

Friends of Millbank

November 2020 Newsletter



The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, 100 years on

*If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields*

Dear Friend of Millbank

Greetings

This Wednesday 11 November marks the centenary of the unveiling of the Cenotaph and the burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey.¹ We have just celebrated Remembrance Sunday. I hope that many of you enjoyed the Festival of Remembrance shown on BBC One on the Saturday evening, and that you were as moved as I was when virtually attending the National Service of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey and the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday, 8 November. Normally many Friends of Millbank, whether still serving, veterans or civilians, would have attended this service together with many thousands of veterans and others. Instead, this year we attended in spirit, through our television screens, as Her Majesty the Queen paid her respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior and later at the Cenotaph. The ceremony was all the more poignant as a result.

The poppies surrounding the Tomb and on the wreaths laid at the Cenotaph recalled to me the catalytic role played by the Canadian military doctor, John McCrae, whose powerful poem 'In Flanders Fields' seared the blood-red poppy forever into national consciousness as the symbol of the sacrifices of those serving their country in war.² The poem's closing stanza is quoted above.

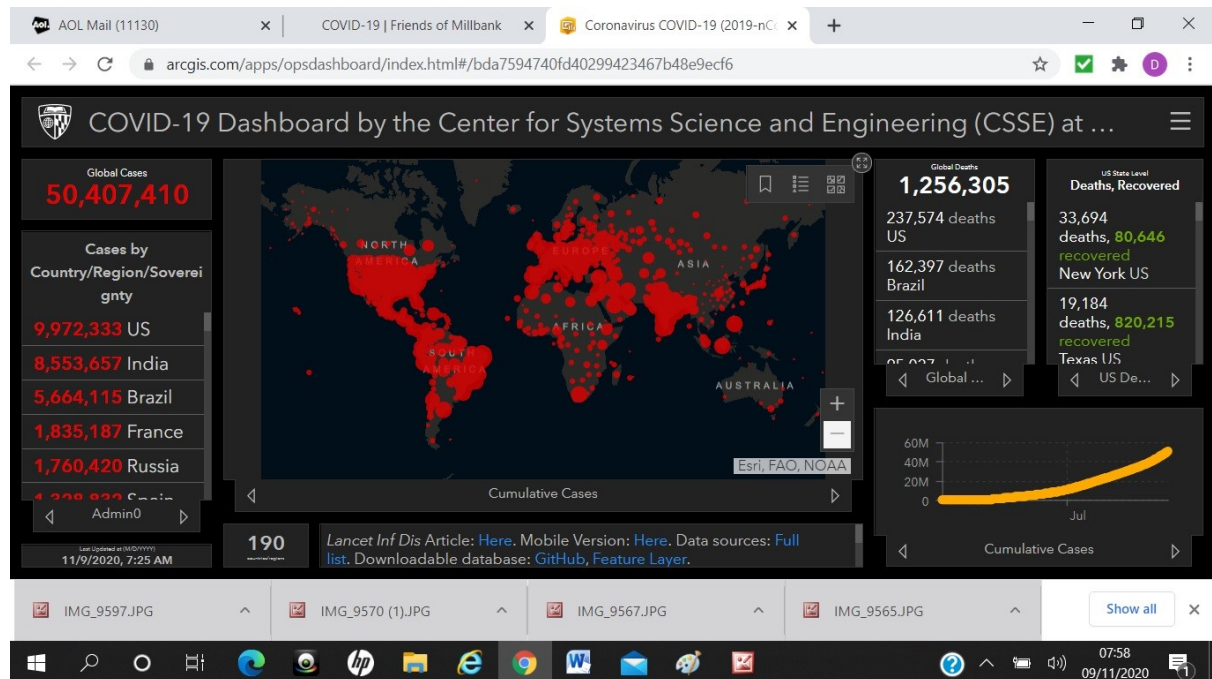
I emailed you my Remembrance Sunday commemoration at the weekend. There was an error in it so I am attaching an amended version. Thank you to the Friend of Millbank who kindly pointed out this out, the eagle-eyed amongst you will spot the correction.

