

Five Months at Camp Devens

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Within the range of this subject one might speak on almost any topic under the sun. Even the weather might prove interesting. The art of developing an army; how to run the United States; the best means of assuring permanent peace; or "The Eternal Significance of the Present Crisis in the Evolution of the Universe" might become the *terminus ad quem* in general conclusions from a brief five months observation. But I refrain from the consideration of those "profound subjects" to the general wisdom of which I could doubtless make valuable contributions, and confine myself to a simple narrative with a suggestion or two, touching the reactions of these experiences upon my own mind, especially the reactions connected with the problems of religion.

The pass which I carried in my pocket to keep me out of the hands of the guards described me as a "Voluntary Chaplain." This combination of words refers to some eight or ten men sent by various religious bodies to assist in the intellectual, moral and religious work among the men in the camp. The need and opportunity of such work arose in the early months of the Camp's History before the regimental chaplains were appointed. After the Regimental Chaplains came, it appeared that the so-called voluntary chaplains could be of use in that very subtle process that is going on of transferring the allegiance of the men from the home ties to the customs, purposes, and loyalties of the army. Just the mere matter of introducing a man to a regimental chaplain was not an insignificant thing to do. Indeed it rather symbolizes the whole task of the voluntary chaplain, so far as the religious work goes.

So far as I know the religious fellowships represented in Camp Devens by voluntary chaplains are the Congregational,

Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Protestant Episcopal, and Unitarian. Representatives of other fellowships may have been workers on the Y.M.C.A. Force, but such are not to be classified as voluntary chaplains. The same need was provided for among the Catholic and Jewish boys by the activities of the Knights of Columbus, and the Jewish Welfare Board.

The military organization provides for the Regimental Chaplain who is a staff officer with the rank of Lieutenant. The Fosdick Commission on Training Camp Activities places the social, recreational, intellectual, and religious work within the camps in the hands of the Y.M.C.A.; K.of C. and the Jewish Welfare Board. The work done by each of these is substantially the same, but modified to meet its particular tradition. You may have seen a copy of the photograph of the heads of these three organizations taken together. The voluntary Chaplain is in the Camp as a guest of the Y.M.C.A. sent by the religious body that he represents to minister to the needs of the men who, at home, were associated with that particular fellowship. In addition he does such other work as opportunity and ability permit. It is a very humble and exceedingly interesting work.

Perhaps the next point in which you may be interested can be presented best by personal narrative. I was appointed to this work by the War Work Council of the American Unitarian Association. On the morning of the fifth of November I started from Pittsfield as confused and perplexed as any selected man that ever strolled into the Camp. I had been told to report to the Y.M.C.A. Administration Building. I did so. To my amusement I found that, on account of the circuitous routing of Y.M.C.A. machinery through which my appointment had to be announced, my probable arrival had not been heralded. A couple of days straightened that matter out, and on Wednesday afternoon I was back in the camp a proper guest of the Y.M.C.A. Not only in word, but in deed as well, was a very cordial welcome extended by the Y.M.C.A. officials. I soon learned that I was to live in Y.M.C.A. 27. The generous-hearted religious secretary of the Camp took me to my new dwelling place in his car,

introduced me to the Building Secretary, and made himself responsible for getting my baggage from the station in Ayer. My room-mate in Y.M.C.A. 27 turned out to be a man I had known in College. He was a Congregational minister, working in the Y.M.C.A. for a period of three months while the Church which had granted him the three months leave was joining in union services with the Unitarian Church. The minister Of the Unitarian Church was in Harvard Divinity School with me. This bit of personal courtesy from the General Secretary, and the beginning of a network of personal ties served as the center about which some very precious associations gathered.

The neighborhood unit in this city of soldiers is the regiment. About the regiment all the organization and loyalties develop. Y.M.C.A. 27 is the recreational center of the 303rd Infantry. On the back of the stage above the moving picture screen is painted the Y.M.C.A. Triangle with 303rd Infantry beneath, the work of two men of the Machine Gun Company. The men of the 303rd Infantry came to Camp Devens from the North Eastern portion of New York State. As a resident of Y.M.C.A. 27 it a natural thing to join with the men of the building in the work as opportunity offered. The first night in the building gave me the fun of selling postage stamps, post cards, and writing money orders for men who were sending money home. It was pay day and the money order business was rushing. I made out money orders that evening, totaling nearly a thousand dollars. Many a little human touch slips into one's experience in doing just this little chore. At about 9:30 the brooms were brought into action. To such work I was not a stranger, and took a subtle sort of delight in assisting in getting the Hut in readiness for the next day. Doing chores, "Policing" is the military term, sweeping, dusting, fixing fires, shoveling coal, taking out ashes etc. was by no means the least interesting part of the work. After a while the building began to reflect in atmosphere the spirit that animated the doing of chores.

