Obituary Notice.

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR W. L. GUBBINS, K.C.B., M.V.O.

BY COLONEL SIR ROBERT FIRTH, K.B.E., C.B.

With genuine regret we heard of the death of this officer which occurred somewhat suddenly on July 8, 1925, at Westgate.

William Launcelotte Gubbins was the son of the Rev. George Gubbins, Prebendary and Chancellor of Limerick, and was born on July 26, 1849. His secondary education was received at Trinity College, Dublin, where he became Erasmus Smith scholar, taking honours in history and literature, and finally graduating as M.B. in 1872. He elected to pursue his profession in the army and was gazetted surgeon on September 30, 1873. He was soon sent out to India, where he served chiefly in Bengal. On the outbreak of the Afghan war in 1878 he proceeded with the 1st Battalion 5th Fusiliers (now Northumberland Fusiliers) and was in medical charge of that unit during the prolonged operations in the Bazar Valley. Later, he was transferred to Divisional Headquarters and became Divisional Sanitary Officer and Secretary to the P.M.O. of the Field Force. In these capacities he saw much of the fighting in the Khyber Pass and associated operations against the Mohmands and Gilzais. His experiences at this time gave Gubbins an insight into the difficulties and needs of sanitary effort among troops, and doubtless were the foundations of his subsequent attitude and interest in problems which were to loom large in after years when he had risen to administrative rank.

At the end of the Afghan war Gubbins came home but soon found himself serving in Egypt with the Expeditionary Force under Wolseley in 1882. After this, he returned to England and did duty at Warley until he was sent out to India again in 1885. During this tour his services during a severe outbreak of cholera in Allahabad Fort were especially brought to
the notice of the Government of India. By this time, Gubbins had been promoted to surgeon-major, and returning home in 1890 soon found himself doing duty at Woolwich where he was Secretary and Registrar to the Royal Herbert Hospital. In 1895 he was transferred to the War Office and during his period of duty in A.M.D. 3, the whole medical equipment of the army was re-organized and plans developed for medical services in relation to Home defence. In this work Gubbins played an active part which received high praise from the Director-Generals of the period, McKinnon and Jameson. The times were then a critical era in the history of the Army Medical Service, for the rank controversy and unpopularity of the service were acute.

In 1898, Lord Lansdowne, by an act of high statesmanship, cut the Gordian knot and formed the Royal Army Medical Corps with army ranks from private to colonel. Gubbins at this time was a Lieutenant-Colonel and Assistant Director-General at the War Office and had much to do with the new scheme, into which he threw himself whole-heartedly as he did concurrently into the work of a British Red Cross Committee under Lord Wantage, for the development of voluntary medical aid, upon which he served with marked success. No sooner had this work been completed than the South African War broke out. Gubbins was sent there in 1899 as P.M.O. to the 6th Division, with local rank of Colonel. He accompanied the division to the relief of Kimberley and was responsible for the medical administration during the operations covering Paardeberg, Poplar Grove, Driefontein and the entrance into Bloemfontein. Later, he did further service in the Orange River Colony and Transvaal, being P.M.O. at Pretoria, Pietersburg and of the northern line of communications when the troops passed to the high veldt. During this period, Gubbins showed great ability as an organizer and administrator of the service which was then being severely tried by the widespread prevalence of enteric fever. This service was duly appreciated by Lord Kitchener, who was then in command, and the promotion of Gubbins to substantive rank of colonel quickly followed.

On the termination of the Boer War Gubbins came home and was appointed medical chief of the Home District. Here his abilities as an organizer and administrator were soon tested by the arrangements associated with the coronation of King Edward VII, when large concentrations of troops in London were made. All his work in this connexion was good and Gubbins was awarded the M.V.O. and promoted soon afterwards to the rank of Surgeon General. In this capacity he went to India, where he was P.M.O. of the Bombay district and afterwards of the Eastern Command.

