

STORE OF PERSONAL HISTORY

The Work of Base Records

IF a rattle as of machine-guns in action assails the visitor to Base Records, in Wellington, there is no need suddenly to lodge one's body behind a friendly partition. That machine-gun effect is produced by ranks of typists and by intricate printing machines, all working at top speed. When men go off to war, their training, feeding, equipment and despatch is only part of the vast work involved; behind the scenes, as it were, is a minor civilian

army keeping the record of every man and woman involved in the fighting forces. That is the job of Base Records, the polite "Ogpu" of the Army.

Three floors of a former city warehouse have been taken over, with a staff of nearly 200 men and women to attend to the details, in which there must be no errors. So there, in file after file, in strict alphabetical order, is the personal record of every member of New Zealand's fighting forces during this war. Each new contingent of men going into camp or leaving the country, each increase in the establishment of the forces at home, each new military organisation, means a corresponding addition to the work involved. Expanding racks round the walls of the rooms tell their tale of preparedness for all increases.

Two Departments

Briefly, Base Records is divided into two large departments. One, the pay department, concerns itself with the soldier's pay, his allowances and allotments and dependants' allowances. On the other side is the personal record of every man. By simply extracting cards from files, an authorised seeker for information will find a man's age, date of attestation, height, colour of eyes and hair and any distinguishing marks; the number of times he has been inoculated; his medical and dental history; his rate of pay; his promotions and decorations, wounds or sickness; his occupation and next-of-kin; any crimes he may have committed during his period as a soldier; whether he is married or single, and his dependants.

That information, quite naturally, is not for the eye of any inquisitive passer-by; only military authorities have access to the files; genuine inquiries by the public are dealt with by the staff.

And when this war is over, the information is not destroyed. Filed away at Army Headquarters in Wellington is the personal record of every man who fought in the last war, from the day he joined up until he was discharged from the armed forces.

Newer Duties

Other duties have fallen to the Base Records since the last war. Each man's X-ray plate is now stored there, and in a huge safe are the wills of every man who has made one, or a record that he has made his will privately. Some men, it seems, are superstitious, preferring not to make a will because they think such a proceeding unlucky. But even the fact that a man does not wish to make a will is recorded. During the last war a man's will was a simple affair entered in the pay-book which he carried with him.

A casualty section has already begun. Coloured slips quickly indicate the

various headings—killed, died of wounds, prisoner of war, sick, died of sickness, wounded, missing, and progress report. Any cabled information from base headquarters overseas is entered here immediately it arrives.

At Base Records, also, is the record of men who volunteered and were rejected as unfit for service; as well as district and routine orders from all military camps, for Base Records is true to its title.

Five Hundred Letters Daily

Orderly rows of girls sit at their desks on the second floor, all busy with typewriters or papers and files and letters. Twelve of them are engaged on personal history sheets. On the opposite side is another section, working on the sheets of those engaged on home defence or territorial training. In the pay department eight typists are concerned only with the correspondence. Letters arrive at Base Records in sacks. In five days 3,250 letters were received in the home service and territorial records department alone. One morning's average is about 500.

An innovation is the payment of insurance, providing that the necessary authority has been given by the soldier before he sails from New Zealand. For example a man may allot a daily rate, working on a multiple of threepence. A record is kept on a separate card and when the instalment falls due, payment of the required amount is made by Base Records to the insurance company concerned. Any credit is carried on to the following payment date. Similarly a soldier may authorise Base Records to pay his deferred pay into a Post Office savings account.

Another section concerns itself with remittances forwarded to soldiers overseas. Only £20 a year is permitted, and so a record is kept, as well as the date on which further money may be sent if the full amount has already gone. This entails considerable work, for the remittance is first cabled to the Field Pay Office, notification follows by air mail and a further notice goes by ordinary mail.

