



## **Colonel Alan C Roberts**

Colleagues will be deeply saddened to learn of the death, on 1 December 2021, of Colonel Alan Roberts, a former Pro-Chancellor of the University. A man of exceptional talents, Alan combined a stellar career as a medical scientist specialising in reconstructive surgery with decades of military service and commitment to numerous charities and good causes.

Alan Clive Roberts was born in Exeter in April 1934, to Major William Roberts MBE and Kathleen Roberts. Part of his early childhood was spent in Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland, where his father was commandant during the war, and he was schooled in Newcastle.

After studying at Rutherford College of Technology (later to become part of the University of Northumbria), Alan was appointed Scientific Officer in the Plastic Surgery Unit of the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle in 1954, specialising in reconstructive surgery. He also completed two years national service, the start of what would be a lifetime of service to the armed forces.

A move to Yorkshire, the county that would become his home, came in 1956, when he was appointed as Senior Scientific Officer at Leeds Teaching Hospitals. By this time, Alan's pioneering work in reconstructive surgery was gaining wider recognition, and he was approached to become the Head of the Biomaterials Laboratory in the Department of Plastic and Maxillo-facial surgery at St Luke's Hospital in Bradford in 1960. Over the course of the next decade, this specialism in biomaterials, clinical prosthetics and implants in reconstructive surgery was honed to the benefit of countless patients.

In 1970 Alan was appointed Consultant Clinical Scientist in the Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust and he was awarded the Prince Philip Medal for research in the field of implantation materials the same year. Alan would go on to hold a succession of influential roles in Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, including Director of Research and Development, as well as senior posts at other institutes and universities, including Professor of Biomaterials in Surgery at the University of Hull.

Expanding the boundaries of knowledge in his field, Alan was awarded the degree of Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Materials Science in Surgery at the University of Manchester in 1975 for research on colour simulation of human skin by polymers, and a doctorate in Biomedical Sciences at Bradford in 1988 for work on adhesives in reconstructive surgery and wound healing.

The esteem in which Alan was held by his peers in the scientific and medical communities was evident. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, he served as its Vice-President from 2007 to 2009 and founded the Society's Technology in Medicine section. In 2010, the Society awarded him the Honorary Fellowship, its highest honour. International recognition came in the form of visiting professorships at the universities of Indiana, Texas and

Pennsylvania (USA); Bordeaux (France); Utrecht and Twente (Holland); St Paulo (Brazil); Teheran (Iran); Tsurumi University (Japan); as well as Jakarta, Malta and Moscow.

What makes Alan's achievements all the more remarkable is that this dazzling medical career was combined with a lifetime of military service. In 1956, he joined the Territorial Army in the Royal Artillery as Lieutenant, rising to Captain in 1962, and Major in 1972. As Lieutenant Colonel, he commanded the Leeds University Officer Training Corps between 1972 and 1979 and went on to serve as a Colonel and Deputy Commander to the General Officer commanding the North East Military District from 1980 to 1983. Commandant of the Yorkshire Army Cadet Force between 1984 and 1988, Alan received the Territorial Army decoration with three bars; and was aide-de-camp to Her Majesty the Queen between 1980 and 1984. He was appointed Honorary Colonel Commandant of the Royal Regiment of Artillery in 1996. He also served as Chairman of the Military, Air Force and Naval Education Committee (MAFNEC) of the University of Leeds for many years.

At Leeds, Alan was best-known for his service as Pro-Chancellor from 1986 to 2000. In this role, he chaired the University's Council, its governing body, with expertise and diligence, displaying many of his special personal qualities: warmth and a genuine interest in people from all walks of life, and a lively and witty style of humour that enlivened many a meeting or social occasion.

The latter included accompanying the University's overseas visitors to watch Leeds United matches during the football club's league success in the early 1990s. A proud ambassador for the University, Alan brought his usual grace and bonhomie to these trips to Elland Road. He was awarded the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* in 2000 and retained a close connection with the University until his death.

National and regional charitable bodies benefited from Alan's service over the years: he was trustee of the Hull and East Yorkshire Medical Research Centre; the Yorkshire Sculpture Park; Action for Rehabilitation from Neurological Injury (ARNI); the League of Mercy; The Maritime Heritage Foundation; and Carmichael Walker Trust. Between 1983 and 2017, he was County President for West Yorkshire of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA), a charity which was particularly close to his heart.

Organisations to which he also devoted his time and support included the Army Benevolent Fund, Yorkshire Regional Cancer Organisation, Age Concern, Crime Stoppers, and the Heart Beat Appeal. In 1982, he was appointed Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Yorkshire, a position to which his talents were perfectly suited.

He also served as President of the Royal British Legion for Leeds District. In 1992, he was awarded the Badge of Honour for distinguished service to the Red Cross. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Biology; the City & Guilds of London Institute; the Linnean Society; and the London Medical Society.

Leeds was not the only university to honour Alan's exceptional achievements. He was awarded the Degree of Doctor of Science by the universities of London and Bradford; the Degree of Doctor of Technology by Brunel University; and the Degree of Doctor of Science by the University of Hull.

An exceptionally distinguished career was recognised in 1982 when he was awarded an MBE, and in 2002, when he received an OBE for contributions to science and technology.

Alan is survived by Margaret, a former nursing sister and midwife, and their sons, Martin and Adrian.