

ICRC DELEGATE

A DEMANDING AND FASCINATING CAREER

A prison visitor... a spokesman for enemy internees in a nation at war... a doctor or surgeon at the bedside of wounded or sick victims of hostilities... a registrar of records to identify detainees, search for the missing, bring families together again... a distributor of food and blankets... a transport manager: these are only some of the jobs of an ICRC delegate. He must be a man of goodwill who may be considered to be a help to the detaining authorities in the solution of the delicate problems arising from the detention of prisoners of war. The delegate knows that his work will not be easy. His activities take place, typically, in a disorganized and war-torn country. He will be concerned with the enemies of that country, prisoners and internees who will very often be the object of hatred. He will speak in the name of what is right and in the name of humanity, at the very moment when passions are at their height and when such language has the least chance of being heard.¹

What kind of man does it take to overcome such obstacles? Who are the representatives of the ICRC? What moves them to choose such a career—so demanding and at the same time so fascinating? How are such people found?

Profile of a delegate

To carry out such a variety of tasks, under conditions which are almost always difficult—and never entirely the same from one country to another—the ICRC delegate must have a combination of such contradictory qualities as to make him quite an exceptional being. Here are some of the requirements:

¹ Pierre Boissier, *The Red Cross in Action*, Henry Dunant Institute, 1974.

Age, at least 25 and—with few exceptions—no more than 55. He must have, at one and the same time, “the dynamism of youth and the prudence of maturity”² so that he may be adamant at times and yielding at other times—with judgement enough to decide which is appropriate at a given time. He must be capable of taking decisions, and sometimes quickly, but he must avoid being hasty; he must be independent, but must also obey instructions; be impartial, but not insensitive; he must have initiative, but a good team spirit. He must be of good appearance and be able to express himself well in several languages. He must know enough to keep his mouth shut about confidential matters—and in particular about things he sees and hears while carrying out his mission. While not becoming “a man without a country”, he must be conscious of international affairs and well informed about them. He must be a “systematic organizer and an inspired improviser.” In other words, “he must carry the ICRC mission in his heart, without acting like a missionary zealot; and while embodying all the qualities and contradictions of *homo sapiens*, he must be willing to dedicate himself unstintingly, for a relatively moderate salary.” Above all, he must be absolutely upright and honest—and at the same time unassuming.

The delegate must accept certain sacrifices. His working schedule on mission is heavy but may include long waiting periods which impose great psychological stress, living conditions which are sometimes difficult and on occasion dangerous, and relatively prolonged separation from his family.

Except for technical personnel—radio operators, drivers, logistics specialists, etc.—and members of the medical corps, delegates must be of Swiss nationality, since they are called upon to conduct negotiations as neutral intermediaries.

Negotiator and man of action

These negotiations are carried on with governmental and military authorities. They have little relation however to diplomacy in the usual sense. While tact is required in discussions with ministers and chiefs of staff, the objectives in these talks involve human beings and not political interests. In confronting these interlocutors, the delegate is sometimes

² Hans O. Staub. “Manager der Menschlichkeit”, *Weltwoche*, Zurich, 1975.

regarded as “the devil’s advocate” since he is defending the rights of various victims, such as prisoners of war, political detainees or civilians in occupied territory who are, *de facto*, opposed to the persons currently in power. The delegate must therefore remain impartial and neutral, even in private, during and after his mission.

The delegate’s task is not, as commonly believed, to scrutinize the application of the Geneva Conventions. The States which have signed them have the responsibility of respecting and enforcing respect for the legal instruments to which they have put their names. The ICRC may be called upon to oversee the application of the Conventions when it is a substitute for the Protecting Power—a neutral state entrusted by the belligerents with tasks of control and protection—but this only occurs when no such Power has been designated. The Geneva Conventions however specifically designate the ICRC for a number of duties in protecting and assisting war victims. It takes part therefore in the application of the law through the activities carried out by its delegates in places of conflict, and through the help it thereby gives the authorities.

The delegate is not only a negotiator but also a man of action who rolls up his sleeves when there’s work to be done. When he is organizing the distribution of relief, he will often have to help unload the trucks; when he is escorting civilians across a cease-fire line, he may have to double as a chauffeur or stretcher bearer.

