

FOLLOWING THE DRUM

IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, 1943-1945

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THE detachment A.E.C., B.N.A.F. (the Corps was not made Royal until after the war), landed at Algiers in May, 1943. I myself had gone ahead, taking passage on H.M.S. *King George V* from Rosyth to Gibraltar, and thence to Algiers by air. The remaining 15 officers and 34 other ranks followed by transport. For historical purposes it is worth recording that the officers were Majors Howarth and Baxter ; Captains Vaughan, Thorpe, Gladstone, Morice, Page and Magee ; and Lieutenants Smith, Lunn, Ormandy, de Pinna, Squires and Davidson. The task before us was to implement in a theatre of war as much as was possible of the war-time education scheme, and thus to justify our presence there. Our degree of success may be measured from the fact that when I left Italy in 1945, I left behind me 183 officers and 420 other ranks R.A.E.C., a very satisfactory expansion in numbers. Nor was quality lacking : we recruited almost entirely from men already serving in the B.N.A.F. and C.M.F. ; we took no one who had not a degree, was not a qualified teacher, or, in one or two exceptional cases, had proved a special aptitude for the work. Moreover, we took no one under 33 years of age unless he had been medically down-graded.

Among our officers was Captain John Hadley, the first A.E.C. officer to be killed in action. At the time of his death he was Divisional Education Officer of 8th (Indian) Division. There were several other less grievous casualties, for the ambition of the Corps was to push forward as far as possible, and not to remain at the base or on the lines of communication. Consequently we had our share of wounded. It would be wrong of me, then, in writing this article, not to pay tribute to the spirit of comradeship, common endeavour, sense of purpose, and sincerity which inspired all ranks. Many worked far too hard, and have suffered ever since as a result of their exertions, but at the time it happened their effort was sustained by an indescribable sense of duty accompanied, in some instances, by something akin to religious fervour. This was not to be wondered at, for there was no education when the detachment first reached the B.N.A.F., and everything that followed was our achievement. We had not been included in the original Order of Battle, and our first war establishment was not generous, for the Establishments Committee at Allied Force Headquarters was by no means sure of the need for our presence or of the work which we would do.

On the detachment's arrival, the only educational books in the B.N.A.F.

were two advance copies of each A.B.C.A. bulletin, sent weekly to A.F.H.Q. The detachment brought with it some cases of books, packed and selected by the staff at the War Office Directorate, and these were divided among the officers when they moved out to their assignments. These were all the books we had until, some months after our application, supplies of A.B.C.A. bulletins and B.W.P. booklets were sent out regularly from home for a scale distribution by the Publications Depot. In the meantime we wrote, printed, and published two primers, one in French and the other in Italian. These were designed to meet the demand for language study, and thousands of copies of each were distributed in the theatre. After that, we started to ask for and to receive from home textbooks for the use of instructors and students. Stocks accumulated until, finally, in early 1945, we set up in Naples the Army Educational Book Depot, C.M.F., which was ready to handle the ample supplies of books provided for the Release Period Education Scheme. Its staff of officers, other ranks, and civilians added up to a total of sixteen.

Clerks were another problem, for there was always a pronounced shortage of them in the B.N.A.F. and the C.M.F. Consequently we were not given any in our original war establishment, so month after month we put up our claims to the W.E. Committee until, in 1945, at A.F.H.Q. alone, we had twenty-seven clerks, in addition to which every Staff Officer (Edn.), according to his responsibilities, had one or more clerks, as well as a storeman. Transport, too, was a matter in which we were fortunate enough to have our needs recognized. To start off with, we were allowed a bicycle apiece. These machines were of little use to us, so in the end, after much solicitation, every Staff Officer (Edn.) in every formation was given a motor-car and driver.

