

Rediscovering the 83rd (Dublin) General Hospital, Boulogne.

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Between Autumn 1914 and the Spring offensives of 1918, the Western Front in Belgium and France remained in a state of relative stalemate. Despite this, British and Dominion forces suffered an estimated 2.25 million casualties. Of these, approximately 750,000 individuals died, either immediately or later; the remainder were either captured or wounded. This volume of casualties along a static Front necessitated the creation of highly organized structures for the assessment, triage and evacuation of the sick and wounded; this involved aid posts at the Front, evacuating back to casualty clearing stations and from there to base hospitals on the French coast. Although these base hospitals were temporary establishments, they were well equipped, and attended by senior medical and surgical staff.

In 1917 William Taylor (1871-1933), a surgeon from the Meath Hospital and later Professor of Surgery in TCD, was asked to identify medical personnel from Dublin to staff a base hospital. Offers from groups of doctors from Dublin, Cork and Belfast to establish such units earlier in the war had been rejected. Taylor already held a Colonel's commission from the Army Medical Services as Consulting Surgeon to the Forces in Ireland.

The 83rd (Dublin) General Hospital was established from the extant 13th Stationary Hospital which had been based in Boulogne since 1914. It remained operational until after the war, treating victims of the Spanish flu, and eventually relocated to Langenfeld in Germany in April 1919. It was intended that staff recruited from Dublin hospitals would be older than was usual for medical officers, 'over 40 years of age, and only to exceed 50 by a small margin' which, according to the British Medical Journal, 'prevented the inclusion in the hospital staff of several well-known Dublin surgeons and physicians who had volunteered their services'. Doctors volunteered for a period of three to six months; temporary commissions were awarded for six months and extended for doctors undertaking further rotations to the hospital. It was intended that each of four three-month detachments would consist of nine doctors, 'two physicians, three surgeons, an oculist, a pathologist, a radiographer, and an anesthetist', although

it unclear if the last two rotations were staffed according to this plan. The chief physician and surgeon of the group were given temporary commissions as Lieutenant Colonels; the other surgeons and physicians were appointed Majors and the specialists were made Captains. After the completion of the fourth, three-month rotation, command and staffing of the hospital returned to the regular army and the Royal Army Medical Corps.

In addition to its role as a general hospital, the 83rd had three specialist units, treating maxilla-facial injuries, and eye injuries and had a 'physical medicine' or rehabilitation unit established by the Red Cross.

The 50 bed maxilla-facial unit was under the command of Charles Valadier, a French-American dentist and pioneer of reconstructive surgery for severe jaw injuries. In 1915 he had convinced the General Staff of the importance of such a unit and a New-Zealand surgeon, Harold Gilles, was appointed to assist him in his work. Valadier's work is credited as inspiring Gilles to establish the first specialist facial-reconstructive surgery unit in Aldershot. The 83rd was also attended by visiting specialists, the most renowned of these was the American neurosurgeon, Harvey Cushing.

It was possible to pinpoint the geographical location the 83rd using clues from a number of sources. A patient, Arthur Leslie Rodda, described the hospital as being on the Wimereux Road in his diary. The names of the houses used for nurses homes -the 'Chateau de la Falaise' and 'Pension de la Legion d'Honneur' - also implied that the hospital was close to the cliffs just to the north of Boulogne and also near the Avenue and Chemin de la Legion d'Honneur, roads in the same vicinity. These residences were described by Maud McCarthy, Chief Matron of the Forces, as being located 'in the road opposite, and in a building in a house just behind.' Cushing reported in his diary in April 1918 that 'bombs dropped in fields behind it, no great damage done'. Although British records were destroyed, this reported bombing initiated a search for contemporary German aerial reconnaissance photos of the area. A high resolution photograph, taken in June 1917 by the FA3 Squadron, was identified in the Eugene McDermott Collection of the University of Texas and magnification confirmed the presence of an encampment consistent with a Base Hospital, in a triangular area demarcated by the Wimereux Road, and the Chemin and Avenue de la Legion d'Honneur.

The hospital appears to have had at least 12 wards and a number of other smaller buildings. The wards were temporary buildings or huts and could usually accommodate about thirty casualties. At the southern end of the site is another structure which may represent the 'physical medicine' building provided by the Red Cross.