Each Y.M.C.A. Building had its own individuality. During the five months in Camp I spoke in eight of the buildings, and visited them all many times. I learned much about the

Y.M.C.A. work, its spirit, and its achievements, its contribution to the task of making an army. But naturally my most intimate knowledge has come through experience in Building 27. Of the life in and about this Building I want to speak for a little. A full regiment consists of more than 3600 men. The 303rd regiment was not full, but had about 2500 men most of the time, I should judge. The staff of the Y.M.C.A. building indicates the nature and scope of its work. A full staff consists of Building Secretary; religious work secretary; educational secretary; recreational secretary; Physical director; and business secretary. Very rarely has building 27 had a full force. In fact most of the time it had but three or four men.

This staff is subject to many changes, but there ran through the months a spirit and atmosphere of wholesome good fellowship, so that the changing personnel of the staff has added to the interest of the work from my point of view, but I fear that the changes have not always been advantageous to the work. One man on the staff entered the army, and is now in the officer's training school. Another has gone back to his Church work. His place has been taken by another minister. Another is taking special courses in anticipation of service in the artillery. Two men, rejected in volunteer work in the army, were getting as near to active service as they could. In this building also was located the teacher of French for the entire Camp. It is worthwhile to note that the percentage of officers taking this training in French at Camp Devens is the largest of any camp in the country. In Building 27 the head of the Jewish Welfare Board lived, and maintained his headquarters. The intimate contact, the rather inevitable comradeship which obtained here worked toward a very broad and cooperative spirit. It might be observed at this point that this interplay of men from widely divergent fellowships in a common work is resulting in not a little of that education and discipline that may make for a more democratic federation of religious bodies.

The contribution the Y.M.C.A. building, the staff of workers, and the transient speakers and lecturers to the life, the character building of the soldiers, and the formation of that subtle thing called Morale of the army is

very definite and real. I heard a Major say one evening concerning the Y.M.C.A. "Before I came here I would have said that the best thing for the army would be to take the entire Y.M.C.A. out of the camp. It has no place. But I now see and appreciate the value of its work." Often I have talked with a man whose education, training and particular professional work of teaching make his judgement of more than ordinary value. His particular work in the army also give him ample and unusual opportunity to observe. He holds that the Y.M.C.A. has been a factor of so great importance in the work of the army building that the thing could not have been done without it or its equivalent. I do not know just what the national Y.M.C.A. officials may consider its main purpose in the camps. It is possible that they place too much emphasis on its religious function. However, as a matter of fact the real work of the Y.M.C.A. is to provide a club, and recreational interests for the men during leisure hours. The doors are always open. Men take root in the place. I have watched with great interest those little indications of attachment and affection. The building becomes part of their inner life. Many, as they leave the camp for [a] "mysterious journey" look forward to a home in the Y.M.C.A. wherever they may be. Here they write letters, hundreds of them. When the regiment is fairly well filled, there will be a thousand to fifteen hundred letters written each day, and dropped into the Y.M.C.A. letter box. To the desk men come for all kinds of information, conversation, and needs. Just here appears what to my mind is the great contribution of the Y.M.C.A. It is the unobstrusive (sic) stimulus of give and take, the plain social contact of men with men in a common club. Here is taking place in the hours of relaxation a process of fusing the varied elements that come into the army. By virtue of the presence of books, associations of good music, good lectures, and wholesome recreation, and the tone given to the building by the spirit of the Y.M.C.A. workers, there is always an atmosphere that is wholesome and clean, yet real and human. Many men of the army have had all the advantages that our modern civilization may offer. Others have had most of its disadvantages. For the latter especially to be in a place where there is a wholesome atmosphere, where there are

clean minded, yet red-blooded men, with whom they may talk and meet on common ground meets a real need in their lives.

The tale of a week's program of activities indicates what is attempted. Names change, men come and go, but this program runs on week after week, subject to minor changes. I am giving the actual program of one week. I have seen many more active ones, but this seemed a fair sample. Monday evening at 7:00 o'clock an illustrated lecture on France by a professor of history in a New England College. At 8:00 o'clock regimental stunt night of competitive boxing, rubicon pulls, etc. Place packed with both men and officers. Tuesday evening at 7:00 o'clock a lecture on some ethical or religious subject by a minister from Connecticut. At eight o'clock comes the Movies, a five reel feature. Wednesday night Thomas Mott Osborne of the Federal Prison at Portsmouth lectured. Capacity house for one and one half hours. Thursday evening 6:45 Mass French Teaching. At eight o'clock regimental stunt night again. Friday evening at 7:00 o'clock the weekly Jewish service, attended by men from all over the camp. I may say here that these Jewish services have been among the best religious services that I have attended in the Camp. Some of the very best addresses have been given under the auspices of the Jewish Welfare Board. At eight o'clock Friday the second evening of movies is run off. Saturday night is quiet. The Sunday program seems rather heavy. At 8:30 there is Communion Service conducted by the Regimental Chaplain. At 9:30 there is a Jewish Service with a talk by the head worker. At 10:30 service of worship with sermon by the regimental Chaplain. At 7:30 an evening song service with a talk by some Y.M.C.A. secretary or Voluntary Chaplain. On Sunday afternoon there is frequently a band concert, or some musical program.

