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NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS :
1, LYDDON TERRACE,
LEEDS, 2
TELEPHONE 23650

Please reply to : -
D. L. Sainty
Relief Section 109
British Red Cross
BAOR.

20th January 1946

Dear John,

Report 39

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German Name

We have not yet had time to discuss this, but shall do so and advise.

Contacts :

We may be able to meet Pastor Mensching - we are awaiting the arrival from the American Zone of a lady who is to be his secretary and to assist in the refunding of the FOR in Germany, for whom we shall provide overnight accommodation and transport when she comes.

I don't think, Father van Dongen will be in touch with the IVH - I'll try to affect it.

Unit 5 :

Fred and I had a very pleasant time at Wentorf. Douglas had left before we arrived, and Arthur and Ewart were well on the way to Berlin, but the house wasn't by any means empty; nor was it dull. It quickens the blood in the hardening arteries to witness and experience the youthful enthusiasm and joie de vivre of a recently arrived team. Margaret in particular has lost none of her ebullience; and the constant flow in and out of interpreters (female for the men and vice versa), co-workers, interested contacts, DP's friends and hangers-on tends or prevent any feeling of stagnation.

Our work :

You may think "stagnation" an unfortunate cue to introduce this subject, but if not exactly stagnant we are in the uncomfortable position of not knowing where we are. Permit me to descent into gloom for a space - or at least the darker realities of the situation.

This job has always been in some respect unsatisfactory. Our official contacts have not been as happy as I anticipated after the initial meeting. Major Oldham, our superior officer, who is in charge of Friedland, is charming and accommodating with the peculiarly exasperating attribute of never getting anywhere. Perhaps I should qualify the first part of that by saying that in our, and particularly my, experience he has always been extremely charming and friendly and promises very easily to provide goods and services. This would be fine if the promises came off, but they very often don't; and it's usually those connected with the camp which don't come off, and our personal requests which do. This is probably because the latter are easier to cope with. Our experience is not unique - the other departments of the Army which work alongside him and have some parallel responsibility for the working of the camp have the same criticisms. The most eloquent criticism is however the camp itself. The work doesn't get done and the camp hardly progresses beyond the mess and chaos of the bad old days in the old camp.

But all the blame is not on Major Oldham's shoulders. He is in charge and therefore responsible, but he gets very little cooperation from higher levels. You will remember my first enthusiastic reports about the changes for the better which were about to take place, about the official Army notice being taken of Friedland and everything being 'laid on' to construct a reasonably good and efficient camp; and I suppose you've noticed the gradual disappointment underlying the various reports you've seen. The fact is that in spite of all the trumpet-blowing and excitement, and the '30-Corps Job', the army never finished the job, and made a mess of it. The camp would have been better designed in the first place. I assumed in my innocence that a camp designed by REs would be well and conveniently laid out for the purpose for which it was intended. Having however mentioned our bewilderment at the obvious omissions as the buildings proceeded to Garry, I learned that the REs are trained to do specific jobs like building bridges, or blowing up mines, and outside their specific sphere they are no better than the next man. It certainly seems so. They placed the hospital on top of a 12' bank with no entrance for vehicles, for one thing (hence the ramp, previously referred to). And then, after three weeks on a job scheduled for ten days (perhaps without due planning) the hordes departed, leaving a pitiful remnant to cope with the finishing-off. Even this remnant at last departed, leaving the camp staff itself to do the coping.

Which brings us to Chapter 2.

The staff (apart from German Red Cross) was Prisoners of War. They have had to be discharged during the last month or so, and the 300 originals have been replaced by about 120 men, many of them old. The dispersal centre at Norheim is supposed to provide men (through the German Labour Office), and Major Oldham went a fortnight ago and personally picked 150. They came one evening when I was at the camp, and things seemed to be looking up. In the morning I asked if the Camp Commandant was happy now. "Why?" he asked. I indicated what seemed to me to be a suitable reason, and he gave to my astonished ears the news that he had only got 25 men out of 150. When they registered the men they discovered that Norheim had not sent the men asked for, but 150 others, most of whom were either too old for work or had medical certificates saying that they were unfit for work. Norheim wanted to keep the others.

An order for compulsory labour has been made on Göttingen, but there is practically no surplus labour there. One reason is that more and more Army Units choose Göttingen as a nice place to live, and each one evicts families, who, perforce, leave the town.

The Camp Commandant is not frightfully good, either. We've come to this conclusion after considerable experience and after starting off with the conclusion that as an ex-Colonel he must be good.

In the old Friedland, the first thing that forced itself on one's notice if the weather was not frosty was mud. In the new Friedland, mud is all-pervasive, unless the weather is frosty (which it is just now). There are, of course, some improvements - there were some things which could not but be improved. But whereas I said in my first report that the Army had done a magnificent job of improvising under difficulties (which it had), I am bound to say now that I should hate to see anything much worse than the organisation, arrangements, and conditions of the camp.

Where do we come in? That is precisely the question. You know what we have done here. Our transport work has been useful, and has given the team some of the most worth-while experiences of its career in providing it with some real first-hand reliefwork. Doug has got the hospital under his wing, and things are running pretty smoothly after rather a sticky beginning; and we have performed the ideal in starting off by doing ambulance work ourselves and withdrawing as German ambulances were obtained to do it.

Ramsay has had charge of constructional work of various kinds (his batteries of 6-seaters are proudly displayed to enquiring visitors, and are a vast improvement on anything provided by the Army or other sources for the use of refugees) and has made improvements in several departments with this work. Work has been done in Bremke camp (now almost forgotten) which would enable it to cope fairly easily and conveniently and expeditiously with seven or eight hundred people a day, since when the numbers have hardly ever been above 70. And now we are trying to find more work.

At the beginning we asked for a job to do, but Major Oldham said he had no experience of Relief Teams and would like us to find a place where we could fit in. Which we did, in transport. At that time plans were made for the new camp, the organisation set up, and everything under control, with experts in charge of each department; we were assigned to Bremke; and to ask for a place in Friedland seemed not only to be muscling in where we were not needed but presumptuous. I attended the staff conference just before the new camp was to be opened at which Major Oldham explained the plans for working it - all very good, and considered in turn by the experts present. There was one copy of the plan of the camp then, and since the camp staff swarmed round it I did no more than look at it, though I wondered if I should ask for a copy. One of the things my boss told me when I was learning the law was never to take things for granted; unfortunately I sometimes still do, and I regret that I didn't demand a copy of the plan so that we could pull it to pieces; apart from the fact that the camp was then building, I think we could have improved the plan considerably.

We are now keeping a somewhat closer eye on the camp generally, but there are still only a comparatively few people coming over the frontier daily and we are not fully extended. We are considering prospecting for some social work in the neighbourhood. A fortnight of the month we asked HQ 5 for has gone without any change in the situation; I hope we'll be able to have something definite to say by the end of the month. It is part of the job, however, but it is extraordinarily difficult to say in advance what conditions are going to be; particularly, perhaps, in this job, where the movement of population depends on so many factors. I am glad to say, however, that the strain has not yet produced any cracking noises in the team, and I hope we'll be able to organise sufficient work to keep everybody tired out and overworked and happy.

The Guides are still on friendly terms with us, after three weeks, all but, and we're working very smoothly together. Their future is also rather uncertain (or less uncertain; it depends which way you look at it) than ours. We hope however that if we are here they will be too (vice versa doesn't apply in this instance).

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All best wishes,

David