The activities of the medical delegate are of great importance during visits to places of detention. Thanks to him, the real situation of the captives can be judged. The doctor in this case is interested not only in the health status of the detainees but also in the cleanliness of the quarters, the sanitary facilities, the condition of the kitchens, the adequacy of the diet and the organization of medical and dental care.

The medical delegate also deals with the authorities on matters affecting the health of protected persons who are detained or who are living in occupied territory. In addition, he carries out various assistance tasks—evaluating medical needs in a country at war, caring for the sick and wounded in civilian hospitals or military field hospitals, organizing the delivery of medical supplies, taking part in repatriation operations... and so on. When medical deficiencies are very serious, the ICRC calls upon the National Societies of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun to provide complete medical or surgical teams, for periods ranging from two to many months.

No systematic recruiting

The ICRC does not systematically recruit delegates. News by word of mouth, mainly in student circles, and information through articles, lectures, film showings, exhibitions, etc., bring the greater number of candidates. Through such organizations as the Group for International Missions set up by the ICRC in 1963 to facilitate the recruitment of delegates for emergencies, and the disaster corps of the Swiss Confederation, the ICRC has delegates in reserve, but they are available only for fixed periods of time, usually about eight weeks.

The Delegations Service of the ICRC receives an average of more than one letter a day from candidates. On the basis of such objective criteria as nationality, motive or studies indicated by the candidate, unsuitable offers are eliminated. For the remaining ones, a preliminary interview is arranged at ICRC headquarters, with the participation of one or more directors. This makes it possible to get acquainted with the candidate, to judge his appearance, manner of speaking and linguistic ability, intellectual and moral level and, finally, motivation. The latter is important, because the ICRC does not wish to engage adventurers, those who merely seek faraway places or those who are trying to escape from their personal problems.

Five-day training course

In co-operation with the League of Red Cross Societies, the ICRC organizes five-day training courses four or five times a year. The twenty-five available places are occupied by candidates who have themselves offered their services, by delegates sent by the Group for International Missions, volunteers from the disaster corps and diplomatic trainees sent by the Federal Political Department. After a get-acquainted evening, featuring a lecture on the Red Cross and its history, four days are devoted to courses on various topics, given by experienced Red Cross people. The fifth and final day is reserved for a visit to the headquarters of the organization.

The first day's course deals with the structures of the international Red Cross—the League, the ICRC and National Societies—and the Geneva Conventions, with special reference to their diffusion and the respect accorded to them in the world. The next two days provide for more thorough and specific studies: the work of the ICRC with regard

to the Third Convention—prisoners of war—and the Fourth Convention—civilian populations—is presented in detail, supplemented by practical demonstrations.

These exercises bring them to grips with some of the principal difficulties which ICRC representatives actually encounter in their work. They consist in simulated visits to places of detention and of the study of a situation based upon current events. A film of real ICRC operations is shown in connection with these exercises.

Several hours of courses are also devoted to ICRC activities in non-international conflicts, organization of relief actions, the role of the medical delegates and visits to political detainees.

The candidates then visit the Central Tracing Agency where they receive technical information on this specialized work. (The ICRC also trains some delegates specifically for this kind of work, involving searches for missing persons, the reuniting of families, the sorting of civilian messages, etc.)

The course ends with a speech by the President of the ICRC, who describes the work being carried out by the ICRC in different parts of the world. There are also some purely practical talks on delegation procedures and the status and pay of the delegates.

Horizontal and vertical classification

When the training course is finished, the ICRC personnel who have served as instructors and the chief of the Delegations Service make their evaluations of the candidates. The resulting classification is both horizontal and vertical. On the one hand, the candidates are judged in terms of overall values, based on assessment of their work and their conduct during the course; on the other hand, in terms of the various kinds of work required in a delegation. The word “delegate” indeed is used for such specialists as prison visitors, jurists, organizers of relief actions, administrators, Tracing Agency specialists, doctors, etc. To assign candidates according to their various skills makes for the most effective use of delegates when the time comes.

What about women delegates?

