

CHAPTER VIII

DEMobilIZATION

IN one sense it was far more difficult to stop the war than it had been to set it going. The Armies of the Empire were created gradually, and the machinery for their maintenance was built up with them piece by piece, until eventually it developed into a world-wide organization and absorbed every field of human activity. During more than four years the titanic war machine had been gathering momentum. Now, on a sudden, its movement had not only to be arrested but reversed; and the strain imposed by the application of the brake and throwing into gear of the reverse lever aggravated very substantially those gaping wounds left by the Great War on the surface of the earth, whose scars are still so plainly visible. The whole productive energy of the world had been gradually diverted from its wonted courses, and the attempt to restore it with all speed to normal channels gave rise to intensely difficult problems; and in no case more so than in highly industrialized Great Britain.

Long before the Armistice a Committee had assembled in London to consider how best to carry out demobilization; and it was this paramount importance of setting our peace industries going once more and finding employment for millions of demobilized men that dominated the situation.

The plan adopted was first to set free those necessary to restart each branch of peaceful industry—pivotal men they were called. The process was next to be extended to others, according to their vocations or guarantees of employment, at such rate as they could be absorbed by the labour market. But in those administrative Corps on whom would now fall the brunt of the military work—that of clearing up the aftermath of war—no one was to be released unless he were an essential pivotal man; and, as this work would fall with the greatest severity on the Ordnance, those of the R.A.O.C. would of necessity be the last to be set free.

Each man was to go home with a full kit ; and, after handing in his arms and accoutrements at a dispersal camp, could rejoin civil life in his service uniform and military boots, with a complete set of underclothes and other necessaries. By this process of attrition each unit would be gradually reduced to a cadre, which was to retain its regimental equipment to the accustomed scale. Everything extra, specially authorized owing to special conditions, was to be returned to the Ordnance locally, and anything deficient or not up to the mark made good from local stocks. The complete mobilization equipment was then to be examined and verified by an Ordnance officer and listed, though no ledger account was to be opened. Finally, when the cadre returned home, it was to be accompanied by this equipment which would either be retained, should the unit form part of our post-war army, or returned to some Ordnance depot at home ; the list already prepared serving in either case as the basis of a peace equipment account.

Excellent in theory, the plan unfortunately ignored two very vital considerations, human nature and the fact that eight months were to elapse between the signing of an armistice and the conclusion of peace. True, as time went on and it became clear that Germany could not continue the struggle, the armistice period merged more and more into a peace period ; but nevertheless we had to be prepared at any time to resume hostilities until terms of peace were actually accepted by the enemy. This necessity conflicted with the spirit of the scheme, which aimed at getting the wheels of industry going as quickly as possible and setting everyone free with a minimum of delay and hardship.

For the rank and file the war had ended on the 11th November, 1918. They had joined up for the duration of the war and it was in vain that the meaning of an armistice was defined in orders and explained in lectures or informal talks by officers to their men. Convinced against their will, they were of the same opinion still and could not understand why they were compelled to mark time.

An even more powerful reason for the spirit of unrest that pervaded every unit at this time was due to the order in which men were to be released ; which, while it might be in the interests of the nation as a whole, failed to take into account individual claims due to length of service. Coal, for instance, being necessary in every form of manufacture or commerce, everyone employed in the coal mining industry became a pivotal man, even though he had only recently joined up. Moreover with a hastily improvised machinery, assembled on a sudden to undertake a novel and highly intricate business of great detail, there were many conflicting orders and counter-orders and the manner of selection was arbitrary and liable to abuse. One of the few pivotal men discharged in the R.A.O.C. was a barber's assistant, whose master presumably claimed him as indispensable.

Nowhere was the plan more keenly resented than among those Corps from which practically no one would be set free until the last. To contend that they were less deserving of release than their comrades who had borne the heat and burden of the day in front line trenches would fail to recognize the position as it then stood. For some two years past all non-combatant Corps had been shorn of their fit men and their ranks filled with the disabled, who had often far longer service than those at that time at the front.

