

William Herbert Baxter Ellis

Pioneer in aviation medicine

Surgeon commander William Herbert Baxter Ellis (b 1921; q Durham 1944; MD), d 4 October 2014.

Herbert Ellis was the first naval doctor to be awarded the Air Force Cross (in 1954), and he tested his mind and body—and those of his brave fellow aviators—to the limits in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. He served with the Fleet Air Arm pilots from the late 1940s to 1959, and spent seven years at the RAF Institute of Aviation Medicine, the so called Farnborough lab, in Hampshire. He flew many prototype planes and explored the physiological and psychological impacts on crew of rapidly developing technologies, including new high speed jets.

Ellis broke his neck in one experiment simulating pilots' ability to withstand the huge G forces anticipated from the "steam catapult," a new aircraft carrier landing device. He contributed to changes vital to the physical and physiological survival of jet pilots: breathing apparatus, helmets, clothing, and life saving equipment.¹ He is perhaps best remembered for the audiosensor system he developed to assist aircraft landings, which became the modern day car parking aid.

Human test pilot

David Bridgeman Sutton, a longtime friend, says that Ellis's exciting naval service had to come to an end at some point—and this brought him deep sadness. "Obviously nobody could go on living the life he did and expect to go on living." Many test pilots in the 1950s lost their lives, and the deck landing accident rate on aircraft carriers was appallingly high.

Ellis's father, William, was a Royal Flying Corps pilot who had been shot down, injured, and taken prisoner by the Germans in the first world war, and who later cofounded a flying club. William formulated the young Ellis's career "in line with his own failed ambition" by introducing him to medicine. By chance, as a student Ellis joined William Beveridge on his election campaign trail in England's north east and was "spellbound" to hear him describe his vision of what would turn out to be the NHS.

Ellis, who became a house surgeon in 1944, applied to join the Royal Navy during medical training. After spells at sea in Malta and Naples, he was appointed to the naval air station at Gos-



port and met Ian Robertson, who was to have a great influence on his life. Robertson, a flying instructor, allowed Ellis to fly and land a Tiger Moth after less than five hours' dual instruction and seemed to sum up the era with this later recollection: "Looking back, I suppose we broke every rule in the book, but who cared?"¹

Ellis gained his "wings" and later joined the "lab," where a spirit of questioning innovation achieved breakthroughs by challenging protocol and cutting through red tape when required.

Ellis conducted special studies of the tolerance of the human body to acceleration and centrifugal forces. In his memoirs he recalled studying the problem of providing for urination in "immersion suits," analysing the "vomit threshold" of pilots, and looking at ways to contend with the vibration of ejector seats. He studied methods of helping pilots with the physical impact of low flying at high speed, and overcoming navigational difficulties. In 1954 he was awarded the Gilbert Blane medal for advances in naval medicine science by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons.

For the steam catapult tests, Ellis was a human test pilot fired at speed on a trolley rigged up with experiments along a disused railway track. These confirmed that pilots would not experience disorientation or visual disturbance—although Ellis's injury would later

induce shakes that made giving injections "an embarrassment," as he said.

He subjected himself to the "bends," a dangerous condition caused by nitrogen bubbles forming in the body, experienced by pilots in unpressurised cockpits. He said the low pressure of 35 000 feet caused him pain like a "premature arthritic."

Predicting "road rage"

Ellis spent two years with the US Navy and retired from military life in 1959. He would go on to spend 20 years in industrial medicine and also worked as a gerontologist.

Bridgeman Sutton, who worked with him at the giant motor distributors Appleyards of Leeds, says Ellis was keenly interested in road safety and, farsightedly, the role of "driver attitudes." Sutton said, "He sort of foresaw road rage, although he didn't use that expression. Roads were becoming more crowded, and he was saying there was going to be trouble from sheer bad manners and inconsideration."

Ellis's disregard of danger and "mania" for speed remained intact—he smashed up the very first Mini Cooper sent to Leeds from the production line by driving too fast into a raised manhole cover. He also launched his boss's iconic car—a Monte Carlo rally winning Jaguar—into a mid-air spin somewhere between Harrogate and Knaresborough. Sutton recalls, "His first thought was not, 'Am I going to come out of this alive?', or even, 'What will people say when they find out I've smashed up one of the world's favourite cars?' He was wondering which bit of the suspension would break first. That was him all over. He was lucky, and nothing broke."

Ellis was director general of the children's charity Barnardo's from 1971 to 1973, and served as a government adviser to the Department of Health and Social Security from 1972 to 1992. He was made chief commander of St John Ambulance in 1989, and was a Knight of St John.

Ellis wrote fondly and with respect for his colleagues. The medical officers, he said, while often eccentric and introverted, had two key things in common—"a bent for curiosity and a belief that the impossible can be made possible through determination."²

His first two marriages were dissolved, and his third wife predeceased him. He leaves two children.

Matthew Limb

References are in the version on thebmj.com.