The organization of our personnel was simple. At the beginning, when we were very short handed, we allocated our officers to the two District Headquarters and Area Headquarters on the L. of C. in French North Africa. As our numbers expanded, we sent officers to the field formations until, finally, we had one or more officers at each Army, Corps, Divisional and Brigade H.Q. Other ranks similarly were originally allocated to the large static units, such as reinforcement and training depots, penal establishments, and hospitals. After a while we made provision for education centres and placed others at the disposal of Staff Officers (Edn.), but our most successful venture was undoubtedly the mobile teams. Originally two, but subsequently ten in number, each mobile team consisted of a warrant officer and three serjeant instructors, A.E.C. It possessed a 15-cwt. truck which the team itself drove and maintained. Its job was to carry education and information to the units, and each team operated under a Corps or a District Education Officer who allotted it in turn to

lower formations. The success of the teams was immediate, and they soon became in great demand. It was W.O.I Denton, leader of No. 1 Mobile Team, A.E.C., who in 1944 was awarded the M.B.E. for his gallant and distinguished services. His work was typical of others. The mobile teams were the spearhead of the educational thrust. Between them they gave thousands of talks, conducted thousands of informal discussions, and answered thousands of questions. During operations, the troops in forward and L. of C. areas used to gather round the trucks for news in the same way that they gathered round the Y.M.C.A. vans for tea. I am confident that the mobile teams did more than anything else to give the troops a sound knowledge of the progress of the war and the aims for which we were fighting. Not even our excellent Army newspaper, the *Union Jack*, could compete with the interest aroused by our expert speakers. It was always a most invigorating experience to talk with the members of a mobile team, lean, fit and brown, about their experiences. Their log books would be surprising reading for some members of the Corps today.

Naturally, when we first arrived, we had no depot and no School of Education. Owing to the speed with which the Army moved from North Africa to Sicily, and thence into and up the Italian mainland, it was not until October, 1944, that the Army School of Education, C.M.F., was formed and opened. The success of this great school, housed in the Universitate Etrangeri, Perugia, was instantaneous. It consisted of three wings, the Unit Education Officers', the Unit Instructors' for General Education, and the Unit Instructors' for Technical Education. Once opened, the school ran rapidly course after course, and its 400 vacancies were nearly always filled. Consequently, by the date of the armistice, nearly every unit in the C.M.F. had a trained U.E.O. and a quota of instructors ready to instruct in the Release Period Scheme. The spirit of the school under the inspiring leadership of its Commandant, Wilfred Vaughan, was dynamic. It shook and stirred the complacency of the entire Army, including that of our American allies, many of whom confessed that they had never encountered anything quite so intensive even in the U.S.A.

Later on, in 1945, we planned and selected the staff for our great Formation College. I had to forgo the satisfaction of seeing it function, which it did six months before any college at home. One amusing sidelight on this rapidity of organization was that, the day before it opened, a cable from the War Office was received, querying the wisdom of selecting Perugia as its location, and suggesting alternative sites. Fortunately it was then too late to change.

Friends have sometimes asked me what the A.E.C. found to do in a theatre of war. Our officers and men were not tied to any rigid policy and

had full play for individuality and personal interests, but the efforts which we made were primarily aimed at maintaining the morale of the Army by keeping it informed as to what was happening on our own front, on other fronts, at home, and to our allies. The troops were always avid for reliable news. We did not make much use of typed broadsheets of the news taken from the radio, because we had an excellent Army daily newspaper. The importance of the A.E.C. instructor was that he could explain what was going on, could answer questions, and could run discussions on post-war problems in which most of the men were keenly interested. I always maintained that the main difference between American Army education and our own was that they relied on the written, whereas we preferred the spoken word. It is highly significant that, after all the thousands of A.E.C.-controlled discussions and lectures which we held, there was never one complaint of political bias or one-sided propaganda. Our men had their own views, but they were always loyal and did their best to be impartial.

One of our best discussion groups was at A.F.H.Q. itself. It was attended by Americans and French as well as by British officers and men. Attendances varied from 15 to 300, a figure reached on the night when the Director-General of Army Education disclosed to a somewhat critical audience his scheme for pre-vocational training. I doubt whether he was used to hearing junior officers and men speaking their minds. We were used to it, for in this group they did so every Thursday night, and the discussions were certainly vigorous. Yet there was never any suggestion that they were dominated by one particular school of thought. The Americans stuck to their plea for individual responsibility and freedom as opposed to the average British view of state control and social legislation.

