

Birmingham Medal Society Meeting Thursday 5 October 2017 – Drummond Lecture

17 members present.

The President opened the meeting, thanking all for attending.

Apologies received from Mick Atkinson, Reg Cook, Paul Murray, Martin Harrison, Danny Rees & Roy Painter

Functions and Visits – positive feedback was received from BMS (double badged) members who had enjoyed attending the OMRS 2017 Convention at Stratford upon Avon.

Committee Points – Dave Seeney reported favourable terms had been negotiated for continued use of meeting room at The Holiday Inn, Bromsgrove subject to those attending each meeting making a voluntary charitable donation in envelopes provided for Holiday Inn's chosen Charity. The Members present agreed to do so and thanked Dave for negotiating such favourable terms, especially as the hotel management had not been aware of the extent of overnight accommodation or meals provided to BMS members during past 6 months. Medal Yearbook 2018 being available from John Scott at conclusion of meeting.

For the benefit of the new members present the President briefly spoke about the background to the Annual Drummond Lecture which has been held annually since Lt. General Sir Alexander Drummond KBE, Director General of Army Medical Services, gave the first lecture to the Birmingham Medal Society in 1979 on 'Military Medicine' at the invitation of Dr Llewellyn Lloyd OBE, KSTJ.

Dr Lloyd served under General Drummond during his period of National Service as a Captain with the RAMC – in a hot spot during the Malayan Insurgency. They became firm friends and it was General Drummond who not only had a wonderful collection of medals, mainly to medical personnel but who also encouraged Dr Lloyd to collect medals to the Medical Services. The General made very significant improvements to the then Royal Army Medical Services Museum at Millbank in 1957 especially the RAMC Victoria Cross Room.

General Drummond was our first Patron until he died in 1988 aged 87, by then unfortunately the ravages of time had caught up with him on the onset of Alzheimer's. Dr Lloyd was our second Patron who regrettably passed away in March 2014.

At the invitation of the President, Paul Handford eloquently introduced Dr John Bourne whose Research Group on Great War Generals has done much to remove the myth that they sat behind the lines and did nothing in the forward areas including the firing line.

The subject being 'Western Front Generals during the First World War' - Few groups in British history have been more vilified than the Western Front Generals of the Great War. Despite several generations of attempted revisionism, they are still commonly regarded in media and public opinion as 'the donkeys', whose stupidity, professional incompetence and callousness destroyed an entire generation. These charges are largely based on opinions about a handful of senior commanders, chief of whom is Douglas Haig. The lecture took a more rounded look at Britain's generals, of whom there were more than 1,200 who had served on the Western Front, who they were, how they were chosen, how they changed over time and provided a far a far more sympathetic conclusion about their actions and achievements.

The lecture was delivered without notes or any visual aids and demonstrated that the British Army had been well organised from the onset but had no idea of the extent of casualties that it would sustain during the 52 months duration of the war. The War was expected to be over by Christmas 1914 and very nearly had it not been some quick thinking by Smith – Dorrien who held the line but was later sent home for not following orders. Had he followed those orders then the 2 Army Corps would have been encircled by the gap created between them as they retired in 1914.

The British Army commenced with 200,000 men in 1914 and many of the 200 Brigadiers in an Army of 2.5 million men had commenced the war as Captains.

British Generalship required the ability to command all arms at Divisional level. Unfortunately not all the Generals at the outset had the ability to do so for there are clearly examples of those not suited to do so, who got sent home whilst others rose to the occasion. Douglas Haig believed that 'we must fight the war as we have to and not as we would wish to.'

The BEF was attacking uphill – the Germans held the high ground. The war needed to be fought: politically, operationally, strategically and tactically. Churchill when Minister of Munitions may have provided the means to win the war but the sheer volume of shells required was for example 100,000 per day by 1918 just for 18pdrs, let alone all the other heavy artillery. The ordinance needed to be such that it could cut extensive wire entanglements and knock out well constructed concrete bunkers which it could not do in 1914 -16. By 1918 wiring parties out in no-man's land are receiving hot coco every 2 hours and it was an 'innovative questing army.'

By 1918 huge quantities of petrol are required, provided by light railways for tanks, vehicles and planes. In 1915 the priority was steel for ships and by 1916 steel helmets in ever increasing numbers. Co-operation between all arms to hammer the Germans in more than one place and then switch attacks to other places required good staff work - yet we started the war with only a small nucleus of trained staff officers. By 1918 Corps Commanders are 'enablers' not 'authorisers' as in 1916.

Haig was a gadget freak always looking for better ways to inflict damage on the enemy. 'The British Army were Lions led by Tigers and not Donkeys. Much damage was done in the 1960's with satirical books/plays/films portraying the staff as gilded and useless.

The President thanked Dr John Bourne and then invited the members to ask any questions. The response to Chris Burn's questions as to why WW1 British Generals continue to have such a poor reputation – being that there is no simple answer to that question.

The 1916 Officer Corps was such that it was not capable of fighting on the Somme in the same way that the 1918 Officer Corps managed to fight in the last 100 days.

John Scott thanked Dr John Bourne for an excellent lecture and presented him with a BMS tie – the above being purely highlights by way of a précis.

The President thanked all for attending. The next meeting being 2 November, the subject Russia 1917-20, John Scott and Martin Harrison to introduce.