Brigadier John Alexander VC. OBE. FRS. DL.

John Alexander Sinton was the first Queen’s College graduate, and the first North Irish medic, to be awarded the Victoria Cross. He later served as Pro-Chancellor of the University and Honorary Colonel of the
University’s Officers’ Training Corps. He was President of QUB Services Club in 1947.

John Alexander Sinton was born on 02/12/1884 in Victoria, British Columbia, the third of the seven children of Walter Lyon Sinton and Isabella Mary Sinton. The Sintons were a Quaker family with extensive interests in the linen trade in the north of Ireland. In 1890 the family returned to Ireland and lived at Wheatfield House in Portadown moving later to the Belfast area.

Educated at the Nicholson Memorial School (run by the Quaker community) in Lisburn and the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (RBAI) from 1899. After RBAI, John Sinton attended Queen’s College, Belfast where he was one of the most distinguished students in the Belfast Medical School. He graduated with first class honours in 1908, gaining a Bachelor of Medicine (1st Class), Bachelor of Obstetrics (1st Class) and Bachelor of Surgery (2nd Class). In 1910 he was awarded the Diploma in Public Health (with a £10 prize) by Cambridge University and was the Riddel Demonstrator of Bacteriology at Queen’s under Professor Symmers. As a precursor to joining the Indian Medical Service, he studied at the School of Tropical Medicine in Liverpool, where he took first place in the examinations.
In July 1911 he received a commission as a Lieutenant (Medical Officer) with the Indian Medical Service and was attached to the 31st (Duke of Connaught’s Own) Lancers, serving on the North West Frontier as a Captain. When the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force commenced operations in the Persian Gulf, JA Sinton requested a transfer to an active service unit and was posted to the 37th (Prince of Wales’ Own) Dogras.

As Regimental Medical Officer, Sinton spent more time treating his men for illness than for battle wounds during the early stages of the
campaign, but he displayed the highest degree of bravery in several actions. The one for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross occurred on 21st January 1916 at the Orah Ruins in Mesopotamia, where the Turks were inflicting heavy casualties on the British troops under siege at Kut-el-Amara. Under near suicidal conditions, Captain Sinton tended the wounded men under heavy fire and without regard for his own safety. He was hit by rifle-fire five times, being wounded in both arms and in the side. However, he refused to leave the firing line and continued treating the wounded until darkness finally ended the shooting. His "conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty" earned him the Victoria Cross. Fittingly, Sinton’s VC is on display, alongside a painting of the action for which it was awarded, at the Regimental Museum of the Royal Army Medical Corps in Aldershot.

In May 1917 he became a Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services with the Indian Medical Service. Before the war ended, Sinton was mentioned in despatches four times and received the Order of St. George (4th Class), a gallantry medal awarded by Imperial Russia.

In 1917 and 1918, Sinton served with the East African Force (Tanganyika) and commanded a

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Cavalry Field Ambulance as part of the East Persian Cordon Field Force. Between August 1918 and April 1919, he was the Senior Medical Officer to the Turkistan Military Mission.

In 1919 he was awarded the MD (honoris causa) by Queen’s University, Belfast in recognition of “his early academic distinctions and his valour in the field.” The university awarded him a Doctorate in Sciences for his work on phlebotomus (a mild viral disease transmitted by the bite of the sand fly) in 1927.

In late 1919 Sinton returned to India and served in the Mahsud and Waziristan campaigns in Afghanistan, being mentioned in despatches on two occasions. In 1921 he transferred to the civilian branch of the Indian Medical Service and was taken on to the staff of the Medical Research Department at the Pasteur Institute (Kasauli, near Simna). In the same year he became an Officer of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for “...valuable services rendered in the field with the Waziristan Force.” He was also the recipient of the Indian General Service ribbon, with three clasps.

In January 1923, he was promoted to Major and, on September 19, he married Eadith Seymour
Remembrance at Brigadier Sinton’s grave

Her Majesty’s Lord Lieutenant (centre) accompanied by two Deputy Lord Lieutenants with two relatives of the Brigadier

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Steuart-Martin.. Their daughter, Eleanor Isabel Mary Sinton, was born at Kasauli on 09/12/1924. He was the first Director of the Malaria Survey of India (now the Malaria Institute of India), an institute that was, under Sinton’s direction, to become one of the chief malaria research centres in the world. He spent the next fifteen years researching the treatment of malaria before retiring from the Indian Medical Service in 1938. After retiring, Sinton became Manson Fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and a researcher with the Horton Malaria Laboratory.

At the start of World War Two, Sinton joined the Home Guard as a Private, but was soon rescued
by the War Office and spent the remainder of the war as a peripatetic advisor on malaria control. As a Brigadier, he served in India, East Africa, the Middle East and, in 1944, he oversaw the treatment of an outbreak of malaria in southern Italy.

On 21st March 1946, John Alexander Sinton was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society for his work as a malariologist and record of his qualification to become a member ends:

"It is doubtful if any other author during the last thirty years ... has contributed more largely and importantly to scientific knowledge of malaria or has worked more originally and assiduously to advance such knowledge."

John Alexander Sinton was the first (and probably only) man entitled to include the letters “VC” and “FRS” after his name.

With the war over he retired, again, and settled in Cookstown, where he undertook occasional civilian posts such as High Sheriff (1953) and Deputy Lieutenant (1954) for County Tyrone and Justice of the Peace. Sinton continued to be involved with Queen’s University where he held a Pro-Chancellor position and was He was also
President of the Cookstown Royal British Legion.

Brigadier Sinton died at his home, Slaghtfreedan Lodge, at the age of 72, on 25th March 1956 and he was buried with full military honours at Claggan Presbyterian Cemetery in Cookstown. Such was the esteem with which he was held, a tradition started whereby veterans in the Cookstown Royal British Legion gathered at his graveside on the eve of Remembrance Sunday to pay homage. A small housing block for ex-service couples, built by the Royal British Legion Housing Association, was named in his honour, as was one of the Halls of Residence at Queen's University Belfast. In October 2009, the British Army opened the Sinton Medical and Dental Centre in Lisburn as a replacement the centre destroyed by an IRA bomb in October 1996.

John Alexander Sinton wrote over 200 scientific papers (comprising twelve volumes now located in the Thomson Room in the QUB Medical Library) and received many awards and honours, including:

Arnott Memorial Medal (Irish Medical School & Graduates Association, 1917); Chalmers Medal (Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, 1929);
Bissett-Hawkins medalist (Royal College of Physicians, 1944);

Robert Campbell Memorial Prize (Ulster Medical Society, 1946);

Mary Kingsley Medal (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, 1949);

Anti-Gambia Memorial Medalist (Awarded by Egypt in 1950 in recognition of his efforts during a malaria epidemic);

Manson Medal (Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, 1956).

Brigadier Sinton’s name appears on the Fitzroy Presbyterian Church War Memorial plaque and in the PCI Roll of Honour.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fitzroy Presbyterian Church
Inst in the Great War
Rev. Dr. Isaac Thompson, DL, TD, minister emeritus of 1st Cookstown Presbyterian Church
The *remembrance ni* programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI.

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