

Friends of Millbank

Book Review

Faithful in Adversity – The Royal Army Medical Corps in the Second World War

Author: John Broom

Pen & Sword Military (2019), ISBN 978 1 52674 955 0

John Broom was a history teacher when a chance inheritance of family papers eleven years ago prompted his interest in the spiritual and ethical issues of twentieth century wars. He has since been awarded a PhD on Christianity in the British Armed Services and is now an established author.

The RAMC was active in all engagements in the Second World War. RAMC personnel were frequently in the heart of the action, risking their lives to provide medical support in all circumstances. That included going into captivity as Prisoners of War in Europe and the Far East, but also being involved in the liberation of concentration camps. Nearly three thousand doctors and other RAMC personnel were killed or died as a result of disease in the war.

Using previously unpublished archival material and personal family papers, this book sheds fresh light on the experiences of regulars, volunteers and conscripts, including conscientious objectors who were no less brave but refused to bear arms and kill the enemy.

The core of the book consists of the personal accounts of fifty RAMC personnel taken from letters, diaries and recordings, as well as other accounts from primary published sources. It is reminiscent of some of the “Voices” series of books about the two World Wars and the Indian Army, but in this case concentrating on one Corps. There are nine chapters: the first deals with recruitment, organisation and training, and the last homecoming, demobilisation and reflection. The remaining seven chapters deal with the main theatres of war. The author gives a good account of every theatre of war and the personal stories of subjects make the whole situation come alive. I found these accounts fascinating and I learned a lot. I read in awe at some of the medical decisions that had to be made and the awful loss of life. What does it feel like when it is decided that one doctor should be left behind with the wounded to be captured by the enemy? Lots are drawn and the doctor who lost and is left behind tells of his sense of desolation and loneliness. You do not get that raw emotion in traditional military histories or the histories of the Corps.

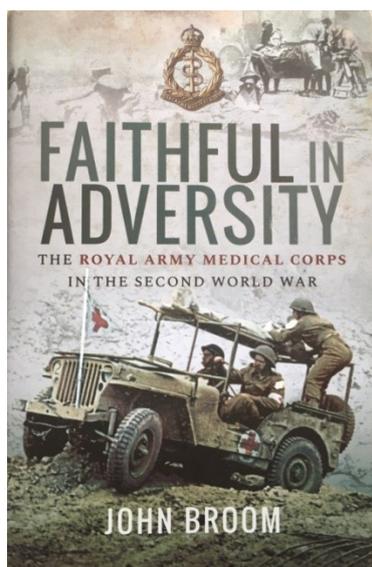
Many of the photographs are interesting because they show the men whose personal accounts you are reading. The typeface is clear. There are comprehensive notes neatly placed at the back of the book so as not to interrupt the text. The sources and bibliography are excellent and a good guide to further reading.

It is reassuring to realise that, when war seems a muddle, previous generations have adapted and coped with it. How they did so is an inspiration to us all. Some old lessons will have to be relearned. This book will be of great interest to all members of the RAMC and those that have retired.

JC Richardson

July 2020

Chairman's notes



Faithful in Adversity (2019) - cover

The reviewer, Colonel (retired) John Richardson FRCGP L/RAMC, a Bart's graduate, is Emeritus Defence Professor of Primary Care and General Practice, Defence Medical Services. He served in the Royal Army Medical Corps from 1964 to 2012, and has been my informal mentor and friend since the 1990s. He is also Membership Secretary and Treasurer of the West Sussex History of Medicine Society which holds talks on alternate Saturday mornings in autumn at the Postgraduate Centre of St Richard's Hospital, Chichester, see <https://wshoms.co.uk/>. WSHOMS is affiliated to the British Society of the History of Medicine, as is Friends of Millbank.

Dr John Broom has kindly accepted my invitation to deliver a talk on the RAMC in the Second World War to Friends of Millbank in June 2021. Professor Richardson alludes in his book review to 'a chance inheritance of family papers'. These were actually some 170 letters written by his father while serving in the RAMC between 1940 and 1946. His father's strong Christian faith came across in his letters, sparking his son's interest in war and Christianity,¹ such that John went on to be awarded a doctorate from the University of Durham in 2018 for his thesis 'Faith in the Furnace: British Christians in the Armed Services, 1939-45'.² He has a blog <https://faithinwartime.wordpress.com/> and has published four other books, three of which deal with the spiritual and ethical issues of combat and therefore might also interest Friends of Millbank:



¹ Essex and Sussex Surnames, Interview: John Broom, author of "Fight the Good Fight"(2016) <https://essexandsuffolksurnames.co.uk/interview-john-broom-author-of-fight-the-good-fight/> (accessed 5 July 2020)

² Durham E-Theses: *Faith in the Furnace: British Christians in the Armed Services, 1939-1945* (John Broom). http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12709/1/Corrected_Thesis_5.7.2018.pdf?DDD32+ (accessed 5 July 2020)