

# Historical Happenings

## THE FIRST CHIEF COMMISSIONER IN AUSTRALIA

Samuel Roy Burston was rarely called by his first Christian name as there were others in the extended family with the same name. He was generally known as Roy, and also known, since his school days, as 'Ginger' because of his hair colour. Roy was born on 21 March 1888, just 24 days after Queen Victoria granted a Royal Charter to St John.

Roy Burston was an Army man. He began as a bugler with the Victorian Infantry Brigade when he was just 13 years old. He graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne and gained employment as a doctor at the Adelaide Children's Hospital. He enlisted with the Australian Army and followed through all the promotions available to medical personnel, i.e., from captain to major to lieutenant-colonel to colonel to brigadier and to major-general. On retirement he became Honorary Colonel of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps. In the early 1940s he controlled as many as 32,000 uniformed personnel spread through Australia, the Middle East, Papua, New Guinea and Borneo. He is particularly remembered for his work in combating Plasmodium parasites and Anopheles mosquitoes, the ingredients that made malaria a disease capable of bringing an army to its knees.

Roy Burston joined St John Ambulance in South Australia as a District Officer in 1934-5. In 1936 he was appointed Assistant Commissioner (second in command) and in 1945 Burston became the Commissioner for South Australia.

Readers may recall that St John Ambulance in Australia achieved Commandery status in 1941 and Priory status in 1946. In January 1947 Roy Burston became the first National head of the Brigade. His title in this role was initially Priory Commissioner, but this was changed in 1954 to Chief Commissioner. He remained Chief Commissioner for ten years and then took on the role of Receiver-General, i.e., the national treasurer for St John. He remained in this role until his death in August 1960.

Major-General Sir Samuel Roy Burston, KBE, KStJ, CB, DSO, VD, FRCP, FRACP, FRCP (Edin.) was one of the outstanding men of the Australian Army Medical Corps. In addition he served St John Ambulance for 25 years and brought to our organisation an aura of 'respectability, probity and integrity'. He has the honour of being the very first Chief Commissioner of the St John Ambulance Brigade in Australia.

Reference: Ian Howie-Willis, A Medical Emergency. Major-General 'Ginger' Burston and the Army Medical Service in World War II, Big Sky Publishing, 2012.

**Question: What does the word malaria mean literally?**

The answer will be given in the next issue of Open Airways.

**Brian Fotheringham**  
Chairman



historical  
society



**Answer to the last question: Shepherd's First Aid to the Injured published in 1885 is said to be the first text in English to use the term 'First Aid'.**



The St John Ambulance  
**Historical Society**  
of South Australia