

Soldiers Learning to Read as Well as Fight

Books in Camp Are Used Twice as Much as Those in City Libraries—
Many Men Acquire Valuable Habit for the First Time

AN enlisted man called at the library of one of the national army cantonments the other day and asked for the best available book on motors. The librarian gave him one, the best in stock.

"Not this one," said the soldier, after a glance at the title page. "I read this in manuscript, as I drew the illustrations for it. It is rather elementary."

This scientific draftsman and illustrator of technical books, now a private soldier of the United States, is only one of a million and a half of men whose needs for reading matter the American Library Association has undertaken to supply, both in America and France and aboard the troop ships that ply between the two countries. Dr. Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress, is the director of this war service in books, with headquarters in the Congressional Library, where a great area of floor and shelf space has been placed at the disposal of the home office staff.

Dr. Putnam began this work on the assumption that man, under proper conditions, readily and naturally becomes a reading animal, and that, under those conditions, the habit of reading spreads rapidly. Many army officers were skeptical, but the facts of the last three months have proved that the Librarian of Congress was right, not only with reference to the highly trained and educated men in the ranks and among the officers, like the illustrator of the book on motors, but with reference to the mass of the troops.

"With more than half a million volumes already in our camp libraries," said Dr. Putnam the other day, "we cannot keep up with the demands of the soldiers. Many more volumes are needed, and the need will be continuous while the war lasts. Contributors who have helped by generous subscriptions to the soldiers' book fund, (to the extent of a million and a half dollars,) and those who are helping by sending books are rendering this country a double service. They are adding to the facilities for wholesome entertainment and recreation in the armies, and they are helping directly to make the reading habit more widespread among Americans than it ever was before. That, I believe, will be the permanent good result of this war camp service of the American Library Association. Every man in his barracks with a book in his hand is an incentive to another man, to several other men, to go to the camp library and get other books. These men, living together, recommending books to each other, will get to talking about those books and in that fact alone we shall have an incentive for making reading a habit that we should not get among those same men dwelling apart in civil life and with too many distractions of other amusements and habits for them ever to come to reading as a regular thing."

That Dr. Putnam is talking of facts and not merely expressing the hope of a professional bookman is indicated by the actual returns from the camps and by the enthusiastic reports of the sixty or more trained librarians who have volunteered for the army work or who have been lent for the purpose by the public libraries of the big cities and by the universities.

Averages for all American towns which support free libraries show that 20 per cent. of the population of each community is enrolled as library borrowers and the capita reading for these civil communities is about three books a year. At the present time, within three months after the beginning of the work, 40 per cent. of the soldiers in the camps and cantonments have become users of the libraries, and they are reading the

available books at the rate of a book a month for each man. No other form of camp recreation can show such a response as that, not even the moving pictures.

This, of course, is true largely because of the fact that finding something to do for amusement, like everything else, follows the line of least resistance, and there is no difficulty whatever in a soldier's getting a book to read. Furthermore, he can get the sort of a book he wants to read, either as a matter of sheer amusement or of education in the line of winning promotion, a line that many thousands of private soldiers have taken up with grim determination to come home from the war perhaps as commissioned officers, at least as Sergeants. They all know that in fits and starts between the covers of books make for such promotion as much as the storming of redoubts.

The conditions in favor of the camp libraries are these: Every soldier has from four to five hours of leisure out of each twenty-four. Most of that time



Library in the National Army Cantonment, Camp Lewis, Wash.

comes in an unbroken interval between the end of the day's work and the time for putting out lights in the barracks. The individual soldier spends most of those free evenings on the reservation, and the facilities for amusements other than reading cannot provide for more than a small part of the men at one time. In a military community of 40,000 men, for example, the space in all the amusement rooms and lecture halls and motion picture shows of the Y. M. C. A., the Knights of Columbus, and similar agencies will not accommodate more than 8,000 or 9,000 men at a time. The reading room of the American Library Association will take care of only a few hundred more, but the great advantage of the library is that its facilities circulate and may be taken to the living quarters of the individual users.

