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SURGEON-GENERAL SIR WILLIAM DANIEL CAMPBELL
WILLIAMS, K.C.M.G., C.B., K.St.J.

(1856 – 1919)

William Williams, who signed his name as W.D.Campbell Williams on his petition to become a mason and who became affectionately known simply as 'Mo' Williams, was born in Sydney in July 1856.¹

His English-born father, who had a successful medical practice in Sydney, had young William educated at Sydney Grammar School and the London University College Medical School where he was admitted a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons (M.R.C.S.) in 1879 and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (L.R.C.P.) the following year.²

He was awarded a gold medal in surgery and, after a year as an intern in the University hospital, he returned to Sydney to open a practice at Darlinghurst.

Shortly afterwards he was gazetted a staff surgeon with the rank of Captain in the New South Wales Artillery.

On 21 June 1881, Williams married Florence Severn and they were to have two sons and a daughter.

In 1885, the acting Premier of New South Wales, Bro. Hon. William Bede Dalley, authorised a contingent of troops for service in the Sudan Campaign.³ They were led by Bro. Colonel John Richardson and Williams, who had been promoted to Major, sailed with the contingent as Principal Medical Officer.

Williams enjoyed soldering and the campaign gave him the opportunity to test his ideas for the medical arrangements for an army in field. He was mentioned in despatches and awarded the Khedive's Star.

He then attended a course of instruction in administration and training at Aldershot in England.

On his return to Sydney, he resumed his practice and became a consulting surgeon at St.Vincent's Hospital and, on Colonel Richardson's advice, he was appointed Principal Medical Officer of the army in New South Wales.

During the period 1888 to 1891, Williams reorganised the Army's Medical Service to include a well-trained permanent medical staff corps equipped with light ambulance wagons which Williams had designed and which were superior to those in use in the British Army.

He established mounted stretcher-bearers for mounted units which used a special stretcher designed by Williams and were trained to move at the same speed as the Light Horse.

His primary and most significant objective was the establishment of a medical service under a single, unified command, with adequate reserves of men and equipment.

In 1889, Williams was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and he travelled extensively to advise the other Australian colonies on the medical needs for their military forces.

He saw at first hand, the differences in administration and training between the various colonial forces and he became a staunch advocate of the federation of the Australian colonies and particularly, a single military command.

In 1896, Williams was promoted to Colonel and he organised a conference of the Principal Medical Officers of the various colonies to discuss a common approach to training and a standard uniform with distinctive badges for each colony.

He argued for lighter, better fitting khaki uniforms and that British style red and blue tunics should only be used on the parade ground.

In 1898, the British Army formed the Royal Army Medical Corps and Williams' unit was named the New South Wales Army Medical Corps. At the same time, Williams was the driving force behind the establishment of the New South Wales Army Nursing Service Reserve. Unlike the British, the various Australian colonial medical corps had their own transport, horses and drivers which ensured maximum flexibility and speed.

On the outbreak of the Boer War in South Africa, Williams mobilised medical detachments which were already trained and ready for active service. He departed with the first contingent from Sydney on 28 October 1899.

His unit caused a sensation with its mobility and lives were saved as a result. His success eventually led to the introduction of the field ambulance system by the British and Australian Armies in 1906.

The high point of Williams' career was his appointment on 24 January 1900 as Principal Medical Officer responsible for thirty-five thousand Australian and New Zealand troops. As a result, it has been suggested that Williams was the first colonial officer to hold an Anzac command although the term had not then been created.⁴

An English doctor in South Africa said of Williams that he was:

The first man I have met who seems to be a master of army medical work in the field.⁵

Writing from South Africa, Williams said:

No one seemed to know the difference between New South Wales troops, Victorians, South Australians and others. So I suggested one badge common to all, to be worn on the shoulder strap and my suggestion of the word 'Australia' was warmly taken up and now the bulk of the Australian troops are wearing it - we have sunk all provincialisation and have driven another nail for the military federation of the colonies.⁶

It was most appropriate that the champion of Federation should be promoted to Surgeon-General on 1 January 1901, the very day of the great event.