Up to the present time, there have been few women delegates. This situation is evolving however, and the experience of recent years indicates

that women members of delegations make an effective contribution to its accomplishment. The tasks entrusted to them include those with a major humanitarian element; contacts with civilian populations in occupied territory; inquiries among families in connection with searches for missing persons; visits to camps for interned civilians, in which it is common to find whole families ranging from grandmother to nursing living under bad conditions of hygiene, nutrition, etc.; visits to women's prisons, in which the presence of a woman delegate will do much for the psychological atmosphere. Women have carried out numerous medical tasks, either as members of mobile teams or as regular physicians.

When the course is over

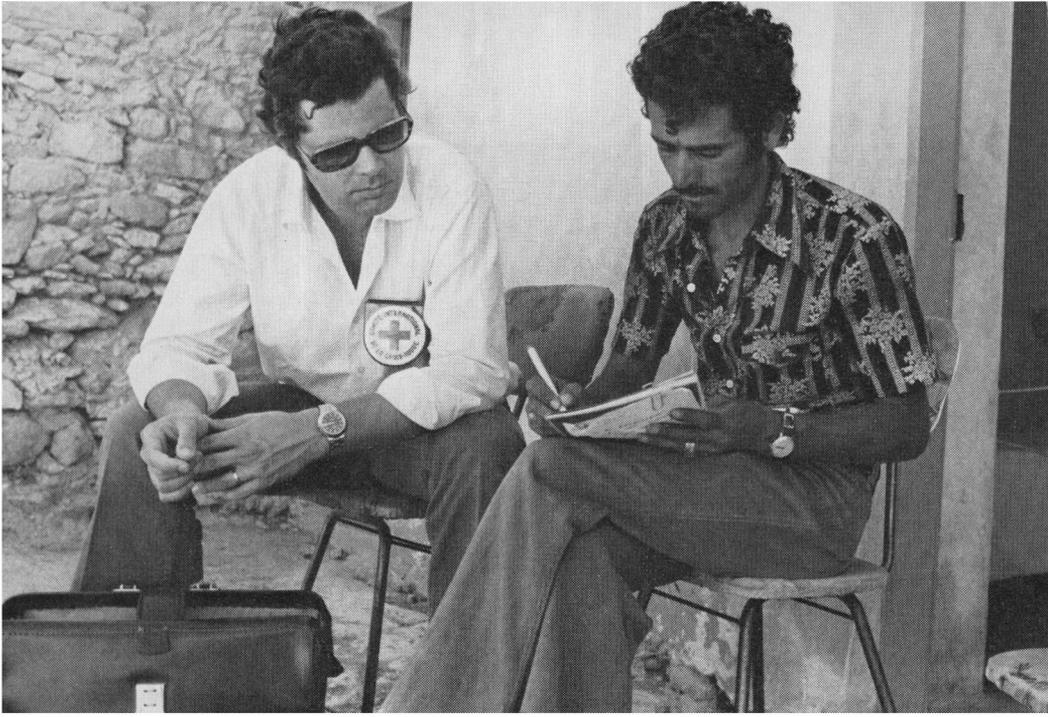
The candidate returns to his home, has himself vaccinated—and resumes his usual activities. No position is promised to him, since the sending of delegates to the field depends on needs as they arise.

The Delegations Service can plan the employment of delegates only to a slight extent, as in the case of replacements for members of long term missions. If a conflict breaks out, calling for the immediate dispatch of a score or more of delegates, the ICRC's manpower reserve may not always be sufficient. Since several months may elapse between the end of a course and the offer of a post, the candidate is not always available when the time comes to send him on mission. In addition to this problem, there is the matter of the duration of the appointment. This is one year for delegates, but the period may be considerably shortened for some specialists, in particular doctors, who are difficult to find when they are needed.

