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NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF BOULOGNE AS A MILITARY MEDICAL BASE.

By LIEUT.-COLONEL GUY N. STEPHEN, R.A.M.C. (T.C.).

BOULOGNE, which seems almost certainly destined to voice France's final farewell to the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies, was also, if only by a few hours, the first town in France to welcome any Division of the original Expeditionary Force. Likewise, though its claim to be considered the principal British base in France might not go uncontested, it has long since come to be so regarded by the average soldier. And all this seems quite in keeping with the eternal fitness of things, for in the bygone centuries the relations of Boulogne with Great Britain, taking them full and bye, were longer and more potential than those of any other of the seacoast towns of our French ally.¹

¹ Since Boulogne is rarely mentioned in ordinary English history books, it may be well perhaps to cite some of the facts which justify the statement:—(a) Most authorities, both French and British, regard Boulogne as identical with the Gesoriacum, or "Port of Bononia," from which Julius Cæsar conducted the conquest of England; and it is certainly at Boulogne that was erected the first lighthouse for the guidance of ships passing between the two countries. (b) From the 9th to the 18th century Boulogne was the capital of a county or earldom which dominated the thirty or forty miles of French coast bordering the narrower part of the English Channel. Hence "Le Boulonnais," as the county was called, was the natural point of departure and arrival for persons passing between the two countries. There were several ports within its confines—Wimereux, Ambleteuse, and Wissant, as well as Boulogne itself, and from all these legitimate trade and smuggling were in constant progress. A bi-weekly mail service between the two countries was conducted from Boulogne long before the introduction of steam. (c) The earlier Counts of Boulogne were practically independent rulers, and at times sided with England against France. In the 10th century one of them joined hands with William of Normandy for the conquest of England, and, by a feigned retreat, turned the Battle of Hastings in his favour. This Count was a brother-in-law of Edward the Confessor, and had an ancient private quarrel with the family of Harold. A later Count claimed the English throne as against his first cousin, Matilda, the only child of the deceased monarch, and reigned as King Stephen. A third gained his position by carrying off the Mother Superior of the Abbey of Ramsay, in Kent: she was also a Princess of England, but her special attraction lay in the fact that she happened to be legal heiress of the vacant countship of Boulogne. (d) During the present war Boulogne, thanks to its proximity, has been the seat of several inter-Allied conferences, and for the same reason, in earlier years, Le Boulonnais from the 12th century onwards was the seat of innumerable events of the same general order. From Boulogne, for instance, in the 13th century an emissary of the Pope solemnly cursed the English king and all his seaports, and at Boulogne also was celebrated between the second Edward and Eleanor of France a marriage which lay to a large extent at the bottom of some 200 years of intermittent warfare. (e) Thanks also to its position Boulogne has always been a natural place of assemblage for fleets intended for the transport of troops to England. Subsequent to the Norman Conquest there were

What was the part originally assigned to the town in the plans of the Higher Command it is perhaps not worth while to inquire. Such plans, whatever they may have been, were quickly upset by the march of events, and it was equally the march of events that subsequently moulded the activities of Boulogne in military medical connections.

Looking back it is seen that these activities fall into several fairly distinct phases, which, briefly summed up, were as follows:—

The first began with the landing of troops about the end of the second week of August, 1914, and lasted hardly a fortnight. News of the overwhelming success of the German operations in Flanders then reached the town and it was rapidly evacuated.

The second phase did not begin until some six or seven weeks later, when the Germans, finding themselves firmly held on the Aisne, began to push towards the coast and the British troops moved round to meet them. The skeleton of a base was then reformed at Boulogne, the first ossifying centre to appear being, strangely enough, a stationary hospital. This phase was one of immense activity, and it was during its progress that Boulogne first experienced the difficulties of a task which subsequently fell to its lot on many occasions, namely, that of fulfilling the double rôle of a military medical base and of a field medical formation.