After the Boer War, he again resumed his private practice and consultancy at Sydney's St. Vincent's Hospital.

On 1 April 1902, he was appointed Director-General of the Australian Army Medical Corps (A.A.M.C.) which was formally established three months later on 1 July.

He then began the task of combining the several colonial units into a single, efficient corps.

His proposals to incorporate a Veterinary Corps and a Dental Corps were rejected and he was required to operate within strictly controlled budget restraints imposed by the Government.

Although he was the only regular medical officer, he moved to Army headquarters in Melbourne where, for a time, he was a consultant to Melbourne's St. Vincent's Hospital. but he relinquished private practice

when the A.A.M.C. was expanded as a result of the introduction of 'Universal' military training.

When the First World War began, Williams applied for the post of Director of Medical Services with the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.), and although he was 58, overweight and in poor health, Dr. Williams sailed for his third war.

It was a mistake.

The old soldier no longer seemed to possess his former outstanding organising ability and the historian C.E.W. Bean described him as 'past his prime' and that he treated his time during the voyage to Egypt 'rather as he might a month at his club'.⁷

He made a bad impression on Major-General (Sir) William Bridges and Williams' 'evident liking for alcohol led Bridges to believe that he was unsuitable as Medical Director'.⁸

He did not leave the ship at Egypt but went on to London which further weakened his position with the A.I.F.

Williams, however, was not yet the 'has-been' that some imagined. In London he did valuable liaison work with the British and Australian Red Cross and medical supplies and equipment for the A.I.F. in conjunction with Australia's High Commissioner and former Prime Minister, Bro. Sir George Reid.

He also saw the need and arranged for the fitting out of hospital ships to take the sick and wounded back to Australia. Once again there were those who owed their lives to Surgeon-General Williams.

He returned to Egypt in February 1915 but found that there was no position for him and his isolation was virtually complete when Lieutenant-Colonel (Sir) Neville Howse, V.C., became Director of Medical Services of the A.I.F.

He left for London on the very day when his skills would have been invaluable; the 25th of April 1915.

Williams returned to Australia and his Knighthood may have been some solace for the treatment he had received.

He returned to London to join his wife and, on 1 January 1917, he was placed on the army retired list.

Thus the career of Australia's great military medical pioneer came to an end.

In 1918, he journeyed alone to Melbourne, sick and disillusioned and feeling the effects of heavy drinking. He died on 10 May 1919, his family on the other side of the world, and he was buried with full military honours in Brighton Cemetery.

His estate of just £540 wasn't much to show for a lifetime of devotion to the well-being of others.

Williams has been either overlooked or maligned by Australia's military and civil historians, but if the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps want to seek their origin, they need not look beyond the man who wrote:

To organise a medical service, complete in itself, self-controlled, under one system of training, decentralised, in the proportions that will be laid down for each State, is our one and only object.⁹

Bro. Dr. (Sir) William Daniel Campbell Williams, aged 26, of 105 Darlinghurst Road, Sydney, was made a mason on 8 November 1882 in the Australian Lodge of Harmony, No. 556, English Constitution, now No. 5, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.¹⁰

NOTES

1. A.J. Hill, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Vol. 12, 1990, p.506
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3. Peter Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, Pan Books (Australia) Pty. Ltd., Sydney, 1985, p.5
4. L. Field, *The Forgotten War*, Melbourne 1995, p.109
5. F.E. Fremantle, *Impressions of a Doctor in Khaki*, London, 1901, p.356
6. Reports from Colonel W.D.C. Williams, P.M.O. of the Australian Contingents in South Africa to Headquarters, N.S.W. Military Forces, Sydney, Jan-July 1900. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
7. C.E.W. Bean, *Two Men I Knew*, Sydney, 1957, p.36
8. C.E.W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, Vol.II, Brisbane, 1981, p.399
9. W.D.C. Williams, *The Development of the Australian Army Medical Services under Universal Training System*, Transactions, Australasian Medical Congress, 1911, p.1076
10. The United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, Archives



COLONEL W.D.C. WILLIAMS,

PRINCIPAL MEDICAL OFFICER, N.S.W. MILITARY FORCES