

## APPENDIX No. 7

### EMPLOYMENT OF "B" CLASS MEN

IN May, 1916, General Birdwood advised the I.G.C., B.E.F. of the A.I.F. policy of returning to Australia all unemployed permanently unfit men owing to the high rate of pay, and in September 1916 requested that all A.I.F. P.B. men in France be sent to England for return to Australia. It was pointed out by G.H.Q., B.E.F. that the services of P.B. men were utilised for employment on the L. of C. and at the Bases in the British Army and that the numbers of Australians employed were proportionate to those used in similar British organisations. A scheme of allocating P.B. men to the Base Depots etc. was therefore drawn up to absorb 700 P.B. men, any in excess of this number to be sent to England for repatriation.

Early in January, 1917, General Howse found it necessary to act strongly in the matter. Both the problem and the policy accepted in the A.I.F. overseas are indicated in the following communication which he addressed to General Birdwood:—

"2nd January, 1917.

"I have to submit the following statement for your consideration in connection with the employment of officers and men of the A.I.F. as P.B. or T.B., that is cases which have been classified as either permanently or temporarily unfit for service in the field, but fit for duty at a base.

"From the point of view of the Medical Services and as a result of my observations since the commencement of the war, I have arrived at the following conclusions.

#### *"Permanent Base (P.B.) Officers and Men.*

"Officers and men of the A.I.F. who are permanently unfit for further service in the field should be returned to Australia at the earliest opportunity, with the exception of those Officers and men fit for home service and included in one of the following classes:—

- (a) Specially selected officers whose services can be profitably utilised with base units or at the A.I.F. Depots in the United Kingdom, as Instructors, Quartermasters or on Administrative duties.

- (b) N.C.O's and men specially selected for employment with base units or at the A.I.F. Depots in the United Kingdom, because of their special qualifications or trades, *e.g.* instructors, clerks, skilled tradesmen and cooks.
- (c) Men over 44 years who by reason of their age are unfit for the strenuous work at the front, but who possess special qualifications for employment on Base duties.
- (d) The Medical Services of the A.I.F. may recommend the transfer to the A.A.M.C. of specially selected P.B. men for employment at the Base hospitals and depots.

*"Machinery for Classifying Officers and Men as P.B.*

"The classification of Officers and men as P.B. should be made only after examination by specially selected Boards composed of Australian Medical Officers, and the following principles should be observed.

- (1) No P.B. Officer or man should be retained on Base duty, if his disability is thereby likely to be further aggravated, *e.g.* cases of asthma, bronchitis, rheumatism, neurasthema, shell shock. By continuing to employ cases such as these instead of returning them to Australia, irreparable injury to their health may be caused, and their pensions correspondingly increased. The Officers and men to be retained should be those whose disabilities will not be aggravated by further service, *e.g.* loss of a limb or an eye.
- (2) All P.B. cases should undergo re-examination every month and possible re-classification. At this medical examination should be submitted a return by the O.C. under whom these cases have been employed, showing the number of days each P.B. man has been unfit for duty since the previous monthly examination.
- (3) P.B. cases should be employed only in England or Egypt and not at all in France where the environment, employment and General Conditions are not so suitable and adequate control and supervision more difficult.

*"Temporary Base (T.B.) Officers and Men.*

"In this class are cases which in the opinion of a Medical Board are fit for Home Service, but unfit for service in the field for a period of less than six (6) months.

"Any case unfit for service in the field for a longer period than six (6) months is returned to Australia.

"T.B. Officers and men might be employed in England, France, or Egypt. Many of the temporary unfit cases, such as those after recovery from acute illnesses, those with slight contractions or stiffness of joints following illness or wounds, would be considerably benefited and more quickly made efficient for service in the field by being employed on suitable home service.

"T.B. Cases should be re-examined each month by the S.M.O. of the unit to which they are attached, to determine whether their health is being impaired by their employment or whether they should be re-classified in the light of their progress or otherwise.

"In France the classification of men as T.B. can best be carried out

in the Divisional Base Depots. At present the Australian Medical Officer of each Depot sends cases for classification to a Standing Medical Board composed of Imperial Officers.

"As a result of two (2) years' experience I consider it is advisable for Australian Medical Boards to deal with Australians.

"The two Anzac Corps would forward their demands for T.B. men to the Divisional Base Depots, and each month T.B. men so allotted to corps and Divisions should be medically examined and possibly re-classified by the D.A.D's M.S. of Corps and Divisions respectively.

"To sum up the position, I am very strongly of the opinion that the employment of P.B. men should be very carefully restricted and limited solely to the officers and men with the special qualifications referred to in the earlier part of this communication. I am strongly opposed to the indiscriminate employment of P.B. men on any large scale, for the following reasons —

- (1) It is frequently stated that by employing P.B. men on Base duties a corresponding number of men fitted for service in the field would thus be freed. My experience is that several P.B. men are required to do the same work as one 'A' class man, that P.B. men are more frequently off duty as a result of illness, while their cost of upkeep and rate of pay are the same as in the case of 'A' class men.
- (2) By returning P.B. men to Australia many 'A' class men who cannot now be spared from their various civilian employments, would be freed to volunteer for Active Service.
- (3) The services of P.B. men on general fatigue duties in Camps and training depots are not required as in every battalion there are from 20-30 men of the unit who are available, *viz.*, those placed on light duties by the Medical Officer, those under detention, and those confined to their lines for disciplinary reasons. These men receive distinct benefit by being employed, for a certain number of hours each day, rather than idling about the camp.
- (4) In view of the unsatisfactory results obtained in Egypt from the transfer of P.B. men to the A.A.M.C., I think it most unlikely, except in special cases, that I would recommend any further transfer of P.B. Combatants to A.A.M.C., unless a serious shortage of 'A' class men should occur.