There was no longer the sustaining stimulus of a patriotic ardour. Everyone was intensely war weary and yearned for home. There was a great and well-founded belief that jobs could not be found for all. Many of those first released had only recently been conscripted and had previously been earning a far higher wage under far easier conditions in England as civilians. Men compelled to toil on had not only to watch this process but also to see those who had never been called on to serve entrenching themselves perhaps in the very billets they had themselves surrendered voluntarily at the call of war. For them, meanwhile, there opened a new vista of seemingly endless work, of the necessity for which they could not be persuaded.

The army of 1918 moreover was composed of very different stuff from that of 1914; particularly Corps such as the R.A.S.C., R.A.O.C., the Railway Operating Staff, etc., which contained so many temporarily enlisted artisans imbued with a trade union spirit and devoid of the traditions of the "Old Contemptibles." During the war labour troubles had been rife in England where employees had gained their ends by means of strikes; and conscription brought to France amongst others agitators, only too anxious to foment trouble and emulate the doings of the Bolsheviks in Russia; an ill leaven for a dough of discontent.

Resentment quickly became rife. Protests were framed but bore no fruit; and at many centres both at home and abroad there were organized outbreaks. In the Ordnance, the fire, after smouldering awhile underground, burst into flames at Calais in the Valdelièvre workshops where, in January 1919, there was a general and concerted refusal to work until this wrong had been set right.

All these acts, which at any other time would have been severely repressed, now actually brought about what lawful representation had failed to effect. The original demobilization scheme was abandoned. It was directed instead that henceforth the rule in selecting men for discharge should be length of service—the first to join, the first to go; and the embargo on the release of men in administrative Corps was removed. That it should have required such serious breaches of martial law to obtain justice shows that the authorities had failed to grasp that, with the cessation of warfare, the constraining and restraining bonds of military discipline could not be relied on to suppress a genuine and acute grievance among a citizen army.

This change in the order of demobilization, moreover, altered the manner in which regimental equipment was dealt with. There were now regiments that found they were due to release at once the greater part of their officers and men, leaving no one to look after their stores; and eventually those who took mobilization equipment

to England were comparatively few, most units, both at the front and on the lines of communication, returning the whole of what they possessed to the Ordnance prior to embarkation. This in its turn largely added to the work of the R.A.O.C. overseas ; and in point of fact it proved impossible to set free either officers or men of the Ordnance when due to be demobilized, such was the stress of work. In March 1919 there were 4000 in France alone who were due for release but who could not be spared, mainly clerks and storemen, for there was less work now for the artificer. To some extent personnel could be transferred from duties that lapsed to others that were intensified, and some hundreds of young infantrymen were sent to assist, while after great pressure the War Office finally sent reliefs from home ; and thus eventually the back of the work was broken.

Although the Armistice only implied a suspension of hostilities, and demobilization did not start in right earnest till some time later, yet from the date of its signature the work began to be on a different plane. The very first step was to shut down the shipment from home of munitions and other warlike stores, to review and reduce wherever possible demands for other categories, and to confine repairs to those of a simple nature to equipment likely to be wanted in the near future. Premises had been rented for the duration of the war and at once the French began to press for their release, especially at Havre, their great commercial port on the Atlantic, where we occupied a large part of the docks.

Thus the policy of evacuation decided on was as follows. A new receipt depot was opened at Dunkirk for stores which would ordinarily have been returned to Havre, inland depots were to empty their contents into the base ports and the latter were then to be cleared starting with those on the Seine, the last to remain being Calais. By the end of 1918 all our Armies were based on Calais ; such portions of the stocks at Havre and Rouen as were still wanted being transferred to Calais by sea, while other goods were being shipped to England. By April 1919

the work of clearing Havre was sufficiently advanced to permit of all our hangars in the docks being released. The A.D.O.S. Provision at Calais then became the universal provider under the title of A.D.O.S. Provision, France; while the D.D.O.S. L. of C. South, and C.O.O. Ammunition South, disappeared. This, however, by no means implied the complete evacuation of the southern area, for every depot had to stay open so long as there were demobilized soldiers passing through or goods remaining on Ordnance charge.

