

## A DAY AT THE UQHD FIELD HOSPITAL

*One of the ICRC nurses spent several months last year in the field hospital at Uqhd in the Yemen. Her personal notes during the period in which she carried out her humanitarian task are well worth reproduction here, for like the many articles and photographs which we have already published on the ICRC's action in the Yemen, they describe the difficulties of work in the desert but they also show how useful is this task, especially in respect of training nursing personnel.<sup>1</sup>*

Early one September morning. It is only 6.30 but already the canvas of the tents is hot under the blazing sun and in spite of the ventilator, the heat is barely tolerable. In the wards—a far cry from those of a modern hospital—the patients are preparing to face a new day. They are dressed in their own clothes in varying degrees of cleanliness ; at the foot of each bed is a dripping water bag ; on a number of empty cases is a mixed assortment of cooking utensils and food ; flies swarm everywhere.

And what about the patients ? Here for example Mahdi's right hand is slow to heal after an amputation of three fingers ; there, Mohammed Ali is suffering from a terrible osteomyelitis of the femur. Further on lie Caïd, Ahmed, and Al Chaïb, who were all three together when their lorry blew up on a mine : one has a broken elbow, another his legs riddled with shrapnel, the third a crushed tibia. Then, there is " Peter and Paul ", two great stalwarts of apostolic mien, friendly, both wounded on the same day, in the same spot by shots which shattered the right humerus of one, the left humerus of the other. There are also a number of Bedouins or Nadjaranis recovering from operation or accident as well as the " sadigs ", the escorts of one or several friends who accompany the patients, settle in at the camp and, taking advantage of Red Cross

---

<sup>1</sup> Plate : Nursing aids and wounded at the ICRC Hospital, Uqhd.

hospitality, "tend" their friends; that is to say bringing them food, occasionally doing their laundry, carrying their beds to the shade or the sunshine, to the clinobox or X-ray theatre as the case may be. At the beginning this swarm of attendants—helpful and unhelpful—was somewhat overwhelming, but one soon gets use to it and one even learns to appreciate it for all the chores it does for the staff.

After introducing the patients, it is time to present the Yemenite nursing assistants, Ismaïl, Ahmed and Mohamed. Ismaïl is more advanced than the others in nursing and is also the most competent of the three. Temperature charts no longer have any secret for him. It must be admitted that it is no mean task to teach a Yemenite to fill in a temperature chart properly. First of all, it is difficult for them to read European figures. Secondly they have no conception of date as we know it, they for example see no difference between the 5th and the 12th of September: mere days like any others. To make things easier the dates are written in Arabic and a simple calendar, also in Arabic, is prominently displayed in each tent.

After taking temperatures, cleaning is the next task. Each of the three sets to work. It does not seem difficult to sweep a tent, but tents like these are another matter! The floor is littered with obstacles ranging from rolls of blankets to sacks of millet flour. And naturally there is a lot to be removed. Apart from shovelfuls of sand and despite the fact that the patients know that they must not spit or throw refuse on the floor, there is always a pile of date stones, cigarette ends, and litter of all sorts. Although Ismaïl and Ahmed have mastered the art of sweeping, Mohamed has still difficulty in this field; almost every day he must be shown the forgotten corners. He just lacks experience, of course.

Now comes the most important part of the day's routine; changing the dressings. In the three tents preparations are made for this solemn, almost ritual act. After carefully washing and scrubbing our hands, squatting in front of the tent, the necessary material for dressing any wound, large or small, clean or infected, is set out on empty packing cases reserved for this purpose. As can be imagined no complicated and extensive equipment is used; we have the bare necessities, having adapted ourselves and our methods