Therein lies the great usefulness of the war camp book service. There is no red tape. A soldier needs no identification but his uniform to enable him to take out a book, and he leaves only his name and the designation of his company or battery as security. No hard and fast rules have been drawn to regulate the length of time which a volume may be kept, but so far the desire of a man to finish one book and get another has been a sufficient guarantee of a reasonably early return.

The librarian and his assistant will do everything possible to advise a reader if he asks advice. If he wants a particular book which is not in stock they will get it for him from the nearest city library, generally within twenty-four hours. That is part of the system in which the Library of Congress and all public and

college libraries are co-operating with the camp libraries. If necessary the desired book will be purchased. That, too is provided for in the system which Dr. Putnam has built up.

On the other hand, no advice is given unasked. Every soldier is treated as a normal, intelligent human being who knows what he wants, and he has the full run of the shelves from which to get the thing that most appeals to him at the moment. The only instructions to librarians as to what they shall place at the disposal of soldiers are to provide the same books that they would have on the "live, open shelves" of their public libraries.

Naturally, the books of fiction lead numerically in the class statistics, showing how each war library is used. And in the fiction class the leading groups are books of adventure and detective stories.

In nonfiction the greatest call is for technical books on electricity, gasoline motors, tractors, and artillery. Second in nonfiction comes books on the war,

The private reading Boswell was a recent graduate of Princeton. Sitting on the next cot was a mechanic reading a book called "Heart Throbs."

"Don Quixote" is another book in the group of things that many soldiers are tired of saying they have never read, and they are going to get square on that point. No camp library can ever keep its Shakespeares on the shelves long enough to gather any dust.

You cannot pull a million or more men out of the civil life of the United States and put them into the army without getting enough highbrows, all told, to make a brigade, perhaps a division. They bring their tastes and their habits with them, keep them alive as far as possible under the circumstances, and the thing is somewhat contagious. The young man who likes to read and can carry his cure for the blues or homesickness around in his pocket is bound to have some influence on the man who has not yet formed the reading habit, when they are living together and working together day in and day out.

When the books began to arrive for the library at Camp Sherman an army truck driver, off duty for an hour or so, volunteered to help open the boxes. With the prying off of the first cover he disclosed the Cambridge Edition of the poets. Being something of a fatalist, that truck driver began his reading out of that box. There is one entire battery made up of men from the University of Chicago who keep all of Conrad and all of Meredith out all the time.

A Southern camp librarian reports that his one copy of "Peer Gynt" has been in constant circulation since he opened his establishment. Shaw's plays have their vogue in the army, and thousands of American soldiers know now how Mr. Britling sees it through if they did not know before they put on uniforms. Creasy's "Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World" has won, by its bare title, the attention of a good many soldiers who are training to make it sixteen, and all good books of history, especially military history, are more than holding their own.

The truck driver who helped open the boxes, refusing pay, is typical of the way the men show their gratitude to the American Library Association and to the people who have contributed. In all the camps there has been much labor in getting started, opening the books and shelving them, arranging tables and desks, and so on. In every case the soldiers have volunteered to do this work and have refused to take any money out of the labor funds provided for just such work.

When the work was begun Dr. Putnam made an appeal to the public for \$1,000,000. A million and a half was contributed in money and half a million books. The money that was given included \$320,000 from the Carnegie Corporation for the specific purpose of erecting library buildings, at a cost not to exceed \$10,000 each. These buildings are 40 feet wide and range in length from 93 to 120 feet. Each library has shelf room for 12,000 books and a reading room that will accommodate 250 men at a time.

About the only sort of book that is not wanted is the so-called "gift" book, the ridiculous thing in pale pink or baby blue covers, tied with ribbons or a silk cord. It doesn't fit into the life of the soldier, no matter what its contents may be.

Of course, the work is to be extended to France, and reading is provided for all troops on the voyage. There is a small library on each transport, and the librarians in charge of the book-dispatching stations at the army's embarkation ports try to see to it that every man gets a book for himself as he goes aboard ship.