A third started towards the end of the first nine months of the war, and was due to the budding off of Etaples as an independent base. Lasting some eighteen months, this third phase was a period of steady work, chiefly notable for an event which for a time ended the medical activities of Boulogne as an evacuation centre, namely, the accidental closing of the port to hospital ships.

A fourth phase, which commenced in the spring of 1917, saw still further expansion of the general work of the base and a good deal of specialization of function in the various medical units taking part in it.

In the fifth phase, which began about Christmas, 1917, and at the time of writing is still in progress, the most conspicuous circumstance so far has been an attempt to apply to army wastage by sick evacuation King George's phrase concerning tuberculosis: "If preventable, why not prevented?" In other words, Boulogne has taken in hand the problem of reducing evacuations on account of sickness to the lowest possible limit compatible with the well-being of the men.

Such divisions of time are, of course, more or less artificial, but they make a review of events somewhat easier than would otherwise

at least three occasions when fleets assembled at Boulogne for the conquest of England, as well as other occasions on which the troops carried were intended to support one or other of contending parties in England. (f) Calais, in virtue of conquest, and Ponthieu, Normandy, and Guienne (Bordeaux) in virtue of inheritance, were English possessions for about two centuries, but Calais, except for its possession by the English, was not a place of much importance, and the others were too far away for relations to be very close once English rule had ceased. (g) Other illustrations of the point will be found in subsequent paragraphs.

be the case, and some similar division will certainly be necessary if ever the moment comes when the part played by Boulogne in the war can be studied in detail.

Such study is likely to be all the more instructive because, as already suggested, the activities of Boulogne, at any rate in medical connections, seem to have been the outcome less of original design than of the trend of the war. The physical characters of the town also, however, had a decided influence, and are therefore worth a moment's attention even in such a necessarily incomplete account of matters as can now be given.

SITE.

The town lies on both sides of a small river¹ whose mouth forms its port and which at its outfall runs nearly due north-west. On both sides of this river in its course through the town are high downs, but on the left or west side these lie a little way back from the river, thus leaving between the latter, themselves, and the sea an irregular triangle of flat ground. On the other, or east side, the site is a series of irregular shaped hills or slopes projecting steeply from the broken surface of the down.

On the left, or west side, the down ends in a bluff² overhanging the sea and facing due west. On the other side, lying high above the town, they slope away to the north till they reach sea-level at Wimereux (population 1,500), some two and a half miles along the shore, keeping close to the latter the whole distance. Thence on to Ambleteuse,³ another two to three miles they again rise somewhat above sea-level, but continue to present a very irregular surface. Much the same description applies to the downs running directly inland. Nowhere, in fact, except for the triangular area already mentioned, is there any considerable extent of flat ground which is both easy of access from the port and central railway station and fairly close thereto.

¹ This river (the Liane), from Boulogne up to its main source, some twelve miles south-east of the town, was the agreed boundary between the English and French territories at the time that Boulogne was held by the English, as described later. Nominally the two nations were no longer fighting, for the moment, but actually there was a chronic exchange of cannon shot across the mouth of the river, as also a good deal of raiding.

² A group of houses lying on this end of the town was known as Henriville, and this name was inherited by the large camp that grew up thereon during the war.

³ There are now but slight traces of any port in Ambleteuse, and hardly any at all at Wissant, further northwards along the coast. Yet both these places, which, before the French Revolution, were part of the county of Boulogne, were formerly much used as landing places by travellers from England making for Boulogne. Before the introduction of steamships they were at times easier to enter than the port of Boulogne itself. At Wissant, for instance, landed Thomas à Becket when flying from Henry II., and at Ambleteuse, James II., also as a refugee. Another small port at Wimereux was used in the same way

BUILDINGS.

The flat part of the site—commonly known as the Bassin-Loubet or Capécure area,¹ is occupied by the central railway station, by fish-curing, boatbuilding, and other factories, and by streets of poor-class dwelling houses. On its watersides it is fringed by the river and port. On the down above it lie two large villages, Outreau (6,822 inhabitants) and Le Portel (6,763 inhabitants), while some miles further afield, along the same downs, lie several smaller villages, notably Equihen and Ecault.

