

Dr A W 'Bill' Frankland MBE, DM, FRCP L/RAMC



19 March 1912 – 2 April 2020

The death of Dr Bill Frankland two weeks after his 108th birthday marks the passing of the last medical officer to have served with the RAMC in the Far Eastern conflict of 1941-45.

Born in 1912 in Sussex, he was the younger of twin boys, and the smaller; he weighed 3lb 1oz, and chances of survival were deemed low. But survive he did, and two years later his family moved to Dacre, Cumberland where his father served as Vicar of St Andrew's Church. From here Bill saw his father leave for – and return from – the Great War, serving as chaplain in France and Egypt. After schooling at St Bees, Bill matriculated at The Queen's College Oxford in 1930, having gained a Thomas Exhibition on entry. He graduated BA in 1934, having been taught by such luminaries as Sir Charles Sherrington, a young John Eccles and the anatomist Le Gros Clark. A sportsman, he competed against the record-breaking Olympic gold medallist and future RAMC officer, Jack Lovelock.

Clinical training took place at St Mary's Hospital, where he was taught by a cadre of former RAMC officers; Sir Almroth Wright, Alexander Fleming, Leonard Colebrooke, Zachary Cope and Sir Charles Wilson. Graduating in 1938 he was houseman to Wilson, a decade before the establishment of the NHS.

With the gathering storm clouds of war, he joined the military medical services as a Civilian Medical Practitioner on 1 September 1939, and was posted to Tidworth where his patients included Major General Carton de Wiart VC 'the unkillable soldier.' Commissioned in November 1939, he proudly wore the Sam Browne that had belonged to his father in the Great War. In 1941, after a two day course in tropical medicine at Millbank, he was posted east, arriving in Singapore a week before the tumultuous events of Pearl Harbour. Based at Tanglin Military Hospital he avoided a posting to Alexandra Hospital (and probable certain

death) by the toss of a coin. On 13 February 1942 he was responsible for ensuring the safe passage of many QAIMNS nurses from Singapore Cricket Club to the docks in order for them to escape the fast deteriorating situation.

After the fall of Singapore, he was imprisoned at Roberts Barracks at Changi, caring for the sick and injured. The following year he led a British rugby team in victory over the Australians, the latter being captained by Lieutenant Colonel EE 'Weary' Dunlop. Although at one time destined for the Burma-Thai Railway, Bill was sent by his captors to be the medical officer on Blakang Mati, 'Hell Island', the only medical officer for some 300 men. Faced with starvation and the ravage of diseases, combined with the cruelty of their captors, Bill somehow ensured that not one of his patients died over the ensuing two years. He, himself, was on the receiving end of severe brutality, at one time almost being bayoneted through the chest.

August 1945 brought liberation after the explosion of two Atom bombs. He was later to describe how they 'saved my life.' He still had work to do, caring for hundreds of sick men once back on Singapore Island. Finally, he was able to return home in October 1945 and decided to put the awful experiences aside and return to a career in hospital medicine at St Mary's. He worked as Clinical Assistant to Sir Alexander Fleming and at the same time developed his interest in allergy. He subsequently pioneered the development of the field of clinical allergy, and became a world leader in the field. Although he retired from St Mary's in 1977, he continued to work as an honorary consultant at Guy's Hospital for another 20 years.

He was a wonderful teacher and inspired so many in the field. He was a prolific author, his first paper was published in 1941, his last in 2019. But above all he was a most generous man who gave so freely of his time and expertise to so many around the world. When asked, he told how he treated all patients the same 'regardless of whether they were a prince or a pauper.'

His life was marked by his strong and unwavering Christian faith. He encompassed reconciliation with his captors. Despite his dreadful wartime experiences, he never hated his captors, and in doing so was following the teachings of his father, the Rev. Henry Frankland. He had told Bill, and his brother Jack when they were about seven years old, that 'you must not hate people, it does you harm but it does not do them any harm'.¹

¹ Note by Chairman, Friends of Millbank, 3 April 2020: This obituary of Dr Alfred William (Bill) Frankland was kindly penned for us by Paul Watkins, a close friend of Bill. The fascinating story of this outstanding doctor, who lived through two world wars, the latter largely as a FEPOW, served King and Country, and made major

