CLEANLINESS IN THE ARMY

(By O.A.G.)

EVERY time I see the rows of shower-baths in the military camps of to-day, I think how the business of having a bath has been simplified for the soldier. Trentham Camp, when I knew it intimately in 1915, had no showers, no swimming pool. We enjoyed the luxury of a warm bath at week-ends, when we went on leave, and took cold plunges into the Hutt River as occasion presented itself during route marches through the week. Any "all over" wash in camp was taken with the aid of a bucket or a basin, but the soldier of to-day has his hot and cold showers.

In Egypt

Egypt solved our cleanliness problems. There were showers in our camps at Heliopolis and at Alexandria. We needed them, to rid ourselves of the dust. Only once was our camp swept by a dust storm, but when that was over, even though we closed up our tents, we were deeply coated with saffron-coloured dust which had penetrated our clothes, for nothing is so fine as the dust of the Egyptian desert.

At Mersa Matruh we found the waters of the Mediterranean pleasantly warm and only a few hundred yards from our tents. When we returned from the Senussi Campaign and were sent to Ismailia, on the Suez Canal, we revelled in the bathing in Lake Timsah. Here, in this extremely salty lake, many thousands of New Zealanders and Australians splashed daily and browned themselves to the colour of mahogany as they lay in the clean sand along the shore which, except at one or two places, is devoid of any green plant or tree. It was almost impossible to sink in the waters of Lake Timsah, so heavy is the salt. When we emerged, to be dried by the sun, our bodies glistened with crystals. I remember that I peeled like a banana but suffered no discomfort. And never have I felt so fit as I did in those days of hard training in Egypt. Because of the heat we drilled during the early morning and late in the afternoon; the intervening hours we spent for the most part in the lake. No one dared to bathe in the fresh water canals because of a small but mischievous microbe which burrows into the skin, causing endless complications. Some of the Arabs we saw were proof of the ravages of this microbe and a sufficient warning against breaking the rule. Later, during garrison duty in the desert beyond Ismailia, we swam daily in the canal itself, often retrieving bundles of papers and magazines thrown overboard by passengers from passing ships.

The Chilly Spring of France

From the glorious, if trying, heat of Egypt we went with a swift change into the grim chills of a French spring, in Flanders. Baths there were none, except the streams and canals round our billets. Before long, however, we were at Armentières where the New Zealand Division took over its first trenches. And there we were introduced to mass-production bathing, in a highly organised and necessary institution known as the Divisional baths. In Egypt we kept ourselves clean and healthy with a minimum of effort, for sunshine is a wonderful laundryman, but in France it was more difficult. I remember having a hurried bath after dark beside a tiny stream which ran through our trenches — a sort of lick and promise, but it was refreshing.

Divisional baths, however, were luxurious affairs in those days and the procedure was simple, if crude. We marched in small parties to a brewery at Pont de Nieppe which had been transformed into a vast bath-house. There we undressed, retaining our boots, braces, uniforms, and hats, and handing our underclothing to attendants. Then, clad only in our identification discs, we went on into the building and climbed into huge vats filled with warm, disinfected water, twenty to thirty of us to each vat. But even that was a luxury. After a thorough scrubbing we dried ourselves, collected a clean set of underclothing (which had been suitably treated) and got dressed, all feeling as clean as polished apples.

As time went on, and we moved about from sector to sector behind the front line, we always found that Divisional baths had been arranged in certain villages. Sometimes we each had a small tub, in which we sat; sometimes we went in numbers into large brewery vats. And while we bathed our uniforms were treated for vermin in special machines, where violent heat and strong disinfectant combined to free us temporarily from irritation. Those vermin, by the way, sprang from a hardy race, sometimes defying both heat and disinfectant. Intense personal application and vigilance was frequently required before our clothing was free of them. During the warmer months, of course, we bathed in the canals if we were out of the line, and in the trenches we took advantage of rain-filled shell holes provided they were free from mustard gas.