In 1906 Gubbins was transferred to Simla as P.M.O. of all India. In that office he soon made his influence felt, tackling with characteristic energy many problems connected with the health of the soldier, and receiving the C.B. In 1908 he was relieved and transferred again to the War Office as Deputy Director-General. On the retirement of Sir A.
Keogh in 1910, Gubbins became Director-General and also Honorary Surgeon to the King and was promoted K.C.B. in 1911. Some of his best work was done during his tenureship of the Director-Generalship, as he there and then had full scope for his views and activities in the various fields in which he was interested. During his tenure of this office he raised the physical standard of recruits and soldiers by initiating more careful medical inspection and lowered the percentage of rejections by means of broader views as to the interpretation of tests for recruits. He took a keen and practical interest in sanitary effort in the army, especially in the direction of fostering sanitary knowledge among officers and men, a movement initiated by his predecessor; he encouraged inoculation against enteric fever and took a strong interest in developments of modern and improved methods of treating syphilis and venereal disease. The results of this policy were soon manifested by the reduced admission to hospital rate and the lowered number of days during which men were in hospital. The death-rate from all causes throughout the army also was definitely lowered. In developing these and other reforms and changes for the better, Sir Launcelotte Gubbins particularly made his influence felt on the Army Medical Advisory Board, the Army and Territorial Nursing Boards and the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Aid, of all of which he was chairman. In appreciation of his good work in these various directions, he received the full approbation of his colleagues in the War Office and also of all officers and men in the service which he so ably administered, while Trinity College, Dublin, awarded him its honorary M.D., and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland its honorary Fellowship. In June, 1914, Sir Launcelotte Gubbins retired, on the expiration of his period of office as D.G.

During the Great War he held various posts, being temporarily re-employed from June 23, 1915, but his chief work was in connexion with the British Red Cross Society. Towards the end of the war he was given the Reward of £100 per annum for Distinguished and Meritorious Service. He also continued to act as an ex-officio Commissioner of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, in which work he maintained a keen interest to the end. In his earlier years he married Florence Margaret, second daughter of the Rev. H. Tripp, formerly Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford, and with his wife and daughter settled down, on retirement, at Wimbledon, where he was a county magistrate and held in high respect and esteem. He identified himself with the fortunes of the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club, where he served on the Committee and will now be missed as a kind-hearted member. For many years he had been a Vice-President of the Army Medical Officers’ Widows and Orphans Fund, and was constant in attendance at the meetings of the Committee, where his shrewd common sense and sympathetic attitude were much appreciated. He is survived by his widow and daughter, having lost two sons some years ago. His funeral took place at Reigate Parish Church on July 13, 1925.
Such, in brief, was the career of Sir Launcelotte Gubbins, and, in thus recording his death, it may be said that the State has lost a good and loyal citizen and the army medical service in particular an able, loyal and sympathetic comrade. Sir Launcelotte did not contribute much to professional literature, but he was ever up to date and in touch with all the changes and advances made in its scientific developments and always keen to apply them to the benefit of the soldier and the credit of the service in which he had passed his working life. Kind-hearted and endowed with sound common sense Sir Launcelotte will be much missed, for he was a man of unusually wide culture and great experience.

AN APPRECIATION BY LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR CHARLES H. BURTCHAEL, K.C.B., C.M.G.

I desire to pay a tribute to the honoured memory of the late Lieutenant-General Sir Launcelotte Gubbins. In doing so I write of him not by repute, but by the intimacy of daily intercourse with him for more than four years, during which time I was Assistant Director-General under him at the War Office. The late Sir William Babtie, then Deputy Director-General, and myself were with Sir Launcelotte throughout the whole period he was Director-General. Other officers served with him while he held that position for various periods, and I am confident I correctly represent the sentiments of every member of his staff in those days when I say that we all sincerely regarded him as a friend, and felt towards him both affection and esteem. Everyone who had a superficial acquaintance with Sir Launcelotte will remember him as a big man in body, emphatic, and sometimes a little brusque in speech, and, perhaps, on occasions slightly impatient with slower-witted men. We who were in close touch with him and saw the inner man knew that under his strong and independent character he possessed a big sympathetic soul and real kindness of heart; that his temper was always the same and that he was affable, generous and indulgent. Sir Launcelotte's well-balanced practical mind, abundant common sense, extensive reading and knowledge of men and affairs enabled him to focus his vast experience in a wide range of military medical positions to the best advantage in the solution of any of the diverse problems he was called upon to solve. All who had to take his directions appreciated his power of clear decision and his wise counsel, which, not infrequently, was associated with evidence of a fine sense of humour—especially when he had occasion to consign to just contempt or oblivion some impracticable proposition. Of all men our Chief knew his own mind and stuck to his decisions and his views.