This entire program is carried on in the midst of letter writing, checker playing, reading, conversation and smoking. Quiet is maintained in the hall when quiet is needed. It is by no means to be assumed that all these lectures and services are attended by all the men. Sometimes but very few will be present. At other times the room will be filled. Each takes what he wishes. Stunt

nights and Movies are most popular. Frequently there will be five hundred men or more on such nights. The daily attendance in the building must be more than a thousand different men. Many men spend all their leisure time there. They come in right after supper and stay all the evening.

Such is a suggestion of the life and the program of the Y.M.C.A. 27. A similar program is carried out in each of the buildings. Of the spirit and atmosphere of the other buildings I cannot speak. Of the building where I have lived I speak with certainty. There is a standard there to which one must attain. Many of the soldiers have spoken of this to me. It is real, human, and wholesome. One realizes it most keenly when, as has happened once or twice, some entertainer fails to understand the standard of the camp life, and strikes a lower plain of thought and purpose.

But after all the above is interesting only as it points towards that marvelous process that is transforming many thousand individuals into a division of a great army, with training, skill, purpose. Last September the men flocked into the camp from all parts of New England and New York. Rich men, poor men; hand workers, brainworkers; hardworking men and idlers; men of high moral standards, and men of low moral standards, foreign and native born: Yankees, Irishmen, Scotchmen, Germans, Scandinavians, Italians, Poles, and men from all over the world. They are just plain unorganized individuals. It has been a marvelous thing to watch, the growth of an army, the establishment of standards and discipline, the process of drill and education, the development of spirit and morale. I am unacquainted with military life, but I do not need technical military training to permit me to say that I have seen some wonderful thing taking place in that division. I have a natural curiosity and interest in just these human transformations. I ate with the men in Company Mess. I have eaten and talked with many officers. I watched, questioned, and listened. I do not presume to speak of the purely military aspects of the life of the camp, but simply as a citizen of a democratic society when I say that I have seen this winter a process of education and fusion, of understanding and sympathetic appreciation of each other

the varied elements of our American life that goes quite beyond my power of description or appreciation. One or two incidents may suggest what I mean. I noted men of five different nationalities standing behind the mess counter serving dinner for the company. That is common. One day a man was heard growling because the corporal of his squad had been his father's Chauffeur before the selection for the army. I was told of another man who was so dirty and unkempt when he struck the camp that the examining surgeon would not give him the medical examination until he had taken a bath. Three months later he was appointed by his company commander to attend the officer's training school. Another man told me that never before in his life had he had a chance to show what stuff he had in him. Still another man, in speaking to me of the Captain of his Company, said, "That man is a prince. We would go through hell with him." I know enough about both the man and the Captain to know that in civilian life their interests were so different that the chances of their ever coming in contact with each other were so slight as not to exist. Yet each in his own way was a prince among men, and both know it now. I could go on with incidents like this to indicate the fusion, change, transformation that is going on in the camp. It speaks much for the future. I may misjudge the situation, but I believe that there is some great process going on there of tremendous significance.

Many people seem to think that a military training camp is a sort of segregated district of men bound for hell with the only saving grace for them to be found in the zone of uplifters who surround the camp. I do not wish to overstate my position here. I do not wish to underemphasize the tremendous value of safeguarding the camp, but let the proper proportions be maintained. The men in camp are not all saints. They are ordinary human beings. Some are men of very high purposes and standards. Others are more careless and reckless, but they measure up as a whole to a standard that is higher, intellectually, physically and morally than the average standard of civilian life. In my opinion the balances throw the burden of safeguarding the camp from the vicious inroads of civilian life rather than protecting the civilian life from the evils of the soldiers.

