

The Sanitary Commission and Other Relief Agencies

The object of the Sanitary Commission was to do what the Government could not. The Government undertook, of course, to provide all that was necessary for the soldier . . . but, from the very nature of things, this was not possible. . . . The methods of the commission were so elastic, and so arranged to meet every emergency, that it was able to make provision for any need, seeking always to supplement, and never to supplant, the Government. (Mary A. Livermore in "My Story of the War.")

WHEN the fall of Fort Sumter made war inevitable, a wave of enthusiasm swept over the country, North and South. As always happens in such crises, the women looked about them for something they might do. The first soldiers who went to the front were furnished with every possible bit of equipment which feminine brains could devise. In every village the women met to "sew for the soldiers."

Out of this feeling that there must be something which women could do, even if they could not fight, grew in the North the Sanitary Commission. Its origin may be traced to a meeting of women held in New York, April 25, 1861. Out of this grew the Women's Central Association of Relief. Plan after plan was suggested, only to be discarded by the common sense of the leaders. Finally, Dr. Henry W. Bellows, pastor of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York, advised them to find out first what the Government would and could do, and then to attempt to do only those things which the general Government felt itself unable to do.

Accompanied by several other gentlemen deeply interested in the problem, he went to Washington to study the situation. The idea of the Sanitary Commission was a natural outgrowth of what they saw, but the plan at first met with little favor. The medical corps was indifferent if not actually hostile; the War Department was in opposition; President Lincoln feared that it would be a "fifth wheel to the coach." But finally the acting surgeon-general was won over and recommended the appointment of "a commission of inquiry and advice in respect to the sanitary interests of the United States forces," to act with the medical bureau. The committee was invited to put into a definite form the powers desired, and on May 23d suggested that an unpaid commission be appointed for the following purposes:

"To inquire into the recruiting service in the various States and by advice to bring them to a common standard; second, to inquire into the subjects of diet, clothing, cooks, camping grounds, in fact everything connected with the prevention of disease among volunteer soldiers not accustomed to the rigid regulations of the regular troops; and third, to discover methods by which private and unofficial interest and money might supplement the appropriations of the Government. "

The plan was approved and, on the 9th of June, Henry W. Bellows, D.D.; Professor A. D. Bache, LL.D.; Professor Jeffries Wyman, M.D.; Professor Wolcott Gibbs, M.D.; W. H. Van Buren, M.D.; Samuel G. Howe, M.D.; R. C. Wood, surgeon of the United States Army; G. W. Cullum, United States Army, and Alexander E. Sbiras, United States Army, were appointed by the Secretary of War, and his action was approved by the President on the 13th of the same month. The Government promised to provide a room in Washington for their use. The men at first appointed soon added others to their number, and as the movement spread over the country additional members were appointed until the commissioners numbered twenty-one. Frederick Law Olmsted, the distinguished landscape architect, was chosen general secretary while Dr. Bellows naturally became president. A general circular asking for contributions amounting to \$50,000 for the remaining six months of the year 1861 was issued on June 22d, which amount was considered sufficient to continue the work of inquiry and advice for that period.

Upon the authority thus given, an examination of the condition of the troops both in the East and in the West was undertaken by several members of the commission, with the result that unsanitary conditions were found almost everywhere. At once provision was made for the employment of expert physicians as inspectors of camps. Though the commission could pay only moderate salaries, it was found possible to secure inspectors of an unusually high type, many of whom resigned more remunerative positions to take up the work of the commission. Minute instructions were issued to them. They must not enter a camp without the approval of the superior officers, which was usually given as a matter of course. In their examination they were instructed to consider the location of the camp, its drainage, ventilation of tents or quarters, the quality of the rations, the methods of cooking, the general cleanliness of the camp and of the men. Wherever any of these fell short of a satisfactory

standard, they were instructed to suggest tactfully to the commanding officers the points of deficiency and also to send their reports to the commission.