to the country. We must forgo the niceties of medical practice which would be observed in Switzerland ; we must adapt our methods to the Yemen. Our objective is to heal with the simple means we have available and we must not seek to complicate the task. That is why we have kept our choice of medical supplies, instruments and dressings to a minimum, bearing in mind that these nursing assistants will be called upon to use what new knowledge they acquire in their mountain retreats where they will be the only representatives of " medical science ". They must therefore be given the means of caring effectively for the many ills to which their compatriots are subject. Their initiation to this work starts in the hospital and that is why the changing of the dressings is so important. Stress is laid first and foremost on the need for asepsis. For the first few times, therefore, the nurse in charge—the " doctora "—dresses the wounds herself, explaining the while the reasons for her actions to the onlooking aspirant nursing assistants. When she is certain that they have grasped the simple actions she allows them to exercise their talents progressively more and more, correcting them ten, perhaps twenty times if necessary, when some ill-considered or clumsy action might detract from the strict cleanliness of the dressings. And this strictness, difficult as it is to maintain with the heat and fatigue, bears fruit. Miraculously, wounds both large and small, even those which were so infected as to give reason to consider amputation, heal slowly but surely. And the Yemeni are most impressed by these results ; they are easily convinced that our methods are effective. The seed of confidence is sown, it grows and strengthens, engendering co-operation. Everyone endeavours to play his part in the improvement of the general situation. The broom is applied with renewed vigour whenever necessary. Those who have been long enough to know the ropes pass on the elementary rules of hygiene to newcomers. The unkempt mop of hair of the warriors, a refuge for dirt and a breeding ground for vermin, falls under the awkwardly wielded scissors. The new-found cleanliness of clothes and bodies is a phenomenon to behold.

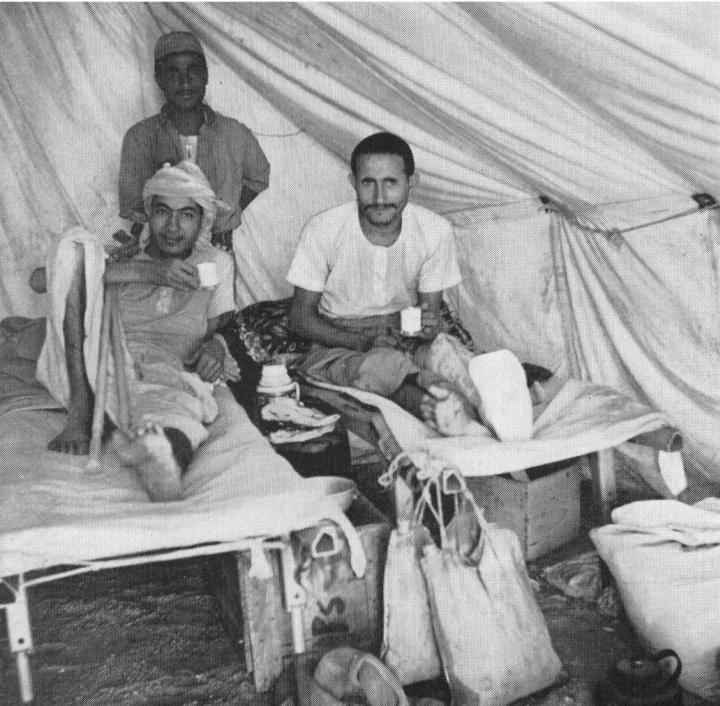
When the dressings have all been changed, injections are then administered. This is a job which seems to have a special fascination for the Yemeni nursing assistants. However, the number of

Y  
E  
M  
E  
N

Nursing aids.



AT THE ICRC HOSPITAL, UQHD.



Two of the wounded  
and their "sadig".

shots which they may administer must be kept to the minimum to avoid risks ; as far as possible we prescribe medicines to be swallowed. In this connection, incidentally, the Yemenite digestive system seems to be capable of taking anything ; it is very rare that medicines cause any side-effects.

