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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

BRIGADIER C. M. NICOL

A short biography of Brigadier Cameron MacDonald NICOL, an officer in the Indian Medical Service from 1919 until 1948 who played an important role in the Quetta earthquake and in ensuring the provision of foodstuffs for the British Indian Army.

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A Concise Biography of Brigadier C. M. NICOL

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Brigadier Cameron MacDonald NICOL, C.I.E., M.D. (Aberdeen), D.P.H. (London)

Brigadier Cameron MacDonald NICOL, C.I.E., M.A., M.D., D.P.H. I.M.S., was a one of the most outstanding authorities on public health in British India prior to Partition.

Cameron MacDonald NICOL was born in New Deer, Aberdeenshire on 20 July 1891. New Deer is a small settlement in rural Aberdeenshire north of Aberdeen and west of Peterhead. He was second son of Andrew Leslie NICOL (1839 – 1894) and Margaret Ann NICOL (nee ANDREW) (1857 – 1938). His father died when Cameron was aged three years, and following his death, the family went to live with an aunt at 11, High Shore, Banff, Banffshire. Cameron was educated locally and after school went to Aberdeen University and graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine degree (Ch.B.) in 1915, having previously taken the M.A. degree.

NICOL had joined the Territorial Force on 31 March 1915 and received a commission with the 1st Scottish General Hospital in the rank of Lieutenant. Lieutenant NICOL served in Salonika with the 1st Scottish General Hospital with effect from 12 August 1916. On 10 September 1918, he was promoted to the rank of Acting Major while specially employed. He reverted to rank of Lieutenant on 16 March 1919, but then on 1 October, he was promoted to the rank of Captain in the Territorial Force. He was demobilised on 11 October 1919, having served four years and one-hundred and ninety-five days with the Territorial Force. He was awarded the Victory Medal and British War Medal for his services in the Great War. At the time of his discharge, NICOL was living at 4, High Street, New Deer.

In 1919, Cameron NICOL was appointed a Doctor of Medicine but obviously missed the military environment as on 4 June 1920, he was granted a Temporary Commission in the Indian Medical Service in the rank of Captain. He relinquished this commission on 16 August 1922, but shortly afterwards, on 9 February 1923, he gained a regular commission in the Indian Medical Service (I.M.S.) in the rank of Captain. His service number was M/18991 and his seniority dated from 29 May 1917 to reflect his former service in the Territorial Force.

The I.M.S. was a unique quasi-military service that operated in British India, and which had both a military and civilian element, and responsibilities for the wider Indian community. Its origins date back to the British East India Company which employed surgeons on its ships. As the company established itself in the Indian sub-continent, its need for medical facilities grew on-shore as well as off-shore. The first surgeon-general was appointed in 1614, and it drew surgeons from several different countries within its ranks. The Bengal Medical Service was established on 20 October 1763, and in the following year, similar services were set-up in Madras and Bombay. The increasing military nature of the British presence in India resulted in the provision of surgeons in Army regiments and the strength of the three medical services grew.

The Medical services of the three Presidencies were merged in 1857 to create the I.M.S. under a single Director-General. The East India Company was dissolved by the British government the following year. In 1891, I.M.S. officers were given formal military ranks corresponding with those of the British Indian Army. The Director-General was now a Major General and irrespective of whether the I.M.S. officer served in the military or civilian side of the service they used their military ranks. On 14 November 1927, Cameron NICOL was promoted to the rank of Major. On 11 January 1929, he was appointed the Deputy Assistant Director of Hygiene of the Meerut District in Eastern Command in India. He held this position until 9 December 1934 when he transferred to the civil side of the I.M.S.. By this time, NICOL had graduated as a Director of Public Health from London University and gained the initials D.P.H. after his name. He was appointed the Assistant Director of Public Health for the State of Punjab in India, and on 14 November 1935, NICOL was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and appointed the Director of Public Health for the Punjab. He left this role on 1941 and in recognition of his services to the state, he was made a Companion of the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire (C.I.E.) with effect from 6 June 1941.