Ingenious Machinery

Installed on the top floor is some ingenious printing machinery, one machine of which is super-human in its accuracy and speed. From addressograph plates, made on the premises, this machine prints the vouchers for the payment of allotments to dependants, at the same time, by letter and number, recording all information for the speedy identification of each one by officers of the department. Each plate (there are long trays of them) contains all the necessary particulars, including the total payment in words and figures, the name and address of the allottee and folio numbers for reference. A long roll of special paper runs from a spool and is automatically cut into sections after twelve names have been printed. Meanwhile the

pay warrants are fed into the machine from the side, each warrant being lifted up and started on its journey by compressed air. As the addressograph plates go through the machine and print as required, they are returned to their trays in their original alphabetical order. If, by chance, two warrants should be fed into the machine at the same time, a small instrument immediately stops one of them like an efficient traffic policeman.

During the last war those thousands of warrants were all typed by hand. This machine prints them by thousands an hour. A locked device accurately records the printed number of warrants.

And here it might be added that dependants should cash those warrants as soon as possible after receiving them. If a month elapses and the warrants are not cashed, the fact must be recorded, adding to the duties of the staff. One woman, when asked why she had not cashed her warrants, stated that she was saving them for her son when he returned from the war.

Girls at Work

Near the printing machine is another mechanical marvel which folds the warrants at the rate of 1,000 every nine minutes, with no more noise than a steady rustle and a flutter as the papers fall into a basket. An upward movement against rounded steel bands folds each warrant in half, then, as it passes between moving bands, it runs against a piece of curved metal which folds it again, with the name and address uppermost. A bevy of girls then takes over and places each warrant in its envelope. Soon a sealing machine is to be installed to seal the envelopes at the rate of 400 a minute. All this mechanism saves an immense amount of labour, for everything is scheduled and numbered for quick sorting when the warrants are returned through the Post Offices.

At the end of the room are seven ledger-posting machines which, deftly played upon by the girls in charge, produce a running total of the amount on each man's pay sheet and lists of figures such as delight the hearts of accountants.

For Returned Men

In addition to all this daily work of paying and recording, which requires an increasing staff as the numbers in uniform grow larger, preparation has been made for returning men. Special counter accommodation on the ground floor is ready for the immediate attention to those calling for pay or information on their return to New Zealand, and a large store is ready for housing the personal effects of deceased soldiers.

Responsibility for the organisation and obvious efficiency of Base Records rests with R. S. Wogan, the director. His assistant is C. T. Andrew, with E. H. Hepplestone as accountant and M. J. R. McBryde as chief clerk. There are about 20 permanent Civil servants on the staff.

"CANNON-FEVER"

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could plainly survey the favourable position of the French; they were standing in the form of a semi-circle, in the greatest quiet and security; Kellerman, then on the left wing, being the easiest to reach.

"I had now arrived quite in the region where the balls were playing across me: the sound of them is curious enough, as if it were composed of the humming of tops, the gurgling of water, and the whistling of birds. They were less dangerous, by reason of the wetness of the ground: wherever one fell, it stuck fast. And thus my foolish experimental ride was secured against the danger at least of the balls rebounding.

"In the midst of these circumstances, I was soon able to remark that something unusual was taking place within me. I paid close attention to it, and still the sensation can be described only by similitude. It appeared as if you were in some extremely hot place, and, at the same time, quite penetrated by the heat of it, so that you feel yourself, as it were, quite one with the element in which you are. The eyes lose nothing of their strength or clearness; but it is as if the world had a kind of brown-red tint, which makes the situation, as well as the surrounding objects, more impressive. I was unable to perceive any agitation of the blood; but everything seemed rather to be swallowed up in the glow of which I speak. From this, then, it is clear in what sense this condition can be called a fever. It is remarkable, however, that the horrible, uneasy feeling arising from it is produced in us solely through the ears; for the cannon-thunder, the howling and crashing of the balls through the air, is the real cause of these sensations.

"After I had ridden back, and was in perfect security, I remarked with surprise that the glow was completely extinguished, and not the slightest feverish agitation was left behind. On the whole, this condition is one of the least desirable; as, indeed, among my dear and noble comrades, I found scarcely one who expressed a really passionate desire to try it."