

BOOKS AND REVIEWS

ANDRÉ SOUBIRAN: « LE BARON LARREY,
CHIRURGIEN DE NAPOLEON » ¹

Dr. Soubiran has attractively portrayed the man who was Surgeon-in-Chief of the "Grande Armée" from 1812 onwards. Whilst he has no hesitation in destroying the legend of his unconditional loyalty to Napoleon I, he describes throughout a well documented work the determined efforts made by a man of integrity, who did not however disdain honours, an able surgeon devoted to his craft who was the "Providence" of the battle-field.

Step by step we follow Dominique Larrey (1766-1842). He was a fighter, as indeed he had to be to maintain the hard struggle throughout his life to obtain some form of independence for the Army Medical Service, constantly thwarted by his subjection to the Staff and especially to the Quartermaster-General's Department. Slowness, slackness, indeed the dishonesty of the administration, obliged Larrey and many of his colleagues to accomplish heroic efforts to deal with the most desperate situations and to give treatment and perform operations in conditions described in these pages.

Of a choleric and obstinate temperament, with his rough but active kindness, Larrey showed great courage when it was a question of defending the wounded, and at times those of the enemy. Many examples of this are given in Dr. Soubiran's work. One such was the famous episode of his resistance at Dresden to the Emperor's orders, after Lutzen and Bautzen, to designate for each Army Corps two cases of self-inflicted wounds to be shot as an example to the troops. His report concluded that "it is physically impossible to discover the slightest indication that any of the soldiers visited by him had wilfully caused self-inflicted wounds . . . our researches have induced us to believe that the lack of knowing how to handle weapons has been the main reason for such mutilations amongst con-

¹ Librairie Fayard, Paris, 1966, 523 p.

scripts, such as when they fire in three ranks, the second and third aim unconsciously at those in front . . .” The Emperor, having admitted the justice of his observations, Larrey sent a circular letter to all his colleagues which, says the author, “ would be sufficient for the renown of one man and which remains one of the foundations upon which military legal medicine is based.” The following is but one extract.

“ Doctors are and should in any case be the friends of mankind. As such, they must always act and speak on its behalf. You should always give treatment and bandage the guilty as well as the innocent and you should only have eyes for the sick organism. You need concern yourselves with nothing else ”.

Larrey’s stubbornness in defending the situation of the wounded immediately after the fighting enabled him, in Alexandria in 1801, to obtain the repatriation of 1,338 wounded and sick in twelve hospital ships before the first able-bodied soldier left Egypt. Unfortunately, however, there were so many other occasions when Larrey was forced to resign himself to abandoning to their fate the wounded who could not be transported.

To his honour, Larrey cared for the enemy, when circumstances demanded, never hesitating to search for wounded men within range of the enemy’s guns. Amongst others mention should be made of his intervention with Bonaparte to enable the release of English prisoners incarcerated in the Cairo citadel.

Creator of the Medical Service of the future, as admitted today by all armies throughout the world, Larrey was one of the forerunners of Henry Dunant, Maunoir, Appia and of all those who for the past hundred years have struggled to establish, then to safeguard the neutrality of medicine which is always at risk in time of war. Moreover, the author in his epilogue makes mention of the battle of Solferino, the Committee of Five, the Geneva Conventions and the principles which are their motivation.

M. G.