



The Army, Rock Island Arsenal and Influenza

As we navigate the once in a lifetime pandemic known as the coronavirus, it might be useful to look back on how Rock Island Arsenal and the Army adapted to the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. It is important to see how many similarities there are from events that occurred over a century ago. We hope that exploring how we met the epidemic then might give us some insight into how we are meeting a different virus today.

In 1918 an invisible enemy made its entrance onto the world stage and would prove to be deadlier in just over one year than four years of fighting in the world war. This invisible enemy would become known as “Spanish Flu” and it would kill more than 50 million people worldwide including approximately 675,000 civilians in the United States. It became known as the Spanish Flu because Spain, as a neutral in the war, had no censorship and was reporting the spread when no other countries were. There is no universal consensus on the flu’s origins, and it is more properly called the 1918 flu pandemic. This strain of influenza was of the H1N1 avian origin and would infect more than a quarter of the world’s population before disappearing. It is still not known why its virulence was so great, but mass movements of troops around the world would serve to partially explain the rapid spread.

In the U.S. there were three waves that swept the country. The first wave in the Spring of 1918 was relatively mild, causing few deaths, and received almost no press coverage due to the excitement of the war buildup. By early May 1918 the flu had found its way to Europe where it spread to friend and foe alike. It is believed that during late summer 1918 the virus mutated and exhibited as an extremely virulent form of pneumonia. This new version of the virus was very different in that it did not target its traditional victims, the young and the old. This strain targeted healthy adults in prime of life. To make things worse, this new airborne virus spread in an area where several million Soldiers were living in cramped and



dirty conditions, allowing for a quick transmission. By Fall 1918 this new and deadlier form of influenza had become so wide spread that it was impacting the operation of the war on all sides. Nearly one third developed pneumonia, and the mortality rates varied from 20 to 40 percent in the war zone, depending upon treatment and time. Overwhelmed, admissions to Army field hospitals were triaged to accept only those having temperatures in excess of 104 degrees. U.S. Army Medical Department records report that military hospital admissions for influenza in 1918 totaled 791,907. A more sobering number were fatalities. The total of American Soldiers who were killed in battle or died as a result of combat wounds numbered 50,500. The total number of deaths from the flu during the same time, in addition to the previous killed in battle, were 55,322.

At the same time this second deadlier wave of influenza returned to the U.S. carried by troop movements. On 14 September, 36 new cases were reported in Boston with over 6,000 cases in the city by the end of the month. This is partially attributed to slow responses to quarantine or social distance after the flu had presented itself. Across the nation doctors urged citizens to wear masks, self isolate or maintain distance, and wash their hands. Despite the warnings, within a month of these new cases in Boston, the virus had spread to San Francisco. The common symptoms of each of these waves were described as starting with mild headaches, muscular pains, and high fever. These could progress to vomiting, dizziness, breathing difficulties and profuse sweating. Severe cases would progress to bronchitis and pneumonia often resulting the death. A third wave made its way again around the world in early 1919 with less dramatic effect.

Local accounts of the disease are important to understand how the flu was treated. In our next edition, continued next week, we will explore local accounts of how the pandemic was confronted in the Quad Cities.



Soldiers at Camp Funston, KS being treated for influenza in January 1918

Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it...



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