

INTRODUCTION

THE A.I.F. ON THE WESTERN FRONT

THIS volume of the history of the Australian Army Medical Services in the Great War is chiefly concerned with the operations on the Western Front. So far as land armaments played their part in attaining victory, this front is generally acknowledged to have been the decisive, as it certainly was the major, theatre of war. It is of course axiomatic that the part of the sea forces, and, in less measure, the efforts in the air, were in certain respects essential to the attainment of supremacy¹; and that political, economic, and moral factors, such as the British blockade, the German strategic bombing, the campaigns of propaganda and other operations on the home front had an important place in the final result; and furthermore that the strategic moves of 1915, in particular the Russian offensives and Gallipoli Campaign, were in their sphere and their moment powerful to influence the decision. But it nevertheless remains true as a general thesis that the war was won and lost on the battlefields of France and Belgium. From the military side then the work of the Medical Services in this sphere of action has a special significance.

The historian of Medical Service therefore enters on this part of his task with a deepened sense of responsibility. And this is immensely augmented by a very remarkable and momentous development in the attitude of military students of war towards the work of the Medical Service. This relates especially to the fighting on the Western Front and is very clearly stated in the text-book on strategy written by Sir Frederick Maurice.²

¹ It is to Winston Churchill that we owe the epigram that Jellicoe was the only man on either side who could have lost the war in an afternoon

² *British Strategy*, by Maj.-Gen. Sir F. Maurice, Professor of Military Studies in the University of London Director of Military Operations. Imperial General Staff, 1915-18. With Introduction by Field-Marshal Sir G. Milne, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. (Constable & Co. Ltd, London 1929) The quotation is from pp 1-8

"It is said commonly that the principles of war are immutable. While this is a claim which requires some consideration, it is indisputable that the methods of applying these principles vary constantly³ . . . War in its highest development is, in fact, as we have good reason to know, a tremendous social cataclysm, affecting every part of the national life. It is primarily because war is a social rather than a purely military development that its nature is progressively changing. . . . What are the factors which made the Great War so entirely different from any other war? There have been in the past many wars which were of longer duration. There have been none in which the opposing armies were permanently in contact. There have been none in which the numbers engaged have been so huge. . . . The feature that was without precedent was that from the first day to the last the guns never ceased firing. This was the consequence of the establishment of a continuous barrier of trenches, which limited manoeuvre and kept the opposing armies permanently in contact.

"To what was the continuous barrier of trenches due? Primarily to the vast numbers engaged on either side. For the first time in history entire nations were in arms. But the appearance of this phenomenon in the years between 1914 and 1918 was not caused by any drastic change in the machinery for making armies. . . . This remarkable change, which, as I have endeavoured to show, altered the form and nature of war far more drastically than did any development of weapons or of military methods, was the consequence of other changes that had no direct connection with war.

"The prime cause of the expansion in the size of armies, which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, was the expansion which had taken place in the means of transportation . . . the application of the internal combustion engine to road transport. . . . The motor lorry could carry from three to four times as much as the horse-drawn vehicle occupying a similar space on the road, and could travel six times as fast. . . . Transportation had ceased to be a limiting factor in the size of armies.

"There remained one difficulty to be overcome before vast armies could be maintained for any length of time in the field. In all wars before the Great War disease had proved to be at least as great a cause of loss as the enemy's bullets and shells, in most of them a greater one. . . . But while scientists of one kind were giving their minds to the solution of the problems of transportation, those of another kind were solving the problems of sanitation and of the prevention of disease, with the result that in the Great War armies of unprecedented size were kept healthy, though the men in the ranks were living under conditions such as human beings had never before been called upon to endure for a like period. . . . It was no longer necessary to calculate how many men could be fed and kept healthy at any given time and place; the question became how many men capable of bearing arms were available. . . ."

³ In Lord Rosebery's *Napoleon: The Last Phase* (p. 191), Napoleon is reported to have once said, at St. Helena, "War is a strange art. I have fought sixty battles, and I assure you that I have learned nothing from all of them that I did not know in the first." This epigram of the great master of the art of war supports the contention that the fundamental principles of warfare are immutable and reflect the operation of natural laws. But *tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis*: science has revolutionised the arts of peace and it is impossible but that it should have a like influence on the art, though not on the essential principles, of war.