In questions of policy he invariably set his own standard, and he was never carried away by illusions of imagination or allowed himself to be advised or pressed from any quarter to adopt a course in which he did not believe, but, once convinced of the wisdom of a particular line of
action he pursued it with resolute courage and without fear of criticism. His tact and steadfastness of purpose were often invaluable. In difficulties he always knew the best thing to say or do, and on occasions, when pushing the merits of a case he gave delightful demonstrations of skill in official procedures, and of the ingenious use of all the honourable and innocent artifices for the disentanglement and defeat of red tape. In appraising the merits and aptitude which Sir Launcelotte displayed in his position as Director-General in the year 1910 and the following years, it is necessary to realize the revolutionary nature of the changes that took place since he was first commissioned thirty-eight years previously—in 1872, when the regimental medical system and long-service were condemned but still in force—not only in the constitution of the medical service, but also in all branches of medicine and their application to the necessities of armies. To have kept touch with progress along both lines of the evolution, and to have controlled the medical affairs of the army with the ability he displayed as Director-General indicate great qualities and an uncommonly keen intellect. He often spoke of his early years of service, which had made a deep impression on his observant mind. His career started in the days of dispersion of medical effort among fighting units, and he had experienced the disadvantages and disabilities from which the medical service, and through it the army, suffered before the formation of the Royal Army Medical Corps. He never ceased to impress upon all the value of the Corps and its possibilities, which he held were based on complete cohesion between officers and other ranks, and co-operation and understanding between those employed on the different phases of work falling to the lot of the Corps. So strong were his views on this subject that he devised and set in motion, so far as lay within his power, methods of propagating amongst officers warnings of the dangers and weakness liable to arise from dispersion of elements or individuals. He believed in concentration of effort towards a common objective and upon that principle he considered the Corps must rely for the effective fulfilment of its purpose.

No Director ever gave more time, care and forethought than Sir Launcelotte to issues he was in a position to influence for the well-being or comfort of all categories of personnel. When the interests of an individual were at stake, he was never influenced by friendship or by enmity and no decision of his was ever based on any motive other than scrupulous fairness and plain honesty.

The progress made in the training of all ranks of the Corps during the four years Sir Launcelotte was Director-General, is still fresh in the minds of many, and to him is due in no small degree the credit for the state of efficiency of the Corps when mobilized for the Great War just two months after he ceased to be Director-General. Such shortcomings as came to light during the early months of the war cannot be attributed to want of foresight on the part of Sir Launcelotte, and it must not be overlooked...
that he had initiated a proposal for the adoption in certain positions of motor ambulance transport. How that proposal failed to mature before war broke out cannot be told here.

Eleven years have passed since Sir Launcelotte ceased to be Director-General and we bade him an official good-bye, but time and the momentous events of the war and its aftermath have not modified my recollections of my Chief or the impressions I received while serving under him. He will ever hold a high place in my memory and my affections, and I am sure that all who were eye-witnesses with me of his control of the Royal Army Medical Corps will agree that he displayed high skill in steady navigation and that he piloted his ship clear of rocks and currents, improved her from stem to stern, never jettisoned an ounce of valuable cargo and handed her over manned by the best crew she had ever carried.

Off duty and relaxed from the stress of work, Sir Launcelotte was a lovable, kindly man with a fund of good stories. He was a great reader of history and biography and had a remarkable power of apt quotation. He was a delightful and finished after-dinner speaker. Many will remember him at the College Mess and especially at the banquet there on the occasion of the International Medical Congress; but I have listened to him at wider public gatherings and seen him take a high place amongst some of the most experienced speakers in the London of his day. Those of us who served with him at the War Office will never forget the inspiring sight of our revered Chief emerging into Whitehall on a summer's day en route for some gala event. He was a notable figure of magnificent proportions with a debonnaire distinction and smartness that no one else could equal—his top hat had a special curve, his morning coat a distinctive cut and his white carnation a peculiar pose—and all went to increase the dignity and stateliness of his rolling gait which made the passers-by instinctively move aside to allow someone evidently of importance to pass.

God bless his memory and may he ever rest in peace.