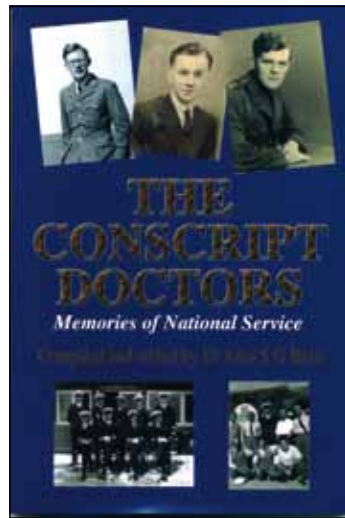


Liked it or Loathed it, we all Served: the Conscript Doctors.

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It is now 50 years since the end of National Service. The National Service Era is unique in British history as the only period when there was conscription in peace time. All young men were called up for two years of full time service, followed by a spell in the reserves. A record of the experiences, reminiscences, and memoirs of those doctors, newly qualified on call up, and from all three Services, seemed something unique to collect. With the support of the



British Medical Association and The Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, this powerful collection of valuable material has been amassed and described by one Wellcome archivist as “one of the best of the 20th century”.

Most of us at the time realised how lucky we were, having missed the war, and so were content to serve. But, and especially as the decade of the 1950s passed, more and more young doctors were angry at ‘the waste of two years’ that National Service meant, and became antagonistic. Because of this, a significant number of those approached failed to provide a reminiscence; and few – including one or two with whom I served, have actively refused. Those who have written their recollections may thus represent only one side of National Service: the others have simply not contributed. From personal knowledge, I am aware that those working in large training depots were the least happy. This pattern applied particularly to the Army, but also the other two Services.

By contrast, Regimental Medical Officers (RMOs) with units enjoyed the camaraderie of the Regimental spirit, and many memoirs are full of praise and admiration for their Regiment or Corps. They had active training exercises, especially overseas. In the RAF, the majority were in home stations, (although many, as in the army, reached interesting overseas postings), but they shared the interest of the flying squadrons, and the pride that went with them. In the Royal Navy, service at sea was just what an enthusiast in the Navy looked forward to.

Postings to hospitals overseas, and to the then world-wide spread of the British Empire, opened a new and exciting life.

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When you grew up during the War there was no foreign travel. In many instances you did not even move far from your own home. Not only was there now the novelty of ship travel to the Middle and Far East, but on arrival there was the fascination of a foreign country. Different disease was a reality. Some parts - Korea and Malaya, but also Trieste and Aden, had active warfare in progress. Real casualties occurred and had to be evacuated and treated. Because they were given huge responsibility abroad, which a newly-qualified doctor would never get at home, many felt their National Service had given their career a permanent direction and boost that would never have occurred otherwise. This comes out over and over again in the written records.

This collection has several elements worth recording in book form. First is the fact of conscription and the military service it involved, from basic training onwards. These are military history. The account of the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in Korea, by Douglas Haldane, is outstanding. This battalion, with the Middlesex Regiment the first British infantry unit committed at the harsh start of the Korean war, had as many casualties during its first three months as its sister battalion suffered in its corresponding period in the Crimea. The Middlesex Regiment too, shared this bad period. William Lewis Owen tells the story from the Naval side. His ship sailed along the coast of Korea prepared to ‘do a Dunkirk’ if our side were beaten back to the sea by the North Korean army. His account is yet another unique one.

Active operations in Malaya, during the Communist inspired revolt, and in Aden and Trieste, are well covered. In the National Service period, from 1948 onwards, the Cold War was much more of a reality than it became 20-30 years later, when the Soviet threat was seen as something delivered by rockets or submarines. The early tension is seen in the records from the British Army of the Rhine and from Berlin.

The worth and variety of the medical clinical and public health memoirs themselves make the archive fascinating, even if no other aspects had been included. It was not only in Malaya and Hong Kong that medical disease and its management was recorded, and not only by two of several famous names, Sir David Weatherall and Sir Roy Calne, but by a wide range of men who in later years became noteworthy in all aspects of medicine. It must be remembered that the entire graduate output of British medical schools went into the Forces in National Service times and so the entire range of talents went with them. Another, whose Malayan experience set his whole subsequent career on its course, was Hughie Webb, first Professor of Neuro-virology at St Thomas’s Hospital in London. African countries, from the Canal Zone in Egypt to Libya, Nigeria, the Sudan, Cameroons and Kenya, are covered by a range of doctors of high quality who later became physicians or neurologists or bacteriologists. Some memoirs came

from the Caribbean and Central America. A few are of general practice among the families of servicemen, with all the problems which that included.

But perhaps the most fascinating part of the whole archive is its worth as social history. On the way to his posting, the young man's troopship tales are full of zest, and at times, scandal. As Captain Iain Stewart put it: *'The troopship romance stuff was probably Mills and Boon or Barbara Cartland, as far as I could observe, but who knows. Troopships had a reputation for unleashing suppressed passion and desire among the travelling females...'*

Postings, and their apparent irrationality, are commented on again and again. Lieutenant Andrew Graham, a Glasgow graduate, became friendly with John Smith, a London graduate, on their troopship to Egypt. When they arrived in the Canal Zone, Graham found himself posted to the Staffords as their RMO, Smith to the Highland Light Infantry. Neither could understand a word his patients were saying! An initial posting order requiring special instruction in tropical diseases was changed at the last moment to one to Wales or north Germany.