"From a financial point of view the employment of P.B. men is wasteful in the extreme, and the Government does not receive in services rendered by the P.B. men a reasonable return for the money expended.

"With the exception of specially selected P.B. men one 'A' class man is worth at least four P.B. class men. For example, if 2,000 P.B. men are employed, their weekly cost of upkeep, at a moderate estimate, is £4 per week, that is a total annual cost to the Government of £416,000. The work done by these 2,000 'P.B.' Class men could be equally well performed by 500 'A' Class men at an annual cost of £104,000, showing a clear loss to the Government of over £300,000. This does not take into account the further damage to health and correspondingly increased pensions, resulting from the further employment of these 'P.B.' men.

I have purposely refrained from attempting any estimate of the economic value of 'P.B.' men employed in Australia.

"I shall be glad if the Lieut-General will give this matter his earnest consideration. This matter has been under discussion for a period of more than twelve months and certain conflicting instructions on the subject now exist . . .

"The practice of the Imperial Authorities as defined in various Army Council Instructions does not greatly assist us, owing to the fact that these Instructions have been drawn up to suit Imperial Conditions, and are not applicable to the Special Australian requirements."

The number of P.B. men was ever increasing and though the question was constantly receiving consideration, by June, 1917, the number employed in France had doubled the authorised allotment of 700 men. The approved allotment was decreased to 640, but by August there was a surplus of nearly 500. On 3rd December, 1917, the D.M.S. wrote to Colonel T. H. Dodds, the D.A.G., A.I.F.:—

The weekly Medical Report of Australian Base Depots, Havre, for week ending Nov. 22nd, 1917, shews that the Bases have an average daily strength of 4,704. Taking the daily average of 686 "P.B." men and 350 "T.B." medical; "T.B." dental; Light Duty Sick Parade; and Light Duty from hospital; and adding thereto a probable 100 "A" Class men on "Permanent Cadre"; we find that 1,136 men are available for full and light duty to look after 3,568—roughly, one (1) man for every three (3)! Apparently my estimate of the value of "B" class was grossly over-stated when I thought that four (4) "B" class men were equal to one (1) "A" class. Roughly speaking 6,500 invalids are now awaiting return to Australia, 3,500 are due to leave before Christmas and I am promised accommodation on Hospital Carriers for another 7,000 to 10,000 in January and February. Would it not be a good opportunity to send back every available "P.B." man? For instance:—

- (1) The big excess which is usually carried at Australian Base Depots, Havre.
- (2) Every "P.B." man with 2nd Anzac.
- (3) Every "P.B." man with 4th Division, now in rest.
- (4) Every "P.B." man carried with Anzac Corps (H.Q. and Divisions) when it is withdrawn from the line for rest.

Our present arrangement only admits of excess P. Base men for France being sent to Australia, and those are probably men who have not done long service in France, whilst a man who was made "P.B." in many cases over a year ago, when no excess existed, has no chance of getting back to Australia unless a medical examiner remarks the fact that he will be injured by climatic conditions. I think the present order has overlooked the fact that many of these men were made P.B.'s in the first case because they possessed unstable nervous systems, and if this be correct, they will probably be irreparably damaged by the unsuitable environment, even although they may not be actually under fire.

"P.B's" are being made so rapidly that if they were all cleaned out of France during December and January it would be quite easy to replace them in 1st Anzac H.Q. and in four (4) Divisions before they went into the line. I say four divisions for even if Referendum says "Yes," it is not probable that five (5) Divisions and Reinforcements will be available before September, 1918. What I wish you to respectfully bring under the notice of the General Commanding is that I have received a great number of complaints from "P.B's" of long service and their relatives that they have been kept in France for long periods whilst men of shorter service have been more fortunate in getting away.

I think this does occur in France; in England I believe it has been remedied to a great extent by selecting for return "P.B's" who have been long at a Camp and have not volunteered to remain. A large number of men are going to vote "No" at the forthcoming election, and I think if the Commonwealth Government gave a definite promise that all men detailed unfit for General Service, for a period of six (6) months would be given an opportunity to return, and selection was made according to date of Medical Board as each Hospital Carrier was available, it would do much to remove a real grievance which now exists, and very greatly decrease the negative vote.

On the 9th of January, 1918, the D.M.S., A.I.F., who had succeeded in getting France largely cleared of P.B's, again communicated with the D.A.G., A.I.F., as follows:

Am afraid you will soon transfer your portion of "P.B." hate to me, but this is really my last appeal for every "P.B" man you have. Report from Base Depots, France for week ending 4th January shews a daily state of 387 P.B. men. After end of this month I can see no transports available to Australia, and we shall probably be compelled to send them via Canada, consequently you will perceive my anxiety to make a complete clearance of any men in excess of those authorised. I hope to send off two transports next week and four at end of January. At present it looks as if these will be the last Hospital Carriers via the Cape.

In May, 1918, instructions were issued by General Birdwood that

"on the score of economy no B Class men are to be kept in France who are not physically fit to be employed on Class B duty; such men are to be evacuated without delay in order that they may be returned to Australia. Class B men physically incapable of giving a sufficient return for 6/- a day with rations, quarters and uniform are not to be kept one day longer than is necessary."