It is on the eastern side that lies the shopkeeping and residential part of the town, which is larger and much older than the rest, and is divided into an upper and lower town. Both contain plenty of large buildings, but, except for a large casino and three or four fair-sized hotels on the seafront, they are mostly on hilly ground and approached through somewhat narrow streets.

THE PORT.

The port, semi-circular in shape,² and with a very narrow entry passage, is practically divided into two by wharves, on one of which are a passenger-landing stage and a railway station—the Gare Maritime—distant from the central station about 500 yards. This wharf can be used by small draught vessels at almost any state of the tide. Larger vessels use the other half of the port, but can come alongside its quays only at high water. Distinct from the port, and running under the western down, are a series of docks which in 1914 were merely in an embryo condition. They are protected by a very long breakwater which also protects the port, and, thanks to this circumstance, the latter, unlike the port of Calais, can usually be entered in all weathers.

ROADS AND RAILWAYS.

With Dunkirk and Calais to its north, and Abbeville, Amiens, and Paris to its south, the town is kept in touch by rail and carriage roads which run almost as straight as the crow flies, while, both at Abbeville and Amiens, branch lines establish connection with Tréport, Dieppe, Rouen, and Havre. Its position in regard to the towns on the Belgian frontier is quite different. The carriage roads to these run fairly straight, but not the railroads. These, regarded from

¹ Bassin-Loubet is the name of one of the docks; Capécure that of a large open space of ground behind the railway station. It was the seat of the French headquarters during the five years in the 16th century (1544-1549) that the English held Boulogne, and was used for the same purpose during the Crimean War when Boulogne lay in the centre of our very large training camps (Honvault, Wimereux, Ambleteuse, Equihen).

² The port gained its semi-circular shape in 1803-4, being then enlarged for the purpose of holding the flotilla of barges intended for the invasion of England. This enlargement was an extension of similar work done in connection with a like project in the reign of Louis XV. The semi-circle was created by digging away some sandbanks which divided the mouth of the river; it has since been rather disguised by the creation of floating and other docks.

Boulogne, form two sweeping half circles whose sea-board extremities reach the Boulogne—Paris line about twenty miles north and south of the town.

To the towns near this frontier Boulogne is consequently nearer by road than by railway. St. Omer, for instance, is thirty-eight miles by railway and only twenty-nine by road; Bethune, sixty-five by railway, forty-two by road. The effect of this circumstance is augmented by intentional and unintentional train stoppages, and by the normal rate of railroad progress, this being for ambulance trains in France only twelve miles an hour.

GEOLOGY.

Practically speaking, throughout the whole Boulogne area the soil is London clay overlain, as a rule, in the immediate neighbourhood of the town by heavy marl,¹ and from Wimereux onward by unstable, turf-covered sand. The town is lit by gas and electricity, and has a tramway service, but possesses an imperfect drainage. Its rainfall is considerable, and it is exposed to the full effect of westerly gales. Its unfiltered water supply in 1914 was just sufficient to give about eight gallons per head of the normal population (about 53,000). It maintains one civil hospital, and before the war from thirty-five to forty doctors attended to the needs of its population.²

THE FIRST LANDING.

It was not until towards midnight of Tuesday, August 4th, 1914, that a state of war was declared to exist between Great Britain and Germany. Most officers immediately concerned had, however, been notified to hold themselves in readiness for foreign service in the field the previous Saturday or Sunday, and in exactly a week from the latter date the skeleton of a British military base arrived at Boulogne from Southampton. It landed at seven a.m., the first officer to put foot on shore being Colonel E. H. Lynden-Bell.³ He had been appointed A.D.M.S. of the prospective base, and brought with him a sanitary expert⁴ and an embarkation medical officer.⁵

Temporary base headquarters were at once established at the Hôtel Christol on the south side of the river. At this time it was the "smart

¹ Variations in the precise character of the upper soil have necessitated corresponding variations in the sanitary and other arrangements of different camps. At one camp deep sand instead of marl overlays the London clay, although the site lies high on the downs.

