



Book Review by David Vassallo

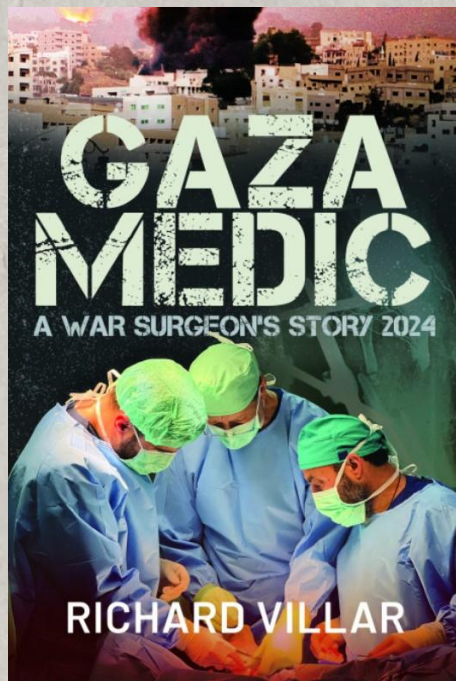
Gaza Medic – A War Surgeon's Story 2024

Richard Villar

Pen & Sword Military

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Always start with the Dedication of a book if you wish to understand the author. Richard is speaking for everyone who has ever practised medicine in conflict, he has bared his soul, even if not overtly religious, and shown his motivating force, his concern for others:

'To those affected by warfare, wherever you may be. You deserve better.'

The book's 17 chapters, from 'Getting Ready for Gaza' to an emotional 'Leaving Gaza', describe in vivid detail Richard's voluntary deployment in April 2024 as an orthopaedic war surgeon with an Emergency Medical Team from Medical Aid to Palestinians, to support the Al Aqsa Hospital in Deir-al-Balah in Central Gaza, during the Israeli invasion after the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023. Their neat titles belie this very personal and moving story, this journey to hell on earth – a man-made hell, full of fear and ever-present danger, of wanton death and deliberate injury, mainly affecting women, children and the elderly in their thousands and ten thousands, yet one illuminated by hope and inspiration, by stories of steadfastness in adversity, of innovation and resourcefulness, of lessons learned and re-learned, and of the human spirit at its very best.



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Richard's story is simply and clearly told, and all the more powerful for that, as his Foreword testifies: 'I brought some light into the Gaza darkness. Talking, taking sides, or having an opinion is insufficient.' Throughout he wears his heart on his sleeve, and while trying to remain apolitical he hides nothing from the reader in facing up to man's cruelty to man, including his fears and emotions, and his trials and tribulations – and those of others far, far worse off than himself. There is one telling exception - he keeps secret for their safety the names of many of those who helped him, other than the overseas members of his Emergency Medical Team – a sad indictment of how medics and aid workers, ambulances and hospitals, are purposefully targeted in this conflict.

Gaza Medic, this powerful eye-witness account, certainly shows how the author, an erstwhile SAS military doctor, now a renowned orthopaedic and humanitarian war surgeon, has given his all to help others. He has come a long way, retaining his humanity always, since he published a Personal View in the BMJ as a junior doctor in 1979.¹ If you could choose only one book to visualise and appreciate the tragic reality of Gaza at war, and frontline surgery, this is the book. Be inspired, and in your own way bring some light into the Gaza darkness.

Richard is a keen supporter of Friends of Millbank. In the early months of the COVID pandemic he memorably delivered our first Zoom talk, on 30 October 2020: the George Blair Memorial Lecture 'Winged Scalpel', which attracted a record audience. The talk was not recorded, but his memoir of the same title, 'Winged Scalpel', tells the full story. Read the review at <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/books>.

He will next be delivering the Friends of Millbank Haywood Memorial Lecture, 'Gaza Medic – A War Surgeon's Story 2024', in person at Millbank and on Zoom, on Friday 28 March 2025 at 1830hrs. Registration is open already, via our Talks programme, or click [HERE](#). All are welcome, do invite friends and guests, and share this invitation with others.

David Vassallo
Chairman, Friends of Millbank
30 October 2024

¹ Villar, R. Personal View. BMJ, 6 October 1979.