When the great earthquake occurred in Quetta on 31 May 1935 in the early hours of the morning, it rocked this area of Baluchistan for three minutes with a magnitude of 7.7. Between 30,000 and 60,000 people died in the earthquake, and the city of Quetta was reduced to ruins. The casualty rate was high because it was night-time, and many people were inside their homes. Initial estimates at the time suggested that up to 20,000 people were buried in the rubble of buildings, and there were about 4,000 injured persons in Quetta alone. The town is located at a height of about 6,000 feet above sea level and in winter it is bitterly cold at night.

Quetta was home to a major British garrison, with the 1st Bn. The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey) based in the cantonment. The Royal Air Force base in the city suffered serious damage as well. At the time of the earthquake, about 03.00 hours, the battalion was returning from night operations. They were marching along a good tarred road, but all were thrown to the ground by the strength of the tremors. One officer saw a large chasm in front of him and then close again. The battalion recovered and continued its march back to its barracks. They reached the barracks at 06.30 hours and found them more or less intact. At 07.30 hours, the battalion was fallen in again and marched down to the city to commence rescue work. On their arrival in the city, the soldiers realised for the first time the scale of the destruction. The city had been razed to the ground and corpses lay everywhere in the hot sun. The 1st Queens were allocated the western end of the city and gave sub-areas to each company. The first task was to clear the dead and injured, which was carried out methodically going from house to house. The injured were taken to hospitals and the dead were collected in carts and taken to the cemeteries. The soldiers dug graves for the deceased and they were buried without ceremony due to the number and concern about disease.

The next day, 1 August, the battalion returned at daybreak and continued its work. It was very hot and by evening the soldiers were exhausted. On the third day, all rescuers had to wear face masks because of the smell and risk of infection. By now, all the survivors had been located and evacuated and the city was empty apart from military patrols.

On 3 June, the city was sealed, and a cordon of barbed wire was erected around it to keep out gangs of looters. Martial law had been declared so that looters could be shot without warning. By 12 June, all British families had been evacuated and tents were erected for the survivors and rescue workers. Several soldiers were recognised for their bravery and work during this period.

Lieutenant Colonel NICOL was sent to Quetta to oversee the public health response to the earthquake. He was given plenary powers and earned the highest reputation throughout India for his ingenuity and ruthless efficiency. Such was the response, that any epidemic was avoided, and further loss of life prevented. NICOL was also involved in the response to the Hissar famine and as a result, the Indian minister in charge of the health portfolio recommended that he be awarded the C.I.E. as shown above.

On 4 June 1943, NICOL was promoted to the rank of Acting Colonel and appointed as the Inspector of Foodstuffs in the Directorate of Supplies and Transport in the Army Headquarters in India. His remit was to create and run a directorate of food inspection. NICOL combed the Army in India for suitable officers, and from this he developed an efficient technical corps to safeguard the food supplies of the Army across India and Burma. His two Deputy Inspectors (Staff Captains) were Lieutenant (War Substantive) J. E. JONES, R.I.A.S.C. and Captain (Temporary) R. F. FISHER, Indian Army. In addition, he saved the Indian government much money in the prevention of adulteration and dilution of foodstuffs and his department rendered great though unobtrusive service to the Indian nation during the war.

NICOL was promoted to the rank of Temporary Colonel on 4 December 1943, and on 20 July 1948, NICOL retired on retired pay and was granted the honorary rank of Brigadier.¹ He had left India shortly before Partition, boarding the Canadian Pacific Line ship the Empress of Scotland at Bombay with his wife Kate. They arrived at Liverpool on 7 May 1947 and settled at Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire. They lived at 2, Bracken Lane, Oaklands, Welwyn Garden City, and NICOL worked for a time with the Commonwealth Relations Office, the Ministry of Pensions and the Ministry of Health. By the early 1960's, NICOL was suffering from poor health and chronic illness. His wife nursed him through until he died in the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Welwyn Garden City on 19 February 1965, aged seventy-three years. In his Probate, he left his estate of £22,962 to his wife.

His obituary in the British Medical Journal states that NICOL was a strong-minded, resolute, forthright, redheaded Aberdonian. He enjoyed the complete confidence and support of Indian ministers in charge of the health portfolio and his departure in 1947 was genuinely regretted.

¹ It is not known when NICOL held the rank of Brigadier, as the Army Lists show him with the rank of Colonel as Inspector of Foodstuffs.



*Left and below:
Three photographs showing
the devastation of the Quetta
earthquake.*



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