In forward areas the immediate effect of the Armistice was to create an unprecedented call for tentage and accommodation stores of all kinds; for, not only had the Germans indulged in wanton destruction whenever they had the opportunity, but it was important to make those compelled to remain during the winter as happy and comfortable as possible. Among other steps, mobile workshops were turned into schools of instruction where the soldier artisan, grown rusty at his trade, could undergo a refresher course to regain experience in the use of his tools. A similar step was taken at the bases where classes were started not only in craftsmanship but in mathematics, draftsmanship, mechanics, and even in general cultural subjects such as English literature, history, civics and foreign languages. This action undoubtedly did something to allay the general unrest.

At the same time battle-field salvage became a principal instead of an accessory duty. A large tract of country had been covered during the summer and autumn which was littered with materials of all sorts, British and German, for we had left much behind in our advance and the enemy had been compelled to abandon far more in his retreat. Round Namur alone were found 1200 barges containing thousands of German machine guns and other warlike stores. These gleanings were formed into dumps, the contents of which were subsequently evacuated to the rear, disposed of in situ or destroyed if valueless.

Salvage operations were specially onerous in the case of ammunition, of which many thousands of tons were

scattered over the face of the country at small roadside dumps and refilling points and in old gun-positions, battery lines, dug-outs and trenches—all unguarded, uncared for and deteriorating. The first step was to locate these, for which purpose each main area was divided on the map into smaller areas which were systematically searched in turn. What was found had to be handled with extreme care. Blind or dangerous shell, bombs and grenades were destroyed where they lay and the rest removed with equal care to central dumps. Dealing with enemy ammunition in particular was a very risky business as fuze mechanisms, etc., were not so well understood as our own and the enemy might of set purpose have left it in such a state that an explosion would occur when it was touched. The ammunition thus collected had next to be sorted out. What was worth keeping was sent down the line and the rest blown up bit by bit after brass, copper and other valuable by-products had been saved.

All this required very careful supervision as so much bordered on a dangerous state; and the Ordnance Ammunition Units, on whom the duty fell, were reinforced by Ordnance personnel who could be spared for the time being from other work. While so engaged, Captain Toms and four others of the R.A.O.C. most unfortunately lost their lives and three more were wounded, weeks after hostilities had ceased. Apart from this, however, there was almost complete immunity from accident, both at the front and in the base establishments where breaking down operations were carried out on a far larger scale. Bourbourg and Conteville, the last two ammunition depots built, were set aside for captured ammunition, while at Zeneghem an immense area was earmarked for brass cartridge cases and other recovered metals. It was impossible to expect the troops, engrossed as they were in the prospects of demobilization, to assist in such trying work during the worst weather of the year, and manual labour was furnished by German prisoners and Chinese coolies.

These preliminary steps were followed by measures to

deal with demobilization on a grand scale. One Army advanced into Germany and became the British Army of the Rhine. Controlled directly by the War Office, and with large depots at and around Cologne staffed by two Companies of the R.A.O.C., it became self-supporting. The whole extent of France and Belgium occupied by our Imperial Forces was divided into administrative areas. The Armies that remained gradually disappeared as fighting organizations but, with their administrative staffs, were responsible for clearing their areas. The last area was that of the lines of communication, the General Officer in command of which assumed supreme command.

In these areas were formed special Ordnance depots, styled Intermediate Clearing Stations, into which units dumped all their stores, except those few who, forming part of our post-war army, kept their mobilization equipment. At these depots everything as it poured in was taken on charge under a rough heading only. So heavy was the inundation that it was out of the question to make detailed examinations. Camps were formed at various ports, stretching from Antwerp in the north to Havre in the south, capable of accommodating in all some 100,000 soldiers, where each man's kit was refurbished before he sailed for home, old boots or uniform replaced by new, and dirty underclothing exchanged for clean.