Mystified Peasants

The desire for personal cleanliness among the New Zealanders was something the French peasant could not readily understand. I remember one arduous march over pavé roads to the Somme in 1916. The days were warm; marching with full pack up was strenuous and tiring work. At the end of a day's march, as soon as we reached our billets, most of us shed our clothes as quickly as possible, gathered round the well and poured buckets of water over each other, to the consternation of the peasants.

After the battle of the Somme, when we were all exhausted and weary, our battalion rested for a while in billets in the tiny village of Mareuil. That is my happiest memory of the Somme. Mareuil lay in the valley, beside the river. Autumn had touched with fire the poplars and aspens and the air was rich with the sweet perfume of fallen leaves. France is very lovely in the autumn, and this charming little village, with its tufted trees and picturesque cottages, looked like pages from the sketch books of Corot and Monet. All along the river valley peat had been removed, leaving ponds filled with warmish water and starred with waterlilies. Between each two rectangular ponds rows of poplars and willows, trimmed to economical shapes, occupied strips of ground. It was an ideal bathing spot, the water warm and peaty, and there we spent several hours of the day ridding ourselves of fatigue born of days of nervous tension in the trenches.

Turkish Bath in London

When leave was granted, the Turkish baths in London became a first call. I remember spending the first evening of my first leave there, wallowing in steam heat, in dry heat, and alternate streams of hot and cold water as I lay on a marble slab until I felt that every particle of French soil had been removed. Then I rolled up in a bath towel which would have made a tent, ordered tea and toast and went to sleep. Afterwards, clad in everything new, I was completely free from the suspicion that lurking vermin might embarrass me.

To-day I'm wondering if the old fumigators have been resurrected for service in France, and whether the breweries have ceased brewing beer to provide liberal supplies of hot water for the troops.

KEEPING THE AIRMEN WARM

HOW to keep warm is one of the airman's great problems. During the winter months, when he is forced to fly at great heights in rarefied air, the intense cold is frequently a greater enemy than bullets. Recent cable messages describing the flights of British and French aviators over the North Sea and Germany have spoken of the intense cold and the danger from ice forming on the machines.

Electric Currents

Science has now come to the aid of the airman. By an intricate system of electric wiring his body can be kept warm, and special methods have been devised to prevent ice from forming on the machine itself.

The airman's suit includes electrically heated gloves, boot-soles, jerkin, and sometimes goggles, all designed to operate from a 12-14 volt circuit. A multicore cable with a five-point plug and socket leads the current into the suit. A fur-lined jerkin is criss-crossed with fine, insulated wires which thus distribute heat evenly over the airman's body. Gloves are worn under flying gauntlets and elements lead down over the palms to the finger-tips from a plug in the cuff sockets. In the upper part of the jerkin there is another socket which leads to the goggles and prevents them from misting up on the inside. Similarly there is another lead directing current to the soles of the boots.

Protection Against Ice

'Planes must also be protected against the deadly menace of ice, of which clear ice is the most dangerous. Rime is not so dangerous, and frost is comparatively harmless. The first to suffer from ice are the tips of the 'plane, the propeller and the leading wing edges. If a coat of powdered ice forms on these parts, it swiftly builds up into a thick crust, giving the machine an extra load, destroying its lifting power and ruining the wing stream-lining. When this happens the propeller may be thrown out of balance and engines may stall through carburettor freezing. Ice also attacks viciously the delicate wires and tubes on which the accuracy of blind-flying instruments depend. Important controls working the ailerons and rudder may also get clogged up and frozen.

Three methods have been devised to combat the ice menace. Rubber tubing fitted to the leading edges are connected to a motor-driven air pump which cracks off the ice as the tubing expands and shrinks. Another method is to take the exhaust fumes through tubes in the wings, thereby keeping them warm. There are also pastes and liquids which can be smeared over the leading edges, but these are not suitable for the propeller, which throws them off. Experts now prefer to fit airscrews with slingerrings and spinners which distribute pure alcohol and other anti-ice mixtures over the blades while in flight.

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