² The original water supply of Boulogne was quite insufficient for its needs as a military base. Fortunately the increase in the size of the base was not very rapid, and eventually the Royal Engineers discovered springs which enabled the Water Company to increase its supply to about 8,000 cubic metres per diem.

³ Colonel Lynden-Bell, who was invalided home early in 1915, received a C.B. for his services, and later on became the officer in charge of R.A.M.C. Records.

⁴ Major W. F. Tyndale, C.M.G., D.S.O.; on leaving Boulogne in 1916 he became Sanitary Officer to the Third Army, and afterwards A.D.M.S. at the headquarters of that army.

⁵ Major (now Lieut.-Colonel) J. W. Prescott, D.S.O., who was invalided home towards the end of the year.

hotel" of the place and was still partly in use for its ordinary purpose, but being immediately opposite to the principal bridge, it was close to the central station and wharves of the port, and yet conveniently near the offices of the principal local authorities.

The next step taken was to survey the town with a view to the selection of sites suitable for the work of all the various units expected to arrive. As the site for a stationary hospital Colonel Lynden-Bell at once took a building on the edge of the eastern downs known as the Jesuits' College. It was a large farmhouse, several stories high,¹ standing in the grounds of a very large educational establishment. Most of the premises of the latter had been destroyed by a fire several years previously, but the farmhouse was still in good condition and used for its original purpose. It was quite an old building which existed previously to the college, and is said to have been used as an officers' quarters during the time that *La Grande Armée* of the days of the first Napoleon was encamped on the adjoining downs awaiting an opportunity to embark for the invasion of England.

Places were also selected as suited for the pitching of tents for the use of troops expected to arrive. One of these was at a spot convenient for the watering of horses outside the village of St. Leonards, some two miles along the river, on the direct road to Abbeville, Amiens, and Paris; another was on the northern downs in the immediate neighbourhood of the Jesuits' College. Here, in addition to being close to the town water-supply, it was also close to the junction of two main roads, one leading to the northern part of the Franco-Belgian frontier, through the Forest of Boulogne,² and the other to its southern half. Sites for a field bakery and other branches of the Army Service Corps were chosen in the Capécure—Bassin Loubet area by the Commandant and other officers specially concerned, and approved from a sanitary point of view by the A.D.M.S. and his staff, as also were billets for men belonging to various base units.

Arrangements were also made for the housing of a certain number of troops at the old barrack³ behind the post office in the lower town, the place to which the third Napoleon, on landing outside Boulogne (at Ambleteuse), in 1840, immediately repaired, and where he received his first rebuff.

¹ This building was originally the château of a large estate known as the Marlboro' domain, in the midst of which it lay. The estate extended over a portion of the downs in its vicinity, and the name of Marlboro' was inherited by a camp afterwards established here during the war.

² This forest supplied much of the wood from which were built the huge barges (over 2,000 in number) prepared for the transport of the French Army for the invasion of England in 1804. Admirers of "The Scarlet Pimpernel" will also remember that it was the scene of some of his exploits when helping ci-devant aristocrats to escape from France during the Terror of 1790-94, as described by Madame Orczy.

³ It was not the first time that British troops had used these barracks. After the first abdication of Napoleon the Great, in 1814, a small contingent of British troops were left in the town as part of the army of occupation, and some 15,000 cavalry re-embarked for England from the port. About a year later, after the Battle of Waterloo, there was again a considerable force of British troops in Boulogne for a short time, some 30,000 infantrymen being re-embarked from this port.

Four days later—on Thursday, August 13th—there arrived the first medical unit of the Expeditionary Force, namely, No. 2 Sanitary Section, which at once set to work to clean up the Jesuits' College and provide the sanitary appliances required at this place; at the two camps mentioned, and at the field bakery, etc.