Study of the conditions under which the formations of the A.I.F. were maintained in the field leads to the conclusion that, in maintaining the strength of the force in the field, a factor of almost equal importance to the prevention of disease was the improvement of methods of treatment—in particular of wounds—and the system of return to duty that was associated with it. This is borne out by a study of the medical statistical records of the German Army.

However brought about, this new status of the Medical Service in the machinery of war has come to stay. The part of the Medical Services in the war was to maintain the national army at the highest point of strength and fitness. In this it co-operated with other services of maintenance and with each of the three great branches of the army.⁴ In its task it met with problems of the most diverse kind, the nature of which it is the special purpose of this work to demonstrate and develop. The more strictly professional and scientific aspect of these problems is dealt with in the third (and final) volume. We are here concerned rather with the effect that laboratory and clinical researches had upon the *organisation* and *procedure* of the Army Medical Service of Great Britain and, as part and parcel with this, of Australia and the other self-governing dominions.

The three Sections into which for greater clarity the volume is divided relate chiefly to the fighting on the Western Front. *Section I* deals with warfare of the type which during 1915, 1916, and 1917 developed as a direct result of the special conditions described by Sir Frederick Maurice. In *Section II*, for reasons that are there fully set out, a general review is made of the new methods of the fully developed Medical Service, as seen at the end of that phase of the war. *Section III* deals with the work of this remodelled service in the operations of the final phase of the war, in which the static warfare of the previous years was replaced by immense drives by each side, with the final victorious push-through by the Allies and the end of active military operations.

Section I—The war of attrition While, therefore, the previous volume, dealing with the Gallipoli, Palestine, and New Guinea campaigns, was concerned with more

⁴ See Vol. I, Appendix No 2, p. 813 The function of humane alleviation is not here in question.

or less traditional methods of making war by strategic manœuvres (with all the medical complications that these involved) *Section I* of the present volume describes the experiences of the A.A.M.C. in a campaign greatly different from any that had ever before been waged. The combined result of improved means of mechanical transport and of preventive medicine in conjunction with a highly developed system of entrenchment and protection by machine-guns and barbed-wire, had been to make an entrenched force inviolate save to highly organised attack and immense expenditure of high explosive or "gas" shell. The so-called "race for the sea," which followed the Battles of the Marne and Aisne in 1914, had been a supreme effort by the Command on both sides to maintain opportunity for open manœuvre. It failed and the result was the permanent engagement of the opposing forces, which became closely locked in two lines extending continuously 50 to 1,000 yards apart, from the sea to Switzerland. Thereafter the numbers engaged in each side and their concentration were on a scale never before known or even imagined.

Out of these unique conditions there arose a method of warfare also without precedent; and this in respect not only of its actual methods but of its human involvements. There developed on this, the decisive front, a condition of stalemate from which the normal methods of strategy and tactics were insufficient to extricate the leaders of either side; and which resulted (whether rightly or wrongly, necessarily or unnecessarily, it is not the part of a medical historian to conjecture) in an experience which the human race can hardly contemplate with any pride or satisfaction as a phase in its *iter ad astra* or an element in its cultural evolution; and which the most ardent advocate of war as a factor in the elevation of humankind must find difficult to exploit for argument in support of his thesis. For it involved, in actual practice, this truly shocking result that, to destroy the continuity of the trench line and compel strategically decisive success, it was first necessary to accomplish a sufficient measure of human attrition by prolonged mechanical slaughter—continued deliberately until the opposing fronts reached a stage of tenuity at which the side emerging more intact and efficient in material and morale might effect, by some surprise or original

combination, a breach in the ramparts sufficient to be exploited with decisive effect.

Such, speaking broadly, was the nature of the fighting with which the chapters in this first section of the present volume are concerned. The first two chapters relate to the transfer of the Australian infantry to the Western Front, and the changes in organisation and method involved therein for the Medical Service, and furnish also a brief survey of the military conditions in the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1916. The succeeding chapters are occupied wholly with a narrative of those aspects and events of the fighting on this front in which the Australian force directly participated until the end of 1917. The course of the fighting is followed chronologically from the preliminary sorties and feints leading up to the Battle of the Somme until the Third Battle of Ypres. The Battle of Cambrai, big in its import and omen if slight in its direct effects, completes the old and points the new phase of the war. *Section I* concludes with the reorganisation of the Australian force in France and concentration of its formations from two Anzac Corps into the single Australian Corps which was to play an important, even commanding, part in those decisive operations of 1918 that had been made possible by the attrition of 1916-17.

