

The George Blair Prize and Memorial Lecture

(Wording of original dedication, 2010)

This is an important new prize, because it commemorates one of the large number of our comrades, rarely mentioned, who fought in the campaign in Malaya until the surrender at Singapore, and then suffered the holocaust of the Japanese cruelty while POW.

The Blair Prize has been endowed by the Friends of Millbank, and authorised in 2010 by General Hawley, to honour the memory of Captain George Blair, MBE, who went to Malaya before the Japanese invasion began as RMO to 5th Field Regiment, RA, with the 10th Indian Division. During the retreat, he performed a feat of bravery of which his fellow officers said 'If the Malayan Campaign had ended differently, he would have got a very high decoration.'

As a prisoner in Formosa, Captain Blair was a beloved medical officer, in the highest tradition of our Corps. Many fellow prisoners testified to his dedication, kindness, and courage. On one occasion the Japanese threatened to cut off his right hand. His epitaph in *Gunner*, by E.E. Leeson in July of 1979 after his early death, has much to tell.

The Blair Prize

This will consist of a purse of £100, and an engraved trophy. The Lecture will be delivered annually at Millbank at a date nearest to 1st April, this being the date of the death of George Blair.¹ Details of the Memorial Lecture and Award will be advertised in the appropriate Medical Publications.

¹ Chairman's note: George Blair's epitaph in *Gunner* is at the end of this document. The inaugural George Blair Memorial Lecture was held on 29 October 2010 in the Banqueting Room of the Chelsea College of Art and Design, previously the Dining Room of the RAMC Headquarter Mess, Millbank. It was delivered by Major General George Cowan OBE, the last Commandant of the College, on '*Tapanuli Fever – or the Black Formosa Corruption*'.

The George Blair Memorial Lecture has been held at Millbank annually in October (not April) since 2010. Though often related to medicine in the tropics, the subject has ranged widely, with titles as diverse as '*Medical Problems of Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs)*' (delivered by Professor Geoff Gill, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, 2013), '*Fighting on the Home Front*' (delivered by Kate Adie, 2015), and '*The life, work and legacy of Professor Dr Nikolai Pirogov*' (delivered by Major General (Retd) Mungo Melvin, 2016). See full list on page 2 below.

The Blair Prize, in the form of an honorarium and engraved shield, is presented after each Lecture by Dr John Blair (President Friends of Millbank), or a member of the family (2019).

The George Blair Memorial Lecture for 2020 is scheduled to be delivered on 30 October 2020, subject to the coronavirus situation at the time, by Richard Villar ICRC, titled '*Winged Scalpel - a Surgeon at the Frontline of Disaster*'.

George Blair Memorial Prize Lectures, 2010 – 2021

29 October 2010	Major General George Cowan OBE	Inaugural lecture: Tapanuli Fever - or the Black Formosa Corruption
20 October 2011	Mr. Kenneth Mills	Good Ideas are Simple - Thomas Splint from Liverpool to Tobruk
26 October 2012	Lt Col Mark S Bailey RAMC (Joint winner of Prize with Dr Robin Agnew) ²	A Brief History of British Military Experiences with Infectious and Tropical Diseases ³
25 October 2013	Prof Geoff Gill	Medical Problems of Far East Prisoners of War
24 October 2014	Prof Mark Harrison	The Mesopotamian Campaign, 1914-1918
23 October 2015	Kate Adie	Fighting on the Home Front
21 October 2016	Major General Mungo Melvin	The life, work and legacy of Prof Dr Nikolai Pirogov
20 October 2017	Bryn Parry	Help for Heroes
21 September 2018	Professor Geoff Gill & Meg Parkes	Burma Railway Medicine
20 September 2019	Professor Michael Charney	What we did not know about the Defence of Burma in 1942, the Burma Railways under fire
30 October 2020 (to be confirmed, subject to coronavirus constraints)	Richard Villar	Winged Scalpel - a surgeon at the frontline of disaster
29 October 2021 (scheduled)	Paul Watkins	On The Shoulders of Giants: Medical Officers in the Far East Conflict, 1941-45

² Dr Robin Agnew was joint winner of the George Blair Memorial Prize 2012, for his paper 'The Capture of Guadeloupe in 1815 – the role of John Forbes (1787-1861)'. Sir John Forbes FRS, physician, had been inspired as a young man by Nelson's victory at Trafalgar to enlist as a surgeon in the Royal Navy (spending most of his naval career, 1807 – 1816, at sea). Thereafter he enrolled in Edinburgh's renowned medical school as a mature student, graduating in 1817, and then practised as a chest physician in Penzance and Chichester. His translation of Laennec's treatise on the stethoscope introduced Laennec's teachings to the English-speaking world, which together with his translation of Auenbrugger's treatise on percussion of the chest, and other works, resulted in Forbes' election to the Royal Society in 1829.
<https://www.jameslindlibrary.org/articles/john-forbes-frs-1787-1861/>

³ The George Blair Memorial Lecture 2012 by Lt Col Bailey was subsequently published as: Bailey MS. A brief history of British military experiences with infectious and tropical diseases. *J R Army Med Corps* 2013;159:150–157 <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/jramc/159/3/150.full.pdf>

THE GUNNER, Issue Number 104, July 1979 (Epitaph by E.E. Leeson).

Doctor George Blair, M.B.E

I wish to record this appreciation of a man, who, though not a Gunner in the true sense of the word, was in every other respect a Gunner through and through.

Doctor George Blair died suddenly at Dishforth in North Yorkshire at the comparatively early age of 62. I first made his acquaintance when he joined our family practice in Middlesbrough shortly after the last war.

Although our relationship was the usual doctor/patient one, we found a common bond through the 'Gunner' connection. Doctor Blair was the Regimental M.O. of 5 Fd Regt. During the Malayan campaign, He was taken prisoner by the Japanese with others of his regiment. During his service with 5 Field and afterwards in captivity, his reputation was of the highest; indeed he was awarded the M.B.E. for his services as a POW.

There are anecdotes too numerous to mention of the compassion and care he showed to his fellow prisoners. One prisoner said of him: 'Did you know that Dr Blair nearly died but I am sure God kept him alive to look after us.'

Sadly his health failed in recent years and the world is the poorer for the passing of this very gallant Christian gentleman who had always been so proud of the fact that he had served with the Royal Artillery.