Bearing in mind what existed in England, our national assets of war material were obviously far in excess of what could possibly be wanted to maintain our small peace army for many years to come ; in many cases they could not have been exhausted in hundreds of years of peace ; and the method of dealing with overseas stocks was as follows. The A.D.O.S. Provision, now a disposer rather than a provider, collected stock sheets periodically from each Ordnance centre from which he prepared consolidated surplus lists for the War Office. The War Office had then to decide what it wanted sent home ; as soon as it called a halt what remained in France was to be disposed of. These redundant stocks either remained at the dumps, depots or clearing stations, or

were concentrated at specially created demobilization depots, of which far the largest was at Beaumarais outside Calais.

With the actual disposal of this colossal residue the Corps was not concerned, except that the Ordnance officer on the spot was empowered to make small sales of ordinary commodities up to £50 daily. A special branch of the Ministry of Munitions was formed, styled the Disposals Board, to deal with every species of redundant war material, whether railways, buildings, foodstuffs, lorries, stores or clothing. Once an Ordnance establishment was cleared of everything to be sent home its contents were handed over in situ, with stock sheet, to an official of the Disposals Board, who became responsible for the subsequent proceedings. Much was wanted by the French Government to rehabilitate devastated areas, and much was sold by tender where it lay. Other agencies helped to reduce the residue. The large depots on the Rhine absorbed a considerable amount. There were our own released prisoners of war to be clothed and a detachment of the Corps, with a supply of clothing and comforts, left for Switzerland where so many were interned. The United States, among other trifles, begged half a million knives, forks and spoons for its dispersal drafts, a great deal was shipped to Russia, to assist anti-revolutionary forces to fight the Bolsheviks, and the rest came on the home market.

For ammunition the same plan was adopted. At the end of February 1919 a programme was drawn up by the War Office of what was to be returned to England; the Rhine Army absorbed a certain amount, Canada took 60,000 tons, Australia 80,000, New Zealand 10,000 and a quantity went to Russia.

But of shell alone there remained 350,000 tons and what to do with them was the difficulty. The first suggestion was to dump everything in the sea after recovering such commercial products as were worth the time and labour. This idea had to be abandoned because the enormous amount of shipping it entailed could not possibly be spared, especially as the Board of Agriculture

and Fisheries would not allow dumping except in certain rather inaccessible spots.

Meanwhile the R.A.O.C. ammunition staff was hard at work sorting out and sending home what the War Office had decided should be kept, after eliminating everything not of the highest quality. But as to breaking down the rest, it was only touching the fringe. Once the forward areas were cleared and such ammunition as was wanted was sent away, the military side of the work was really at an end. Soldiers enlisted for the war could not be expected to remain indefinitely in France and a commercial organization was better fitted to deal with a task which involved, for example, the emptying of millions of high explosive shell whose nitrate contents were of value as a fertilizer.

A Directorate of Munition Recovery had been formed in England to supervise and co-ordinate work of this sort ; and as a first step this Directorate set to work itself at Fressenville and the depot at Dannes. Next the Directorate, by then merged with the Disposals Board, took over the whole of our ammunition establishments in France and sold them with all their contents to firms of contractors who set up very elaborate breaking down plant to extract the full residual value from every category, British and German ; a job that occupied years.¹

This description of how the Ordnance dealt with its stocks in France after the war has not taken long to tell, nor indeed did the operation take so very long when everything is considered—the magnitude of the task, the shortage of staff, shortage of shipping, and the length of time that it often took to get disposal instructions from the War Office, or to get the Disposals Board to find staff to take over a depot. Yet, when the Peace of Versailles was signed at Paris on the 19th July, 1919, there were few Ordnance establishments which were not still at work and it was not until October 1921 that the last man of the R.A.O.C. left France.

¹ An account of the operations is given in Appendix VII.