It is now almost 11 o'clock and the morning's work is finished. Those on duty return to their quarters with a sigh of relief . The heat is terrible : 140° F. in the open. However, there is a slight breeze, raising here and there small clouds of fine pink sand. And then, suddenly, towards the end of the midday meal, a gust of wind gives warning of the forthcoming sand-storm : in less time than it takes to tell, tables, plates, food, the water in the glasses, are all sprinkled with sand which is gritty and sets teeth on edge. Within five minutes a nightmare is upon us. The Northern horizon is of an ocre hue. Copper-tinted whirlwinds are unleashed. Unsecured papers, boxes and clothing are blown about, empty tins roll around with a clashing and a banging. We protect ourselves as well as possible, which is not very well. The tent poles shake, the canvas creaks—will the tents stand the strain once again ? And the sand, sand, and yet more sand ! Despite closed eyes and tightly closed lips, one soon feels them blocked with sand. Breathing becomes insufferable. Perspiration adds to the discomfort and we wait ; that is all we can do. The sand piles up in and around the tents. With anxious hearts and set teeth we wait.

Then the wind begins to lose its continuity and violence ; it comes in gusts of declining frequency and strength, the cloud becomes less dense, the uproar slowly subsides. Finally, we can go out into the open. The camp is unscathed. It's over for today—and we have survived !

Towards 4.30 p.m. life resumes in the hospital. The wards are alive with activity. As it is no longer so hot, and as the shadows are lengthening, the " sadigs " carry their friends out of the tents which are still stifling. The time has come for physiotherapy. Indeed, these arms and legs, so long inactive, will soon have to recover their full use. Those cosseted lungs must have exercise. So now the gymnastics begin : one, two, one, two, raise this leg, lower it, raise it . . . and everybody counts in Arabic to encourage those undergoing the drill. This is also the time for a social get-together : talk is of the

war, the wonders of Europe, of families and of sicknesses. This is an opportunity also to inculcate elementary ideas of anatomy and physiology in those who are interested. Soon the nurse is surrounded by perhaps thirty men from all over the camp, who come to listen or to express opinions. How friendly is this gathering, smiling and eager to learn, in an atmosphere of confidence and respect ; and the " doctora " would not refuse the glass of tea here, the cup of spiced coffee there, with a few dried dates to nibble at or some of those delicious Arab biscuits cooked on hot stones ; or perhaps she will be invited to partake in the communal dish highly flavoured by a sauce of pimentoes.

But what is the reason for this sudden commotion ? It is the Yemeni cook bringing in the inevitable spaghetti in tomato sauce. After the meal, comes the time for ablutions. All who are able congregate at the tap with their water bags, jerrycans, containers ; for this precious liquid being scarce, it is rationed. The tap is in use near the hospital tents for only 20 minutes each day . . . enough to drink but not much to wash ! Nevertheless, this is the time of the day which we have chosen to teach the nursing assistants to wash the patients properly. This is no easy matter. Their own method of washing is to pour a pail of water over their heads and to give themselves a cursory wash in the puddle ! When a patient is confined to his bed this is out of the question, even in this country where everything dries so quickly. They must also be taught the use of that appreciated but little known commodity, soap.

Night falls quickly in the Yemen. Soon the throb of the electric generator can be heard and lights go on one by one. Before leaving the patients for the night, there is one more task for the nurses : distributing sedatives. In the tents, card games are in progress ; the transistors are at full blast ; the remains of midday's rice is being eaten with fingers, while others patients are already settled down for the night.

Under the blankets of one of the beds two forms can be distinguished, but one is on the bed and the other beneath it. The " sadig " is on the bed, the patient underneath. He is not accustomed to sleeping above the ground and fears to fall whilst asleep. When the nurse appears to hand out the pills, everybody comes to life, groaning in pain. This situation calls for discretion, as the local

inhabitants adore taking pills and if they were not watched they would leave the hospital as addicts. Fortunately, one soon learns to distinguish between those who are really in pain and those who are shamming. The situation calls for some firmness !

After finally saying good night, the nurse makes her way out of the ward by stepping across the reclining patients to go to sleep beneath the stars ; the stars of the Yemenite sky. How they compensate for the trials of the sand-storm, the dirt, the flies and the heat ! There are a hundred, a thousand times more than in Europe. What luxury to stretch out to sleep in peace in this country racked by war, in a strange calm so near to these fierce warriors in the vastness of the desert under a panoply of stars.

EVELINE DARBRE