

In Foreign Fields

Dan Collins. Monday Books 2007
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The conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan are never far from the front pages of the papers. Updates on how things are progressing, the political debate, depressing news of fatalities and the injured and occasionally, when the Honors List is released, an uplifting general account of a select few who have received awards for exceptional acts in these testing times. Dan Collins has brought together the personal stories of twenty-five of these brave service personnel who received gallantry awards for acts of outstanding achievements in the face of adversity. These accounts are set out in a chronological order from the beginning of the conflict in Iraq and progress through, by dipping in to individual stories, to the Afghanistan troubles. The way in which this has been skilfully done allows for greater insight into each event, with some stories mentioning what had occurred in the preceding account, giving a much fuller overall vision. All three services are well represented as are the different elements that make up a fighting force, infantrymen, engineers, medics and pilots are but a few. Each tale begins with a factual citation that is followed by a mini autobiography by the recipient of the award. This flows into the bulk of the book, the details of conflict, the actions taken, thoughts and emotions surrounding the brave acts that led to the highest recognition. Like all heroes however, modesty is a strong characteristic and comments like “just doing my job” and “there were other people doing things far braver” appear more than a few times. Another common theme that appeared was the concept of killing and death and the impact that it had on different personalities. It is thought provoking and you find yourself often thinking, “*what would I have done?*”

As an active member of the Armed Forces I had been aware of some of the events told in this book prior to reading it, but the stories I had heard were delivered in a disrupted incomplete manner. Pte Michelle Norris RAMC is a prime example of this. I had worked alongside her for about three weeks before I knew about her MC, even then it only came up because her mates were teasing her about it and she was most definitely modest about her actions. Discovering the truth and to get a fuller version, a first hand edition and deeper understanding of what happened is enlightening.

This book gives a glimpse into the personalities of true heroes by the stories teased from them. Over all, it is a lovely book presented in a readable fashion and leaves you with a general sense of pride in our Armed Forces. It should appeal to all service personnel.

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GEORGE GUTHRIE Soldier and Pioneer Surgeon

by Raymond Hurst. RSM press 2008.
ISBN: 978-1-85315-765-3

It was Rene Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* of 1637, who wrote ‘*To read good books is like holding a conversation with the most eminent minds of past centuries.*’ His statement fits well with this Life of Guthrie by Raymond Hurst, because Hurst fills the major part of his excellent and thoroughly researched biography with first-hand accounts by Guthrie of his week by week and often day by day experiences as a military surgeon. A striking fact, much forgotten today, is the young age of medical graduation and military entry of the time. George Guthrie, a son of Mr Andrew Guthrie, a London chiropodist (podiatrist) and with a Scottish and Irish background, began to study Medicine with others at the age of 13, became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England before he was 16, and was appointed assistant surgeon to the 29th Regiment of Foot when he reached his 16th birthday. His first posting was to North America. In the 29th, his C.O. was Lieutenant-Colonel Byrne, aged 22. It was a different world.

Guthrie’s personal accounts of Wellington’s Peninsular Campaign and of Waterloo, in both medical and surgical detail, are the traditional ‘mine of information.’ The author has recorded them fully, and this is when we begin to see what an outstanding young teenager Guthrie was, highly skilled and outspoken and unafraid to criticise seniors when it was clear they were wrong and out of date. The surgical procedures he criticised were insisted upon because they were the laid down teaching of John Hunter, one whose practical experience of active and large warfare was limited. It is, of course, entirely fair of the author to stress Guthrie’s dourness – that Scottish failing which does not endear the Scots to their more courteous neighbours from elsewhere in Britain. By contrast, the references by the author to the more mighty Scot McGrigor’s comments about Guthrie show him to have observed the junior surgeon’s actions with favour.

Guthrie did not confine his criticisms to surgical management. In some of his letters from the Peninsular Campaign, he complained that ‘pay and allowances were six months in arrears and that the official rate of exchange was scandalously low compared with the commercial rate.’

The account of the later post-service part of Guthrie’s life is also very full – perhaps a little too full with some repetitions, but the reader, who by now must have become mesmerised by the great career of this man, will make the time to read as much of them – his career in the Royal College, his attacks on nepotism, his creation of a multitude of new surgical instruments – as he wishes, and pass over some items more quickly. On another side, the accounts of his bad temper while examining in the Fellowship are highly amusing and cannot but recall the harsh and loud examiners we still meet – either as quaking candidates or as the embarrassed fellow-examiner. And, as always in the military field, so much actual military knowledge learned by Guthrie and recorded carefully by him in order to teach others was lost in the later century and had to be re-learned during the Crimea, and again at the beginning of the Boer War.

This book is essential reading for the career medical officer, because it teaches so much about casualties and their handling, and about the failures of army administration which military medicals may have to endure.

I recommend it to everyone.

John S.G.Blair, Past-Vice-President Emeritus, ISHM

Handbook for Surgical Cross-cover

IF O'Connor, M Urdang
Oxford University Press,
Flexicover 610 pages £24.95
ISBN 978-0-19-929648-4



This latest in a long line of Oxford handbooks aims to make life easier for all those junior doctors who now find themselves covering surgical specialities outwith their own. On that basis alone I am sure this pocket sized book will do well as an increasing number of juniors find themselves in unfamiliar territory for an increasing proportion of their time.

Its scope is broad and generally it succeeds in its aim of equipping the covering doctors with sufficient knowledge and skills to handle most situations. That having been said, my major complaint about this book is the degree of detail it goes into. As an example the two pages that deal with abdominal trauma suggests in the section on investigations that this should include "ultrasound scan(USS) of abdomen (FAST). Look for free fluid". I know plenty of senior consultants and surgical registrars that cannot FAST scan and I would certainly not expect my cross-covering SHO from ENT to perform one and wouldn't rely on the results if they did . . . and USS abdomen is markedly different from FAST scanning. A further example is in the gynaecology section which has a section on interpretation of ultrasound findings in early pregnancy – surely not a topic for the cross covering doctor to take on. In many respects over provision of information is a much lesser evil than not providing enough and this book certainly provides all the information I would expect my SHO to have at their finger tips on call. I am sure it will provide plentiful reassurance to the many unfortunate doctors who now find themselves at the mercy of the EWTD and cross covering rotas.

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