Their reports contained an immense number of physiological and hygienic facts, which were tabulated by the actuaries of the commission and digested by the physicians employed for the purpose. The effects of these inspections were almost invariably good. When a commanding officer once had his attention called to defects in the location of the camp or in drainage or in police, he was usually unlikely to make the same mistakes in the future, and every regiment in which sanitary and hygienic conditions were satisfactory was an example to the regiments with which it might be brigaded in the future.

Through the inspectors, eighteen short treatises prepared by committees of eminent medical men were distributed to the regimental surgeons and the commanding officers. Since these surgeons had been almost wholly drawn from civil life and as the Medical Department had not issued any such treatises to them, these little books were of inestimable value.

The ideas of the members of the commission, which included some of the best-known physicians in the country as well as men of affairs, were large. The members of the Sanitary Commission felt that only a young man was capable of making the organization effective, and they were successful in so influencing public opinion that a bill was passed destroying to a large extent the system of promotion by seniority and allowing the appointment of William A. Hammond as surgeon-general.

The third phase that of relief began with the care of the fugitives of the battle of Bull Run. Many regiments had been scattered, and the men came pouring into Washington, separated from their officers and surgeons, and but for the work of the commission, much more suffering would have resulted. Relief was also sent to the wounded after the battles at Edwards' Ferry, Ball's Bluff, and Dranesville.

The collection of supplies in kind was left largely to the branches, which were made almost entirely independent of the parent organization. In all of these women were prominent. The Women's Central Relief Association of New York was the first one recognized, though the branch in northern Ohio was the first association of women organized. The chief branches in the East were those in New York, Boston, Buffalo, and Philadelphia. There were other

branches at Cincinnati, Louisville, Chicago, Troy, Detroit, and elsewhere. Far-off California sent a large contribution in money. These branches were best able to deal with local conditions, as through them were collected such diverse articles as quilts, blankets, pin-cushions, butter, eggs, sauerkraut, cider, chickens, and many other things. The standard set by the branch for the local-aid societies was "a box a month for the soldiers."

At first, there was much difficulty in establishing the principle of universality of relief. A community was willing to send a box to its own company or to its own regiment, but was less enthusiastic over the question of sending articles to men whom it had never seen. But after it had been shown that, on account of the frequent changes in the position of troops, thousands of such boxes lay in the express offices undelivered until their contents were often spoiled, the wisdom of the provision of a general-relief fund which should send aid wherever needed, came to be recognized.

One great difficulty to be overcome was the widespread belief in some sections that the soldiers did not get the contents of the boxes sent them. Rigid investigation disproved the existence of any considerable misapplication of stores, but the rumor was stubborn, and was believed by many whose zeal naturally was relaxed.

The commission proved its value during the Peninsula campaign of 1862. The transfer of troops to this new and somewhat malarial country soon brought on an amount of sickness with which the Governmental agencies were unable to deal. With the approval of the medical bureau, the commission applied for the use of a number of transports, then lying idle. The Secretary of War ordered boats with a capacity of one thousand persons to be detailed to the commission, which in turn agreed to take care of that number of sick and wounded. The *Daniel Webster*, assigned to the commission April 25, 1862, was refitted as a hospital and reached the York River on April 30th, with the general secretary, Mr. Olmsted, and a number of surgeons and nurses.

Other ships were detailed, though great inconvenience was suffered from the fact that several were recalled to the transport service, even when they had a load of sick and wounded, who, of course, had to be transferred at the cost, sometimes, of considerable suffering. At the same time, agents of the commission were near the front with the soldiers,

offering such relief as was in their power. Undoubtedly hundreds of lives were saved during this campaign by the efficient work of the commission.

During this campaign another branch of the commission's activity developed. So many letters inquiring about sick, wounded, or dead soldiers were received that a hospital directory was begun, and before the 1st of April, 1863, this directory included the names of the sick and wounded soldiers in every general hospital. At the second battle of Bull Run the supplies sent forward by the surgeon-general were captured by the Confederates, and but for those furnished by the Sanitary Commission, the suffering would have been truly frightful. The work was continued at Antietam, where the supplies were brought to the field two days ahead of those of the Medical Department. The commission was also the main dependence after the battle of Fredericksburg, and not until the battle of Chancellorsville were the supplies of the Medical Department on the battlefield plentiful and accessible.