I was speaking one night with an old army officer about this very thing, the morale, the standard, the spirit and purpose that somehow permeates the camp. Suddenly he stopped, his facial expression changed, the whole soul of the man seemed to leap into his eyes and voice as he said, "My God, man, there never was anything like in the world." There is little demonstration, little talk. There is no swagger, no cheap blatant boasting, but a quiet, intelligent, determined conviction that falls little short of religious consecration. I saw a symbolic illustration of it one night at retreat. I chanced upon a man doing guard duty, just as the Buglers were sounding retreat. No one was round to see him. Off alone by himself. No one would have seen this little side play had I not happened on him just at the moment. He was standing at salute, alone. Other men all over the camp were doing the same thing. The early evening air was vibrating with the notes of the bugle. The tears were swelling in the eyes of the lone private on guard, his face was aglow. There shone in it some of that spirit I had felt so often. Intelligent, keen, alert, responsive, consecrated.

No. They are not all saints. But they are real men, and they are doing their job well in the camp. They will do it well elsewhere.

This leads to a statement that I wish to make concerning the religious, educational, and recreational work of the Y.M.C.A., and I believe other institutions. Either as a result of talk that was rampant in the early days of the camps, or as a result of experience in other places, the mental, and spiritual standards of the men were not clearly measured. It seemed very apparent to me that both in educational and religious work the aim was too low. I noticed this in particular upon several occasions when a musical program of extra fine quality was rendered and when lecturers addressed the men as they would an ordinary group of civilians. One of the best illustrations of a real response occurred on New Year's day when three women came to the camp building and gave a concert. The selections were well chosen not ultra-classic, but real music. They

were rendered by artists as to an audience that might appreciate as good music as the artists were capable of rendering. The audience did appreciate, because, as a matter of fact there are enough men in a regiment who know and like good music, to make an audience. The atmosphere of the hall, the response and comments of the men demonstrated then as at other times, the fact that what they wanted, and could and would respond to was not ragtime, or vaudeville but real music.

I could point to similar experiences in lectures. Straight man to man expression of real things brought them all to intellectual attention. The entertainer, the lecturer who comes before such audiences of soldiers as were accustomed to gather in Y.M.C.A. 27 with the idea that he is dealing with men of less than average intellectual acumen misses the point. He will find before him men of all ranges of conventional educational training from the keen minded man whose education has been in the university of life, to the man whose education has been as good as the country offers. To be sure the men are not interested in academic subjects. Not many of us are these days, but they are interested in real subjects handled in a real dignified manner. Condensation will not pass inspection.

I fear that the same mistake was made in the attempt to adapt a religious program to the men. I am not referring here to the so-called evangelical program of the Y.M.C.A. as distinct from some other form of a program which I am absolutely convinced would have reached more men and touched them more deeply. I believe that the evangelical program was out of place in the army, but I recognize that this judgement grows out of a difference of point of view. The point that I wish to call your attention to is one of method in presentation of program. Many in fact most of the Y.M.C.A. services lacked in dignity and tone of presenting their own programs. The Hymn books abounded in hymns of only passing, ragtime quality. The effort seemed to be to get what was often called "pop" into the singing. Poor preparation, random singing, and altogether undignified conduct of the services seemed to me to be the prevailing habit. In the army everything is done with a great deal of

dignity and form. These services seemed to me so common and utterly without form as to give a real explanation for the very small attendance.

The fact of the very meagre attendance at religious services was noteworthy. The Catholic Mass was well attended. The Jewish services were well attended, but with few exceptions the Protestant services were not well attended. With but from one to fifteen or twenty attending the Communion service and 15 to fifty or so attending the 10:30 service out of a possible protestant population in the regiment of a 1000 or 1200 one does not get the impression of a very strong enthusiasm for such services. I have said that this situation was due, in part, to the slipshod methods. I believe that another factor was the nature of the message. But after all such discounts have been made, there is still room for me to throw out for your consideration the suggestion that these men are simply quietly boycotting the services because they did not find anything real there. I believe that the cause runs deeper. It is not due to any irreligious attitude among the men, but to the fact that their religious natures were not touched by the services offered, or by the intellectual and moral appeal made. What it all means is not a question that I propose to discuss, but I throw out the facts for consideration.

Even as I make these suggestions and criticisms my mind runs past them to the tremendous fact of the war. There are men now in the service in such number that if they were marching in a column of fours from Boston west along the New York Central lines, the front ranks would be well beyond Chicago before the rear end of the vast body of men had lost sight of the State House at Boston. Hardly have we begun to feel the effect of that great tragic thing, the war, of which we are apart. Quite apart from the military needs of the day and the years, there looms before the essential demands upon thought, and the tremendous demand upon faith. As the men in the battle lines resist the aggressions of tyranny, are we going to be able to not only maintain but to increase, even beyond our present most daring conceptions, a democratic social order in which we

shall live together, sharing the burdens and responsibilities, as well as the joys and achievements of life? The hand has been put to the plow.