END OF AN ERA - THE DEPARTURE OF THE MILITARY MEDICAL COLLEGE FROM MILLBANK

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The area at Millbank has not always been associated with the RAMC. In Victorian times the whole area was a large prison that housed up to 1200 at any one time. Its close proximity to the Thames and the sea, made it ideal for the transportation of the convicts to the Antipodes. Within the McGrigor courtyard in the College ground, there is still one of the bollards that was used to tie the ships in the riverbank.

In 1897 the prison was demolished to make way for the Tate gallery which opened in the same year. This still left a large area that was Crown property, which subsequently became the Army Service Corps barracks (1903), the Queen Alexandra Military hospital (1905), and finally the Royal Army Medical College and Laboratory block (now RAMC HQ Mess and College which was completed in 1907). The barracks were subsequently occupied by staff from the College and hospital.

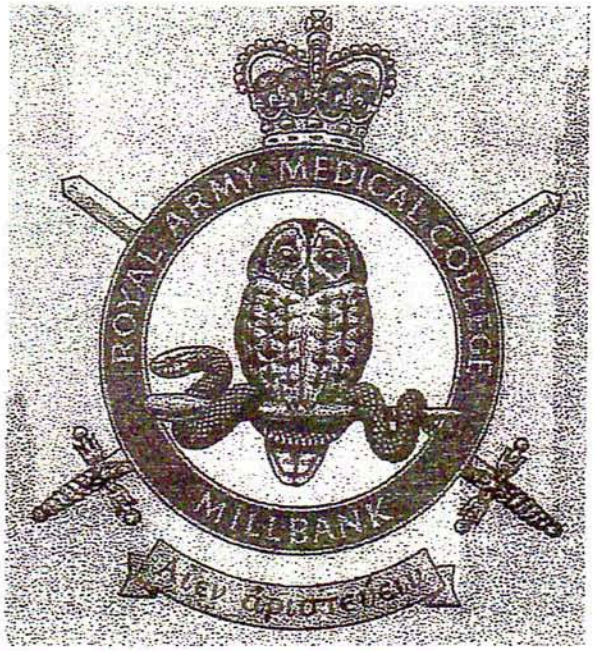
The College itself is a direct descendant of the Army Medical school which was founded at Fort Pitt in Chatham in 1860 after a report by the Royal Sanitary Commission following pressure from Florence Nightingale after her experience during the Crimean Wars.

Prior to this time the majority of doctors who joined the Army were posted straight to their regiments, with only a few undergoing a modicum of Military medical training at the York Hospital in Chelsea or the General Invaliding Hospital on the Isle of Wight.

In 1863 postgraduate medical training moved to the recently built Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley, Southampton. From 1865, training was not restricted to just Army Medical Department personnel, but also candidates from the Indian Medical Service. In addition, between 1871 and 1880, medical probationers from the Royal Naval Medical Services were also trained.

After the Boer War a Royal commission recommended that a Military Hospital and Medical staff college should be established in London. Hence the move to the area in Millbank.

The RAMC College officially opened on 15 May 1907 and the first Commandant was Colonel H E R James CB, CMG, OBE. Since then there has been 35 Commandants



Crest of the Royal Army Medical College

with the last being Major General G O Cowan OBE QHP.

Since March 1996, when the name was changed to Royal Defence Medical College the Commandant has been Surgeon Commodore I Jenkins RN.

During the First World War teaching at the college was suspended and the premises were used for production of vaccines and later for research into protection against chemical warfare. The early gas-masks were developed at the college with much of this work being pioneered by Brigadier General Sir William Horrocks, first Director of Hygiene at the War Office. Teaching resumed in 1919 along with research into insecticides, nutrition, inoculation procedures and other projects.

During the second world war courses in tropical

medicine continued with over 3000 medical officers attending despite the college being seriously damaged by the Luftwaffe in 1941. Bomb damage can still be seen on the wall of the Tate Gallery adjacent to the college.

In 1961 it was felt that the College should have its own badge. Mr J H Grundy, an Entomologist on the staff of the college and artist of merit, was asked to design a badge, which was submitted to Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Army Medical Corps, for her approval. Her Majesty's Private Secretary wrote to the then DGAMS that:

"Whilst entirely in agreement with this suggestion, which Queen Elizabeth feels is most wise and imaginative, Her Majesty is not quite happy about one aspect of the drawing of the proposed crest. Her Majesty feels that the Snake, as portrayed has an ugly and rather forbidding look about it, which offsets the excellent balance and dignified proportions of the remainder of the drawing. Before giving final approval, Queen Elizabeth has asked me to put this point to you, as Her Majesty, feels that it might be worth giving further consideration to this aspect of the design".

Having modified the snake, John Grundy in his covering letter wrote:

"I have done my best to cope with the request to reduce 'ugliness' and 'aggressiveness' from the snake in the proposed College crest. The steely-blue thick-bodied Australian snake has been changed to a slimmer grass snake which is the most harmless and non-poisonous snake known! The 'smile' has been exaggerated so that it is as 'friendly' as any snake could possibly be, and I have also changed the eye from black to warm brown. Any further changes may reduce the 'snake' to an 'eel', or even worse 'worm', as all snakes tend to have an aggressive appearance, which is simply part of their character".

Over the years the college has played a major role in the training of Laboratory Technicians with both Class One and Class Three courses being run at Millbank, the last ever Army Laboratory Class One Course finished in March 1997. There are no longer any trainee Army Laboratory Technicians within the RAMC and with the introduction of the single service concept, further recruiting will be into the RAF.

Pathology was one of the first elements of the College to depart, with the closures of the working laboratories in September 1996 following the transfer of the specialist aspects of the trade to The Royal Hospital in Haslar.

Currently the RDMC at Millbank provides postgraduate training in Military Surgery, Military Medicine, Military Psychiatry, Preventative Medicine, Military Entomology and General Practice.

Within the College there is also a very comprehensive medical library containing many historical books. The sheer number of books in the library has just been realised since the packing up and removal, to HMS Dolphin, process has just begun.

The Owl's Nest, (the social club), once the domain of many a Lab tech, has now been used recently for many of "Last Ever" Social Functions that keep on being repeated. It will be a sad day when the Medical College finally closes and even more so when the Owl's Nest pulls its last pint. (Have you seen the prices of beer in London?).

Obviously the buildings are to remain, but their use is still under debate.