Chairman's addition

As befits a man who has inspired and helped many thousands of people over his long life, most of the leading media outlets published obituaries of Dr Frankland within 24 hours or so of his death being announced, and doubtless more yet will be published.^{2,3,4}

The following quotation from a message by the Alexandra Hospital where Bill was known and where the RAMC sacrifice is properly commemorated perhaps says it all:

"I have received the sad news of Dr Bill Frankland's passing, and convey my deepest condolences to all who knew him, especially close associates like yourself. Even though I may not have had the opportunity to be in touch with Dr Frankland, his stories and contributions to the medical field will be felt profoundly, for generations to come. We mourn the loss of a great man."

The last word

In celebrating Bill Frankland's long life, overlapping the challenges of both Spanish Flu and COVID-19, I feel that the last word should be from him, so the following are excerpts from the interview he gave to Imperial College for his birthday.⁵

'Speaking from his care home near Barbican, Dr Frankland who turns 108 on 19 March, puts his longevity down to luck:

"I like to think the reason I've lived so long is that I've got 'guardian angels'! I've come close to death so many times – from the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, three and a half years spent

contributions to medicine is described more fully in Paul Watkins' very readable biography 'From Hell Island to Hay Fever' (Brown Dog Books, 2018).

Paul Watkins has kindly accepted to deliver next year's George Blair Memorial Lecture to Friends of Millbank, 29 October 2021, when he will be speaking about the life of Bill Frankland and fellow POW Jacob Markowitz.

² The British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology (BSACI) published their own tribute to Dr Alfred William Frankland on 2 April on their website <https://www.bsaci.org/announcements/dr-alfred-william-frankland-has-died-at-the-age-of-108>, focussing on Dr Frankland's outstanding contribution in his chosen field of clinical allergy over 70 years, following the end of the Second World War.

³ BBC News published an obituary to Dr Frankland on their website on 3 April, together with a recording of a telephone interview undertaken shortly before his 108th birthday, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52150361>.

⁴ Chairman's update 10 April 2020: The reader is directed in particular to the excellent obituaries published by Imperial College London on 6 April, <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/196715/obituary-dr-bill-frankland-mbe-dm/> and the University of Oxford on 8 April, <https://www.alumni.ox.ac.uk/quad/article/dr-w-%E2%80%98bill%E2%80%99-frankland-mbe-dm-frcp>

⁵ Imperial College London, 19 March 2020 'Dr Bill Frankland, the grandfather of allergy, celebrates his 108th birthday' <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/196273/dr-bill-frankland-grandfather-allergy-celebrates/>

as a Japanese Prisoner of War, to experiencing anaphylaxis following a tropical insect bite – but somehow I’ve always managed to miss it and that’s why I’m still here.”

From Spanish flu to COVID-19

As a child growing up in the Lake District, Dr Frankland experienced the spread of the Spanish flu – a pandemic which lasted from 1918-1920 after soldiers fighting in World War One returned home and brought the disease with them.

“I remember my uncle from Yorkshire who was a teacher so wasn’t required to join military service caught the virus in 1919 – he died four days later ...”

Asked on his perspective of COVID-19, Dr Frankland said: “I must confess that I’m not a ‘virus man’ – infection and allergies have always been my research passions. However, I’ve been following the news around COVID-19 and it’s worrying; I think there are a lot of challenges ahead. It’s great to see scientists, such as those at Imperial, working so quickly to help tackle the pandemic.”

"I’m also in awe of all the clinical and health care staff on the front line. It takes me back to World War II when I was stationed in Singapore with the Royal Army Medical Corps. I was looking after over 100 injured patients – mainly soldiers – at the same time. I saw many cases of encephalitis which didn’t have a treatment at the time, which was challenging

A smaller birthday celebration this year

Dr Frankland’s birthday would normally involve a gathering of his family and friends but amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the care home has closed its doors to visitors.

“My birthday this year will be quite different. I’ve been given a special request to have two of my children visit for a short while, but they will have to keep at a safe distance. The staff at the care home are doing a fantastic job at keeping us residents safe and I’m so grateful to them.

“I’m pleased I will still receive a card from the Queen and I’m also delighted that my alma mater, Queen’s College Oxford, is flying their flag in my honour!”