Preparations for departure

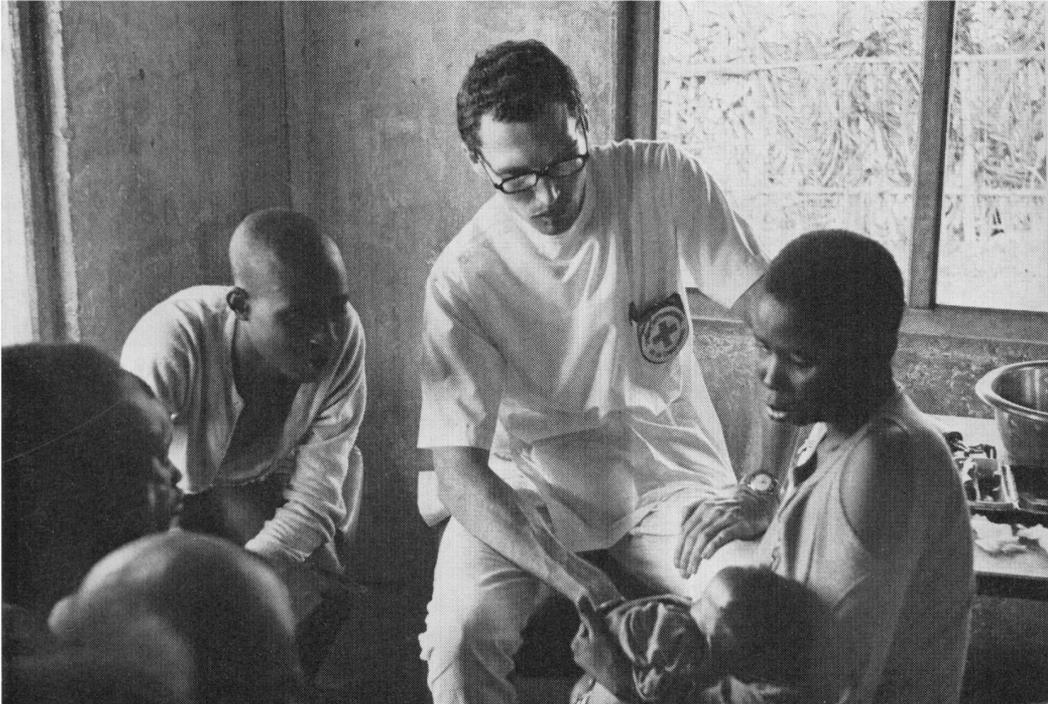
Before leaving for the country where he will carry out his first mission, the delegate spends about a week at ICRC headquarters in detailed study of his forthcoming assignment and in working meetings with the heads of various services. This is supplemented by a period spent at the Institute of Development Studies, affiliated to the Geneva Graduate Institute of International Studies, to obtain background knowledge of the ethnologic, geopolitical and economic situations in the region to which he is being sent.

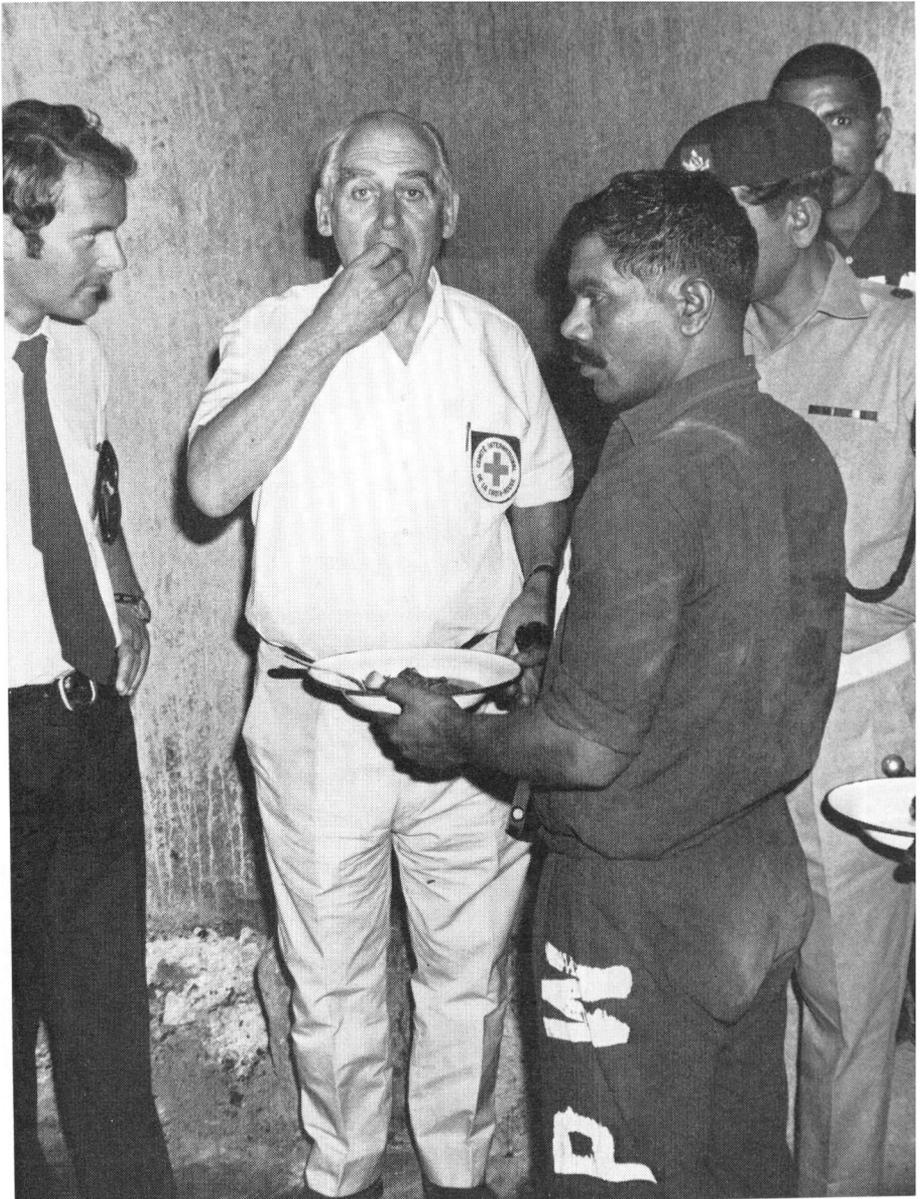
It is actual work in the field however, bringing him face to face with the realities of life and of war, which constitutes the real training



