



Colonel William Lordan Keller (1874 – 1959)

“The Grand Old Man of Army Medicine”

Many officers of the Medical Corps have achieved well-earned fame and commemoration. Their careers, which followed different patterns, almost inevitably were climaxed by executive positions. This was not entirely true of Colonel Keller. He entertained no ambition for administrative duties but accepted them on occasion to better aid the sick and wounded. In fact, from the day that he received his medical degree in 1890 until he ceased active practice fifty-five years later, at the age of 80, his chief concern was for his patients. This unreserved devotion on his part and his desire to continue full time in active surgery explain the fact that he declined appointments which would have given him general officer rank. One of these occasions was in 1931 when President Herbert Hoover wanted to appoint him Surgeon General of the Army.

Young Dr. Keller was serving as a contract surgeon in the Philippine Islands when he received his commission as a First Lieutenant in the Medical Corps of the United States Army. His first assignment was Assistant Surgeon, First Reserve Hospital in Manila. For fifteen months he performed many major operations "with results that could not be excelled, saving many lives that would otherwise be lost." This was the opinion of Major John M. Banister, his Commanding Officer, who also praised his diagnostic ability. It was during these early years that Keller devised an operation for bunions, which results in a minimum of postoperative pain and which still bears his name.

After three years of duty at several posts in this country, Captain Keller returned to the Philippines. He was famous throughout the islands as a remarkably able surgeon, as an indefatigable worker, and for his success in eliminating infection from the operating room.

Dr. Keller's tour of duty at the United States Military Academy at West Point served to enhance his reputation as a surgeon and may have resulted in his promotion to the rank of Major in 1914.

At Army and Navy General Hospital, Hot Springs, Arkansas, Major Keller was esteemed for his knowledge of general medicine as well as for his special knowledge of operative surgery, and for his enthusiastic pursuit of self-improvement, his versatility, and his aptitude for field service. By this time, Dr. Keller had conclusively established himself as a Thoracic Surgeon.

When the United States declared war against Germany in 1917, Lieutenant Colonel Keller was enroute to a French military hospital at Ris-Orangis. Here he served as chief medical officer and conducted a large surgical clinic for almost a year. He later used this hospital as a teaching center for American medical officers, laying the foundation for the outstanding surgical work accomplished in our own front-line hospitals.

It was also during World War I that Colonel Keller became an authority on fracture cases, so that the General Fracture Committee of the American College of Surgeons sought his opinions and advice. He created the Keller-Blake splint, a traction-fixation device (also known as the Army leg splint) for fractures of the femur. It is still in use in both military and civilian hospitals.

Shortly after the Armistice, Colonel Keller entered upon the most rewarding phase of his career when he was assigned to Walter Reed Hospital as Chief of the Surgical Service, a position that he held until 1931. From 1931 until the end of his military career in 1935, he continued to serve with distinction in this capacity and was also Commanding Officer of the hospital. Among the highlights of his contribution to medical science during these years was his introduction of the "uproofing operation" for the treatment and cure of emphysema, the heretofore frequently fatal chest ailment that was often a sequela of influenza or pneumonia. His excellent results with this operation brought him international renown. He also innovated an operative procedure, which reduced the recurrence of direct inguinal hernia from about 20 to 3 percent.

Colonel Keller's boldness, ingenuity, and phenomenal achievements in surgery were natural consequences of his keen intellect, magnificent skill, and total dedication to his profession. Throughout his career he received nothing but praise from men who were able to evaluate his work.

The depth of professional and personal esteem, which Colonel Keller evoked, can be measured, at least in part, by the acts of homage paid to him during his lifetime.

The greatest of these tributes was rendered in 1935 when Colonel Keller retired from active military duty. President Roosevelt, upon authority of the Congress, designated him a lifetime consultant in surgery at Walter Reed General Hospital in appreciation of

his past services and to insure the availability of his talents, mature professional judgment, and wealth of experience. Colonel Keller was the first man in Army history to be so honored.

In December 1935 Brigadier General Hugh S. Johnson, soldier-lawyer, and Administrator of the National Recovery Administration from June 1933 to October 1934, expressed his admiration for Dr. Keller by presenting a bronze bust of him to Walter Reed General Hospital. This memorial still stands in the hospital lobby.

Finally, in 1953, Major General Paul H. Streit, Commanding General, Walter Reed General Hospital in cooperation with the Office of the Surgeon General, created a living memorial to Colonel Keller's vast role in Army medicine. He established an annual lecture series to be presented in March of each year, to be known officially as the "William L. Keller Memorial Lecture."

From 1935 until 1950, Dr. Keller pursued his duties as Surgical Consultant with accustomed zeal. After 1950, however, because of age and ill health, he was able to work only intermittently; and in 1954 he was finally forced to abandon his career. He died at Walter Reed Army Medical Center on 10 July 1959, at the age of 85.