. 4 in to 5 ft. 2 in., the standard of vision reduced, and men with minor defects accepted. For special units additional lowering had been approved. Thus men for railway sections and mining corps were accepted up to 50 years, and men with spectacles were allowed to enter the A.S.C., A.M.C., and ordnance corps. Men with minor and curable conditions suitable for operation could be taken into military hospital for treatment. The conditions under which treatment was given was that if the operation was successful the man forthwith enlisted for general service, if not successful agreed to be discharged and had no further claim for compensation or pension. (So many men pleaded disability, as a result of such operations, and were subsequently discharged, that this method was abandoned.)

³ See pp. 844-5

January, 1918, General Howse to Colonel Giblin.—

“Defence are annoyed at number of rejections but cannot for the life of me see why they still wish to send unfits unless it be a desire to quote big numbers independent of their fitness.”

A later letter says:—

“It is not a question of a very high standard at all, as I went and saw a group of them (reinforcements rejected in England). Old men of 55 and 60, and they looked it, who were absolutely persuaded by the recruiting agents to put down their ages at 40. And similarly with boys of 16 and 17, who were told by the recruiting agencies that they were 21 and entered as such. It is simply a scandal. It is not the medical authorities I blame at all.”