In the West, an organization in St. Louis, known as the Western Sanitary Commission, though having no connection with the larger body was very efficient in the work of relief. It established and equipped hospitals, and was able to supply them. Many valuable contributions, however, were sent from the East. The Chicago, or Northwestern branch, also rendered valuable service. Scurvy was prevented by rushing carloads of fresh vegetables to Vicksburg and to the Army of the Cumberland.

After the reorganization of the medical bureau and the resulting increase in efficiency, the work of the commission became, as mentioned above, largely supplementary. And yet, to the end of the war, with every corps was a wagon carrying, among its supplies, chloroform, brandy, and other stimulants; condensed milk, beef-stock, bandages, surgeon's silk and other articles of pressing need. A telegram from the inspector or relief agent on the spot to the nearest branch, demanding articles of food or of clothing, was almost sure to be promptly answered, while Government supplies were to be procured only on requisition, and necessarily passing through several hands, were sometimes much delayed. With the resulting lessening of the burden upon the energies of the commission, its activity was much broadened. A "home" was established in Washington to give food and lodging and proper care to discharged soldiers. Those in charge were always ready to help soldiers to correct defective papers, to act as agents for those too feeble to present their claims at the pension office or to the paymaster, and to protect them from sharpers and the like. Lodges were established

near the railway stations to give temporary shelter. Two nurses' homes were established, but these were largely used as temporary shelter for mothers or wives seeking their wounded sons or husbands.

In the West, a home was established by the Chicago branch at Cairo, Illinois, which was one of the main gateways through which soldiers passed, going toward or returning from the army. Rations were issued by the Government, and the building was furnished for the most part by the commission which assumed the management. It was, in effect, a free hotel for soldiers, and thousands were looked after and kept from harmful associations. Later it was much enlarged by order of General Grant, who instructed the officer commanding the post to construct suitable buildings. Much of the money raised by the Sanitary Commission was by means of fairs, some of which became national events, and lasted for weeks. During its existence the Sanitary Commission received \$4,924,480.99 in money and the value of \$15,000,000 in supplies.

No such well-organized instrumentality as the Sanitary Commission existed in the South. There were many women's aid societies, and some of those in the seaport towns performed valuable services. The one in Charleston devoted its energies largely to procuring through the blockade the much needed stimulants and medicines. In Wilmington, much work of the same sort was accomplished. In every town through which soldiers passed, the women were always ready to feed the hungry and nurse the sick without formal invitation.

There were few organized convalescent homes, but their place was taken by almost the universal custom of private families taking convalescent soldiers to their homes. In Richmond, the so-called ambulance committee was very efficient in proportion to its scanty means, but the needs were so great, and the scarcity of men and money so discouraging, that it did not work so like a well-oiled machine as did the Sanitary Commission. Bibles and tracts were distributed by various organizations, and an attempt to furnish other reading matter was made.

Another organization which did good work among the Northern soldiers was the United States Christian Commission, organized by the Young Men's Christian Association. Its purpose was primarily to improve the morals of the soldiers and, incidentally, their physical condition. It distributed thousands of Bibles, millions of copies of religious books, and many

millions of religious newspapers and tracts. In addition, it bought many copies of the better class of magazines and sent them to the soldiers. In the permanent camps, free reading rooms were established, and in a number of these State newspapers were kept on file. Writing materials and postage stamps were furnished free to the soldiers, and the agents never ceased to urge the men to write home and to send a considerable part of their pay. This commission set up a number of coffee-wagons in competition with the sutlers, many of whom sold liquor, and also established "special diet-kitchens," where needed, for the sick and convalescent. The commission estimated that it had expended in money and in supplies more than six and a quarter million dollars.

Source: *The Photographic History of the Civil War*. Article by Holland Thompson