On arrival at the unit, the attitude of the National Service doctors towards their seniors in the Regular Services, non-medical as well as medical, will be another source of research surprise and amusement in fifty or a hundred years. One later highly distinguished professor's stories of his various wrong forms of evening wear at dinners on his troopship to the East is pure P.G. Wodehouse. The often friendly humorous attitude of the senior Regular to the National Service doctor is well told by John Heber and others. John Heber was a Guy's graduate, interested in anaesthetics and in Malaya, he devised a neat, small, portable anaesthetic apparatus. *'Splendid, Heber'* said his C.O., *'you can test it in the jungle.'* *'But the jungle is full of terrorists, Sir'* was John's reply. *'Excellent, Heber'* quipped back the colonel, *'I see you read your intelligence briefings.'*

Sport, naturally, was a common source of activity, and several were posted to a place where the Service could make the most of a skill. Rugby, hockey, boxing, athletics, and golf are all featured. The tie match in the Army Golf Championship at Royal St Georges in 1954, and the seven o'clock play-off, with senior officers having had a good number of drinks accompanying each match, went into the mythology of that sport for many years. Social life was full of spice. Drinking and smoking were commonplace, often to excess. Dr Ross Coles, later an ENT surgeon, remembers, enjoining the Navy in 1953: *'When I was first interviewed by the Captain, a man eventually to become a full Admiral, he asked us three new officers whether we smoked. I did, but the other two did not. "Well, I expect all my officers to smoke. And the two of you who don't, you damn well learn to. When we entertain, you carry a cigarette case and a lighter and you offer cigarettes to our guests and smoke one yourself to keep them company." A direct order from a superior officer is to be disobeyed at your peril.'*

The life of spice that the young wives of Regular officers had on troopships *en route* to join their spouses on troopships has been alluded to. National Service doctors of course were never allowed to have their wives with them, or if they did, had to pay all travel, and accommodation and rent. Comments of a few wives of National Service doctors are in the archive, with their views on their welcome, or lack of welcome, by Regular Service society.

There are some poignant anecdotes. Dr John Grant recalled a doctor in his own intake who was posted to a large military

garrison in the south of England. He was allotted his room in the mess, and on his first evening, chummed up with a pleasant quiet medical officer in the next room after he looked in to borrow a match. They became firm friends, and shared the rest of their two years together. Some years later, his friend confided that he had been so unhappy that he had been going to shoot himself, and would have done so the next day had the new doctor not appeared on the scene and restored his spirit.

RAF memories have their special interest. They, too, contain some hilarious recollections, but they also include accounts of those involved in important military research, one describing the Atomic tests at Christmas Island, another of the development at the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough.

The second smallest number came from the RN Medical Service. Here there was a rather different emphasis; National Service staff were described as RNVR and badged accordingly, although the fact that they were not volunteers is well shown. That these National Servicemen men enjoyed their period of full-time service is evident by the number who became active and enthusiastic members of the RNR afterwards.

There is a last, smallest group, of those who did conscription in another way. Dr John Scott, later a consultant psychiatrist, tells of his time as a miner, Dr Anthony Dixon, OBE, tells of his active service with the British Red Cross in the Far East, and Dr James Macgregor, OBE, of his in Sierra Leone as a Colonial Medical Service doctor, and later in the Solomon Islands, make up this group.

At the end of their two years, or during their service, many National Servicemen were given a range of inducements to sign on for Regular commissions. The best story of all these came from Captain Bryan Ashworth, whose Commanding Officer told him in Kaduna: *'Ashworth, you could finish up a brigadier if you stayed in.'* *'But I don't want to finish up as a brigadier, Sir'* replied Bryan. He became a consultant neurologist in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh.

This book was written in response to the wishes of a large number of contributors who wanted their recollections widely available in book form rather just as a closed archive. I thank each and every one of the contributors for the time and trouble they went to, in producing records of the highest standard. The age that they described as theirs belongs to a half century ago; national characteristics of loyalty, patriotism, *caritas*, were present then without doubt, and disrespect, narrow nationalism, the need for finding scapegoats and the constant urge for litigation, were absent. Sad events and accidents were overcome without 'counselling' by eager enthusiasts, and those involved recovered more quickly with comrade compassion. There is much, of course, not recorded in the book. But what is included is enough to make up the *real* magic of the memoirs. And the public will have to wait a further half-century before these become available. In the meantime, we who shared the National Service experience will have many a good laugh as we have our memories stirred. We hope others will share our enjoyment too.

The Conscript Doctors: Memories of National Service, compiled and edited by John Blair. Copies can now be obtained from the author at the correspondence address priced £17.50 inc P&P.