An ICRC delegate assisting persons to fill in enquiry and civilian message forms about missing relatives...

... while a medical delegate treats patients in a dispensary.





The delegate must also taste meals prepared for the inmates of a prisoner-of-war camp.

of the new delegate. For several months, his training continues under the direct guidance of the chief of the delegation. The latter will not only counsel him in his work but will also test his character. After all, a man may prove to be highly resourceful in an emergency, even though he may have seemed timid during the theoretical course—and the reverse may also occur.

To become a well-rounded delegate, however, varied experience provides the best schooling. For this reason, the ICRC offers missions with different problems and different psychological atmospheres. It also arranges *ad hoc* courses at headquarters, so that the delegate will broaden his knowledge of ICRC activities in the field and of its administrative procedures. Eventually, when the delegate has all the necessary qualifications, he may be offered a contract of from three to five years in a position of responsibility in the field.

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ICRC delegates serving abroad are usually members of a delegation of two or more persons. Their activities are carried out under several headings:

Visiting delegates, who visit places of detention, intervene with detaining authorities and write reports on their visits.

Visiting medical delegates, who carry out the same tasks as those above and who also examine seriously wounded or seriously sick prisoners and constitute medical commissions with a view to repatriating such persons.

Clinical medical delegates—including surgeons, anesthetists, specialists in tropical medicine, public hygiene, etc.—who also evaluate the needs in a country at war for clinical personnel, hospitals, equipment, medical supplies, etc.

There may also be emergency medical or surgical assistants, working alone or in teams, in hospitals or in mobile clinics.

Para-medical personnel, consisting of male or female nurses who may be engaged to work under some of the circumstances referred to above.

Central Tracing Agency delegates, including office workers, investigators, organizers, to set up and staff local bureaus of the CTA, comprising both Swiss and local personnel. They are concerned with searching for missing persons, arranging for exchanges of messages between members of divided families, reuniting families, drawing up and checking lists of prisoners or internees and providing travel documents.

Specialized relief delegates, *who estimate the non-medical needs of countries at war, in food, clothing, housing, etc.; set up emergency programmes; receive merchandise and arrange for its storage, inventory control, insurance, etc.; distribute and check relief supplies and prepare reports.*

Transport specialists, *who deal with transport of goods and persons by railway, road, sea or air.*

Administrators, *who look after administrative and financial matters, involving housing and subsistence for delegates, general accounting, relief programme accounting, local employees, vehicles, etc.*

Radio operators, *who send and receive operational messages either by code or voice, in English or French, exchanged between the delegation and ICRC headquarters in Geneva. They are also responsible for installation and maintenance of equipment.*

