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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

COLONEL M. K. AFRIDI

A concise biography of Colonel Monawar Khan AFRIDI, C.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P., D.T.M. & H., who was an officer in the Indian Medical Service between 1924 and 1947; and a distinguished physician in Pakistan after the Second World War.

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A Concise Biography of Colonel M. K. AFRIDI

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Colonel Monawar Khan AFRIDI, C.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P., D.T.M. & H., Indian Medical Service.

For an Army to fight a campaign successfully, many different aspects of military activity need to be in place. The soldiers who do the actual fighting need to be properly trained, equipped, supplied, and importantly for the individual soldiers, they need to know that in the event of them being wounded (which is more likely than not), they will receive the best medical treatment possible.

In South East Asia, more soldiers fell ill than were wounded in battle, and this fact severely affected the ability of the Army to sustain any unit in the front line for any significant period. Key generals of the period, including General Sir George GIFFARD, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the 11th Army Group, and Lieutenant General 'Bill' SLIM, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the 14th Army, knew that if they were to retake Burma, they had to conquer the medical problems first.

Colonel Monawar Khan AFRIDI, C.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P., D.T.M. & H., was a distinguished physician who served in the Indian Medical Service between 1924 and 1947. He was the physician in the British Indian Army responsible for combating malaria within the Army in South East Asia during the Second World War. He then continued his distinguished career in Pakistan, working for the World Health Organisation, and he was Vice Chancellor of Peshawar University.

Background and Pre-War Career

Monawar Khan AFRIDI was a Pathan, who was born on 12 February 1900 in Kohat, on the North-West Frontier of British India.¹ He studied medicine at Lahore, and then travelled to the United Kingdom to graduate as a Bachelor of Medicine (M.B.), and Bachelor of Surgery (Ch.B.), from St. Andrew's University in 1923. During his time in Scotland, AFRIDI gained a Scottish accent that lasted for the rest of life, particularly when he was stressed.

AFRIDI was commissioned into the Indian Medical Service on 1 August 1924, in the rank of Temporary Lieutenant. The Indian Medical Service was different to the Royal Army Medical Corps in the British Army in that it provided medical and public health services to both the civilian population in British India as well as to the British Indian Army. AFRIDI was granted a Regular Commission in the Indian Medical Service (service number MZ/1100) on 20 May 1925 in the rank of Lieutenant, with his seniority dating from 1 August 1924. He was promoted to the rank of Captain on 1 August 1927.

¹ His forename is also spelt as 'Munawar' in some sources.

On 4 January 1930, AFRIDI was appointed a Deputy Assistant Director of Pathology at Army Headquarters, Delhi. He relinquished this appointment on 15 March 1933. During this period, AFRIDI returned to St. Andrew's where he became a Doctor of Medicine (M.D.). Later, whilst on study leave in London, he also gained the Diploma of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (D.T.M. & H.). As his career developed, he specialized in bacteriology and serology, and later on malariology.

AFRIDI was appointed a Deputy Assistant Director of Pathology again between 27 September 1934 and 23 December 1935. He was promoted to the rank of Major on 1 February 1936, although in 1940, this was ante-dated to 1 February 1934. After a period of military service with the Indian Medical Service, in 1936 AFRIDI was appointed the Assistant Director of the Malaria Institute of India. He undertook extensive malarial surveys in Delhi, Bahrain, Uttar Pradesh and Terai, and developed anti-malaria larval measures in urban areas.

Service during Second World War

With the outbreak of the Second World War, AFRIDI was recalled to Military service. On 1 August 1941 he was promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant Colonel, and then on 1 November 1941, Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. He was sent to The Sudan, and then Iraq, to be responsible for anti-malarial measures in the respective commands.

On 12 January 1942, AFRIDI became the Assistant Director of Hygiene (Anti-Malaria) at General Headquarters of the Army in India. At this time, he was still a Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. He began to build an organisation to address the problems of malaria in the British and Indian Armies. The rates of malaria in some units in the British Army and Indian Army serving in India and Burma in 1942 and 1943 was as high as 70%; this meant that many battalions and regiments ceased to be combat effective very quickly.

The main precautionary treatment was the use of quinine, but this was not popular amongst the troops as it tasted foul. Steadily, with the medical expertise of AFRIDI and the support of senior officers such as Lieutenant General SLIM, the rates of malaria dropped to as low as 5% by early 1944. Promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on 1 February 1944, AFRIDI was recognised for his work on 8 June 1944, with the award of Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) in The King's Birthday Honours List.

On 2 August 1944, AFRIDI was promoted to the rank of Acting Colonel. Three days later on 5 August, India Command appointed AFRIDI as a Consultant in the Directorate of Medical Services at G.H.Q. India, upon promotion to the rank of Local Brigadier. He continued to oversee the Indian Army's anti-malarial programmes, and it is reported in his obituary, that it was due to the organisation that Brigadier AFRIDI built up that malaria ceased to be a problem of military importance among the Allied forces in South East Asia.

On 6 June 1946, his service was recognised by the award of the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.). Major General TYNDALL, the Director of Medical Services at the Headquarters, Allied Land Forces South East Asia, recommended he be granted an award on 15 November 1945, and his citation reads:

Brigadier Afridi has been Consultant Malariologist to H.Q. ALFSEA since its formation.

The decrease in malaria, during the Burma Campaign, has been the most remarkable triumph in modern medicine, and as historic an event as the epic triumph of the Australian Forces over malaria in New Guinea etc.

During the worst malaria period in 1945, the Alfsea overall malaria incidents did not exceed 0.3 per thousand of strength per day, an infinitesimal figure considered with the overwhelming incidents of the previous years.

Brigadier Afridi in his capacity, as Consultant Malariologist spared no efforts to keep in touch with all recent advances in Anti-Malariol measures. His advice guided this Headquarters in implementing all measures for the control of malaria. By personal visits to formations and units, medical and non-medical, he succeeded in rousing interest in malaria prevention, and in convincing all personel (sic – personnel) that malaria can be reduced to negligible (sic – negligible) rates, even in the worst of malaria risks.

His success has made Brigadier Afridi a recognised authority on anti-malaria measures. The victory over malaria in the Alfsea Command has earned high recognition for Brigadier Afridi.

I recommend him for the C.B.E. as an operational award as a great part of his time was spent with the operational formations east of the Brahmaputra.

Post War Career

With the end of the Second World War, AFRIDI resumed his post as Assistant Director of the Institute of Malariology at Delhi. With the partition of British India on 15 August 1947, being a Pathan, AFRIDI moved to the new country of Pakistan, where he established the Malaria Institute of Pakistan. AFRIDI led the Pakistan delegation to the World Health Organisation (W.H.O.), and in 1949, he joined the W.H.O. as the Deputy Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. Later, he returned to Pakistan to become the Surgeon-General for East Pakistan (now the independent country of Bangladesh), and then returned to his roots as the Director of Health Services in the North-West Frontier of Pakistan.

Appointed a Vice-Chancellor of the University of Peshawar in 1958, AFRIDI held this post for four years. In 1962, he was elected chairman of the Executive Board of the W.H.O. and was President of the 17th World Health Assembly in Geneva in 1964. At this assembly, he was presented with the Darling Foundation medal and prize for 'his outstanding achievements in the field of pathology, aetiology, therapy, prophylaxis and control of malaria'. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (F.R.C.P.) in 1964.

Colonel Monawar Khan AFRIDI died in Pakistan on 16 October 1968 at the age of sixty-seven years. He was married and had a large family.

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