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Prudence Barron



Surgeon and geriatrician Edinburgh (b 1917; q London 1942; MBE, FRCS Ed), d 10 October 2014.

When appointed as senior surgical registrar in 1947 Prudence Halton ("Prue") supplemented her salary by demonstrating anatomy at the University of Edinburgh. It was there that she met Arthur F M Barron, a fellow surgeon. They were married in 1950, and a year later the first of three children arrived. Prue eventually returned part time to her medical career, eventually working as a geriatrician at Queensberry House and Lodge in the Canongate. In June 1971 Arthur died suddenly and unexpectedly after a massive stroke. Being left to cope with three teenage children and a reduced income cannot have been easy, but Prue volunteered in a multitude of organisations, sustained by her Christian faith. She leaves three children, five grandchildren, and six great grandchildren, the last of whom was born on the day of her funeral.

Richard Barron

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Roy Dalglish



Former consultant surgeon (b 1929; q University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1952; FRCS Eng; FRCS Ed), died from acute myeloid leukaemia on 13 December 2014.

Roy Dalglish came to the UK in the 1950s for further postgraduate studies in clinical and research

work. He worked as a senior lecturer in ophthalmology at Manchester University and had several publications of original research work in this specialty to his name. He was then appointed consultant surgeon at the Manchester Royal Eye Hospital.

After retiring he maintained his South African linkage and, with his wife, spent six months of each year there, at their coastal home. This pattern continued for more than 20 years. His hobbies included pedigree cattle breeding in north Wales. He leaves Vivienne, his wife of 52 years; their four children; and grandchildren.

Kathryn Dalglish

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Khushru Mancherji Mehta

General practitioner (b 1919; q Bombay 1945; OBE, FRCS), d 18 November 2014.

After qualifying, Khushru Mancherji Mehta travelled to Edinburgh to complete his FRCS and thence several registrarships in the UK. In 1952 he accepted a posting with the Colonial Service to the post of district surgeon in the colony of North Borneo (now renamed Sabah and federated with Malaysia). He showed great resourcefulness in difficult conditions and was awarded an OBE for his work in 1965. In 1967, after a trip to the UK to recuperate from a badly broken wrist, he worked as a locum GP for a former colleague who had died, found he enjoyed it immensely, and decided on a change of career. He worked as a single practice GP in Harlesden, finally retiring in 1988. Predeceased by his wife, Roshun, in 2014, he leaves four children and three grandchildren.

Jim Mehta

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Robert Dunning Nicholson

Associate specialist in general surgery (b 1921; q 1947; FRCS Eng), d 4 November 2014.

Robert Dunning Nicholson ("Bob") spent a short time in the Home Guard, often doing the night watch during the Blitz, before joining the navy as a ship's doctor. In 1944 he



crossed to Juno Beach with the D-Day forces, making several trips to bring back wounded soldiers and take more troops, before being shipped out to India for the final year of the war. After the war, Bob lectured briefly at Newcastle University before moving south to take up medical positions through the 1950s. In 1962 he moved to West Somerset to take up singlehanded practice in Dunster, combined with surgery at Minehead Hospital. In 1972 he returned to full time general surgery at Musgrove Park Hospital in Taunton. He retired in 1986.

He leaves his wife, Joan; four children; 12 grandchildren; and five great grandchildren.

Janet Nicholson

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Alan Robertson



Former consultant orthopaedic surgeon Falkirk and Stirling Royal Infirmarys (b 1927; q Glasgow 1949; FRCS Ed), died suddenly from pneumonia secondary to subdural haematoma on 10 September 2014.

Alan Robertson moved with his young family from Glasgow to a post as a consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. In 1965 he returned to Scotland and worked as a consultant at Falkirk and Stirling Royal Infirmarys for 25 years. His specialisation included hip replacements and sports injuries, and he was an early adopter of the Association of the Study of Internal Fixation (ASIF) methods of internal fixations. After retiring he spent 25 years sailing his yacht with his wife,

Joyce, and other family members, became commodore of the Clyde Cruising Club, and was an active member of the Serpent Yacht Club. He leaves Joyce; four children; 10 grandchildren; and two siblings.

Susan Brown

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Roy Webb



Former general practitioner Ipswich, Suffolk (b 1920; q Guy's Hospital, London, 1943; FRCGP), d 14 July 2014.

Roy Webb joined *HMS Kelvin* in 1943 as a surgeon lieutenant. Later action in the "Cod Wars" saw him awarded the voluntary reserve decoration and bar. He went into general practice in Ipswich, where he stayed until he retired. He played a big part in setting standards for local community obstetric practice, and organising an early GP training scheme.

A keen sailor, Roy owned several boats, including a 34-footer that he designed and built himself. He and his first wife, Mary Kelly, from whom he was divorced in 1976, had one son and three daughters, all of whom worked in various areas of the health service. His second wife, Daphne, died in 2009, after many happy years with Roy in the village of Kersey.

Jonathan Webb

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