A different type of information meeting was Dunne's "Saturday night is A.B.C.A. night." These took place in the largest cinema in Perugia, and consisted of a short talk by Dunne, who was an excellent speaker, and a display of A.B.C.A. films and news-reels. The house was always full. Great work was done, too, in the hospitals. Upton, the warrant-officer instructor in an 1,800-bedded hospital in Algiers, seemed to know every patient. Hundreds worked on handicrafts and others attended news talks and concerts of recorded music. Quite a good library was formed, and books were carried round to all the bed patients. Towards the spring of 1945 we were able to route civilian lecturers. Sir Alexander Gray, of Edinburgh, was the first to visit us, and he subsequently wrote a most vivid and appreciative account of his experiences which was published in *The Scotsman*. He was the first of several who had highly successful tours. Correspondence courses were another successful experiment in a theatre of war. We could not implement the War Office scheme until the autumn of 1944 because of the lack of air lift, but when, after protracted negotiations,

we were given our bid, the pent-up demand resulted in 15,000 applications reaching A.F.H.Q. within six weeks.

Our work was not confined to British troops. Before we finished, we were running education for Indian, African and Jewish troops. Our Imperial Education Conference, held at the Army School of Education in February, 1945, was attended by representatives of the South African, New Zealand, Indian and High Commission Territory troops. We also welcomed representatives of our American allies. This three-day conference, besides being a most pleasant experience, was of great value to us all.

Apart from formal education and current affairs, the A.E.C. took a lead in cultural pursuits. John Bishop, at H.Q., Eighth Army, published two volumes of poetry, written by the Army. Sam Morse Brown in Rome, Johnny Lunn in Tunis, and Ben Baxter in Sicily, developed intelligent sight-seeing. "Three days in Rome," organized by Sam, meant that the soldier on leave really saw something of Rome, instead of idling away his time in the cinema and canteen. Johnny Lunn, on the other hand, conducted parties round the bazaar in Tunis, where they studied oriental craftsmanship and salesmanship. Ben Baxter's parties climbed Etna, which fortunately never erupted during any of his expeditions. There was music everywhere, opera in Naples and ballet in Rome. Up the Adriatic Coast, not far from the enemy, Eighth Army had an education centre which attracted quite a flourishing group of artists.

There is, then, no doubt that the A.E.C. did most valuable work in the B.N.A.F. and the C.M.F. The importance of the information service on which it concentrated needs no stressing. Similarly the assistance given to those who wished to study for examinations, was obviously meeting a demand, but the stimulation of culture of any kind, the interest and sympathy with those men who wanted some mental relaxation from their daily task, was more subtle and less obvious, yet of equal if not greater importance. Situated in Italy, a land of great antiquity with wonderful buildings, marvellous paintings and sculpture, and a great tradition for music, it was well that, thanks to the A.E.C., the Army did not lose these opportunities for intelligent appreciation.

This brief account of the expansion of the A.E.C. in a theatre of war would be incomplete without a reference to the administrative problems which had to be solved. During the whole of the campaign we were faced with the necessity for justifying our presence by intensive work, obtaining increase in man power and, whilst carrying on with the job in hand, looking ahead to the release period. We began with totally inadequate resources. We had no precedents to guide us in our organization or our programme of work. We had to make our claims to a staff preoccupied with the campaign in an army always short of everything and everybody, and working

hand in glove with our American allies. We wished to avoid the administrative weaknesses which had hampered the work of the Corps elsewhere, and a great deal of time was devoted to the detailed personal administration of our officers and men. We originated a system for transfers, training, promotions and reports which had to be accepted by the staff at A.F.H.Q. as well as by 2nd Echelon. Well before the armistice, it was realized that the organization and the personnel for the release period would have to be trained and readily available if the Corps was to play an effective role when fighting stopped. So the pace was hot and the work intense, but the fact remained that, when the armistice was signed, we had the men, we had the organization, we had the scheme, and we had a force which was thoroughly indoctrinated and eager to work. Consequently, both from the release period angle and our war-time work, the despatch of the A.E.C. to a theatre of war was justified. Should the Army again be involved in an overseas campaign, there is ample precedent for the inclusion of the R.A.E.C. in the Order of Battle from the very beginning instead of at a later stage.