¹ Westminster Abbey – Unknown Warrior <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/unknown-warrior>

² Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae – In Flanders Fields <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/mccrae>

A momentous month

Hasn't a lot happened since my last newsletter of 4 October, not least second lockdowns across Europe and a nail-biting election in the USA! The ongoing coronavirus pandemic truly affects everything and everyone. Today marks a milestone - 50 million COVID-19 cases have now been recorded worldwide (one fifth of them in the USA), in just 12 months since the first cases in Wuhan, with 1.25 million deaths officially attributed to coronavirus.



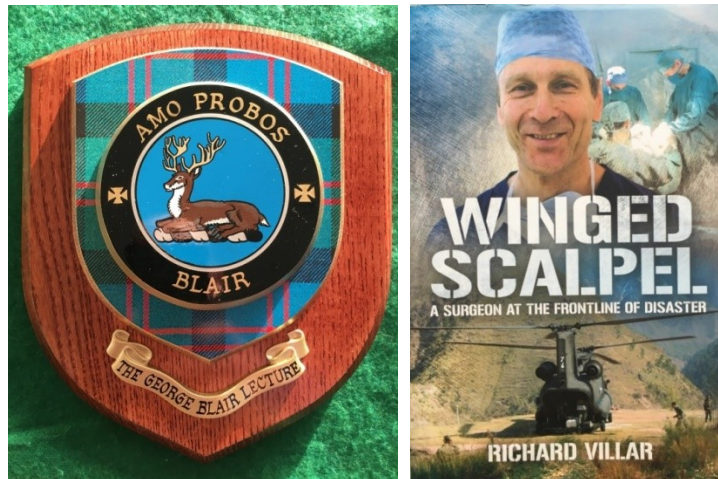
Screenshot from John Hopkins University dashboard (see <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/covid-19>)

We re-started our lecture programme, after a COVID hiatus of over seven months, with our first virtual lecture – our prestigious George Blair Memorial Lecture on Friday 30 October, delivered by Richard Villar. I was determined not to cancel this, even if eventually we did have to convert it to a virtual format as we could not hold it at Millbank. I am delighted to report this was successful; it also attracted a record number of applications and was extremely well attended (see next section).

Barely a day after our lecture (and purely coincidentally), the UK's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced a second lockdown in England starting Thursday 4 November, following the example of Wales and Northern Ireland, with tough restrictions in place in Scotland. Other European nations are also in various forms of lockdown, and concerns are rising related to Denmark's mink farms.

England's second lockdown coincided with the USA presidential election, a hugely significant event, not least for its potential impact on global warming, global public health, security and defence. Joe Biden has now been elected as the 46th President of the USA, and I am sure that Friends of Millbank will join me in wishing him and the American people the very best for the next four years.

The George Blair Memorial Lecture, 30 October 2020 – our first online lecture!



George Blair Memorial Lecturer 2020, Richard Villar

During the run up to Richard's talk 'Winged Scalpel – a Surgeon on the Front Line of Disaster' I was most impressed by the enthusiasm shown by the many military medical student bursars, Foundation Years One & Two doctors, and General Duties Medical Officers who registered to attend. These comprised fully half the applicants, and if you are one of them reading this I hope you felt most welcome. It was the first time almost all of you, being scattered around the country, have been able to attend one of our talks, as previously you would have found it nearly impossible to attend an actual Friday evening meeting in London. A major advantage of our new virtual format is that it enables a much wider audience to attend – including on this occasion our Life President, Dr John Blair, who lives in Perth, Scotland and who would normally come to London for the weekend, obviously not feasible this year. I do hope that many of you will return and continue to attend our forthcoming virtual talks, the next ones being on Friday 27 November and 18 December.

Several of you informed me that you had been inspired to study medicine and to pursue a career in the Forces, and potentially become involved in humanitarian and disaster medicine, through reading Richard's book, pictured above. One such is Christian Perkins, a final year medical student at Warwick Medical School and newly enrolled Friend of Millbank, who was motivated to write the book review on our website. I dare say that those of you who attended the lecture will agree wholeheartedly with the sentiments expressed in that review. Like you all, I found Richard to be truly inspirational, as well as entertaining and informative – a great combination. For those who could not attend the talk or who wish to have a permanent record of it, I thoroughly recommend you procure a copy of this book, enjoy reading it at leisure – and be inspired to do likewise.