The first contingent of combatant troops landed early the following day, Friday, August 14th. With them came No. 2 Stationary Hospital,¹ which received instructions to open up forthwith at the Jesuits' College.

Troops thereafter arrived continuously, and within a few days the Divisions destined for Boulogne had all arrived. They were distributed between the two camps on arrival, but were usually pushed up country within twenty-four hours. The units composing them arrived with medical officers attached, and were accompanied by field ambulances. The latter, however, did not open out, and any cases of sickness arising in the camps, as also amongst base units, were sent straight to No. 2 Stationary Hospital.

During this week and the following few days No. 2 Stationary Hospital got itself into very good order and was frequently visited and admired by French official and other visitors. It was also not without a fair amount of ordinary work, for apart from cases of sickness arising in the camps, the task of rapidly unshipping stores and disembarking horses, gave rise to a good many accidental injuries.

Its career at the Jesuits' College was not, however, destined to be long. News of the rapid strides the Germans were making in Belgium began to reach the town within a few days of the first landing, and on Monday, August 24th, it was known that the British troops had been hurriedly thrown into action at Mons. Two days later the retreat from Mons had advanced so far that Boulogne as a base was in danger of being cut off, and on Thursday, August 27th, it ceased to exist as such. It was no longer in touch with the Army, and it seemed likely to be entered by the Germans within a few days.

All officers and other ranks of the Base Headquarters, together with such supplies as could be removed, were therefore at once embarked and sailed for Havre.

The last unit to move out was that which had been the first to arrive, namely, No. 2 Sanitary Section.² It remained to the last in order to complete its task of cleaning up the vacated camps. At the moment of evacuation No. 2 Stationary Hospital had upon its hands some half-a dozen cases which it did not think well to take with it—a case of pneumonia and several of fracture. For these the A.D.M.S. made arrangements at a civil hospital which had been extemporized by the French at the Collège Mariette just outside the upper town. Bedding was kept with them, and a nursing corporal of the R.A.M.C. remained behind in charge of the patients.

The French military authorities left the town at the same time as the British. Consequently, by the evening of the 27th, this corporal,

¹ This unit was under the command of Major W. L. Steele, C.M.G.

² This unit was under the command of Major R. B. Ainsworth, D.S.O.

these patients, and possibly a few French sick, were the only representatives of military life to be found in the neighbourhood.

During this brief phase of its existence as a British military base, Boulogne was known as the White Base among those stationed thereat. Presumably the name was derived from the code title assigned to it in the "operation orders" under which the troops landed.

Though the evacuation of the town by the French and British military authorities divested the place of all military appearance, it in no wise lessened the direct or indirect interest of the inhabitants in the progress of events.

The Germans were known to be at places within thirty miles, and for some little time the first action of the Boulonnais on rising each morning was to look if the tricolour were still flying on the turret of the Hôtel de Villé,¹ and thus assure themselves that an advance guard of Germans had not quietly entered the town during the night.

As usual in the summer time, on the outbreak of war the town had been full of English and foreign visitors, but the majority of these had left in the first week, being sent away by their Consuls at the request of the French authorities.

At the time now in question, namely, the last two or three days of August, the remainder vanished likewise, thus leaving in the town no foreigners other than a few permanent residents holding more or less official positions therein.

But it was not only foreigners who left: large numbers of Boulogne's normal population also took to flight, being encouraged to do so by the authorities. The fears of the latter included the possibilities of food difficulties, for the country inland, if not the town itself, seemed likely to be invaded and the port entirely deserted by shipping.

It was, in fact, entirely deserted for a time, for not only did all merchant shipping at once leave, but most of the fisherfolk packed their wives and families on board their boats and went down to Havre and elsewhere.