I have had great feedback following the talk and have passed on some of it to Richard. I have also put him in touch with a couple of members to follow up their requests for advice or further talks: he is very amenable to such involvement so I hope this event will catalyse great things. He also put me at ease at our rehearsal before the talk, which I appreciated. This was my first experience hosting a Zoom lecture, as you might have noticed. I'll do better next time.

Of note, this George Blair Memorial Lecture, our very first virtual talk, attracted a very encouraging 100 applicants, 76 of whom successfully registered with Zoom and 58 actually logged in to

participate on the day. This is a record for Friends of Millbank, equalling our previous largest (physical) attendance, also for a George Blair Memorial Lecture, 'Fighting on the Home Front' by Kate Adie on 23 October 2015.

A most unusual presentation – and do pass the port

Normally Dr John Blair or more recently a member of his family would present the George Blair Lecture shield to the speaker. That is not easy to accomplish through a computer screen, but fortunately Richard had a commitment in Portsmouth two days after the lecture (just before lockdown). We were able therefore to meet up on the Sunday morning – obviously outdoors and socially distanced – for me to present the shield and a certificate on the family's behalf, as well as a personal token of my appreciation. It was a real privilege and a joy to do so, so do share in the fun:



Passing the port – who dares spot the clue? (answers by email please)

Our next lecture, 27 November – ‘A history of the AMS TA and its pre and post guises’

Our next scheduled lecture and second virtual talk is by Brigadier (retd) Alistair Macmillan, at 1830 hours on Friday 27 November. I do hope you can join us. I look forward to welcoming you online.

Brigadier (retd) Alistair Macmillan will be familiar to many Friends of Millbank. There is a flyer on our homepage, but as this will eventually be replaced I feel you should know some more about him here. He graduated in medicine from Glasgow University, entered the RAMC as a medical cadet, specialised as a Consultant in Public Health and then undertook several command and staff functions in the Defence and Army Medical Services. He was an airborne officer in both the Regular and Territorial Army. In retirement he has served as a Colonel Commandant RAMC and as Honorary Colonel to 144 Parachute Medical Squadron and 225 (Scottish) Medical Regiment. He is a former President of the RAMC Association <https://ramcassociation.org.uk> and is its current and very active Chairman. He is also a Deputy Lieutenant of Renfrewshire and a jobbing military medical historian.

A personal recommendation: Do explore the RAMC Association’s website, especially the history and Medical VCs pages in the ‘About’ section, and appreciate the new developments on this site.

There is now a new registration link to Brigadier Macmillan’s talk on the Friends of Millbank homepage, with a more streamlined process than for our first talk: once you register with us you will automatically be directed to also register with Zoom to receive the link for the lecture. The original link did not make it clear enough to those unfamiliar with Zoom that after registering on our site they next had to register with Zoom to access the lecture. This probably accounts for part of the discrepancy between the number of applicants and registrants for our first lecture.

We are limited to 100 participants so please register early to guarantee a place. Incidentally, a household sharing a single computer to view the talk should register as a single participant.

A surprise – a pre-Christmas virtual lecture, by Jessica Meyer, Friday 18 December 2020

Jessica Meyer is Associate Professor of Modern British History at the University of Leeds, where she specialises in the history of the First World War. We do not normally have lectures in December but these are certainly not normal times, and I thought it would be a great idea to finish this year’s programme with an especially uplifting talk. I had been very impressed by Jessica Meyer’s online book *‘An Equal Burden: The Men of the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War’* (which I have linked to via our website <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/the-defence-medical-services-in-war>). I therefore contacted her and she readily agreed to deliver us a talk that would inspire us in this time of adaptation to adversity: *‘It worked’: Innovation and Improvisation in the Work of the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War*. Registration will open at the end of November.

Stay safe, stay well. I look forward to seeing you at our next lecture on 27 November. Do register.

In Arduis Fidelis

David Vassallo

Col (retd) FRCSEd, MA, L/RAMC
Chairman, Friends of Millbank