The only exception that should be made to this statement is in respect of the cross-Channel steamers. One of these, the "Onward,"²

¹ Boulogne is able to boast that, despite the number of times northern France has been ravaged by hostile forces, including the Flemings and Spaniards, and the frequency with which the county of Boulogne was raided when the English held Calais, the flag on this tower has only once been lowered to an enemy. This was in 1544, when its military governors opened the gates of the high town to the English. Eurvin, its mayor, and all the leading inhabitants denounced this act as a treacherous betrayal, and, declining to remain under English domination, they left the town in a body the following day. A picture showing their exodus is to be seen in the Town Hall. The tower itself is the remains of a building successively used as a residence by the Earls of Hereford, Bedford, and Surrey, by Sir William Grey, the Earl of Huntingdon, and Lord Edward Clinton, these being the Governors of Boulogne during the five years that the English were able to retain their hold on the town. The departed citizens of Boulogne were replaced chiefly by emigrants from Calais, whose population was all of English origin, mainly Kentish.

² The "Onward" continued to ply to Boulogne until the late autumn of 1918, when it was mysteriously set on fire at Folkestone.

after a few days' cessation, began to pay a cautious daily visit to the port, there being plenty for it to do in the way of taking over to England the refugees who soon began to flock into the town from Belgium and the inland villages. If, however, it had occasion to remain the night, it took the precaution of lying out in the roadstead instead of inside the port.

Among the passengers who thus crossed to England were eventually all the patients who had been left behind when the town was evacuated, and also several lightly wounded men who found their way to Boulogne by themselves. There were also a certain number of unwounded soldiers who had been cut off from their units during the retreat but had managed to escape capture. Most of them arrived dressed in civilian clothes they had secured from villagers and others. But not all; for among them were a cavalry officer and several troopers who contrived to reach Boulogne with their horses and their arms complete.

The needs of these men received attention at the hands of the British Vice-Consul¹ and of the Chaplain in charge of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Institute, the latter in particular daily visiting the men already mentioned as having been left behind at No. 2 Stationary Hospital.

It is not to be concluded, however, that the attitude of Boulogne was solely one of anxious expectation. On the contrary, apart from the work thrown upon the town by the arrival of refugees in a state of greater or less destitution, the possibility of there being wounded soldiers lying in need of assistance in farmhouses and elsewhere was perceived, and steps were taken to afford them assistance if they could be found.

For this purpose sundry citizens made journeys up country in their motor cars, and one citizen in particular fitted up his car so as to be capable of carrying a lying-down case. It was a two-seater car with a long chassis, and he modified the back of the latter so that a patient could lie upon it. No doubt it was a very amateur contrivance, and in the event only one patient was found. This, however, hardly makes the endeavour less interesting. None of the armies on either side began the war equipped with motor ambulances for field service, and it was not until several weeks later, when the Mons retreat was at an end, that they began to be built rapidly by private and other persons and sent out to search the country immediately north of Paris. How vastly important a part motor ambulances soon afterwards commenced to play hardly needs mention.

The condition of things suggested by the foregoing paragraphs did not endure throughout the whole of the pause occurring after the evacuation. This lasted about six weeks, but after about the first fortnight it became clear that the Germans had no immediate intention of occupying Boulogne or any other neighbouring coastal town, and in another week, Amiens having been retaken, Boulogne began

¹ Mr. Henry F. Farmer and the Rev. Reginald Harward. The latter, with his wife and sundry ladies, kept open the Soldiers' and Sailors' Institute right through the war, providing meals night and day for men arriving by train from the front on leave and otherwise.

to lift up its head. Thereon regular cross-Channel traffic was, little by little, recommenced,¹ and Boulogne again used as a port of entry to France by persons who proposed to take a part in the war in Red Cross or other capacities. Among these were a considerable number of owners of private cars converted into motor ambulances, as also a definite section of motor ambulances dispatched by the British Red Cross. These arrived with the idea of going to Paris, but in the event most of them remained in Boulogne.

(To be continued.)

¹ Among fairly early arrivals were the "Albion" (Lord Leith), and next the "Glenaig" (Lord Brassey), both being yachts fitted up for the transport of wounded. Though too small to be really suitable for the work, they took over a fair number of the slighter cases during the nine or ten weeks they were employed.