

Rowley Richards

Australian doctor who cared for fellow prisoners of war during the second world war

Rowley Richards (b 1916; q University of Sydney 1939), d 26 February 2015.

As a prisoner of war during the second world war, Rowley Richards kept a meticulous secret diary documenting the inhumanity he witnessed in Japanese prison camps from 1942 until 1945. Thousands died, but Richards survived and in the following years he would read his diary many, many times.

In his book *A Doctor's War*, published in 2005 and one of his two published memoirs, Richards wrote, "I am now 89 years old. And still, each time I read my pages, I cannot remember all of the events my words allude to." He adds, "Sometimes I even find myself thinking, 'Those poor buggers were really having a terrible time,' without seeing myself as one of them."

His inability to remember, Richards surmised, was most likely a form of self preservation. He could easily recall humorous incidents and memories of the prison camps that demonstrated "brotherly love, compassion, self sacrifice." But he had buried the memories of "misery, brutality, and degradation of life" in order "to move on and lead a meaningful life, free of bitterness and regret."

Indeed, Richards led a meaningful life. After the war, he met a nurse, Beth McNab, while working as a resident medical officer at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. They married in 1947, built a home in the Sydney suburb of Balgowlah, and raised two sons. Richards established a private practice as a general practitioner and obstetrician. He was medical adviser to the Australian rowing teams for the Olympic Games in 1968 and 1972. In 1972, with his wife as his assistant, he established a medical practice for corporate executives in north Sydney, from which he retired in 2000 when he was 83 years old.

"A Doctor's War"

Through all the years of his meaningful life, however, the horrors of the prison camps followed a few steps behind. Late in his life he was able to stop and turn back and face the past and let his emotions flow. "I can now shed tears and acknowledge some of the darker moments in ways I couldn't as a younger man who still had the rest of his life ahead of him," he wrote in *A Doctor's War*. "Little by little, my barriers have dropped—at least somewhat."

On 15 February 1942 the Japanese army captured Singapore. Richards, who had completed his studies only three years before, was a medi-

cal officer in the Australian army and, along with 85 000 other allied troops, became a prisoner of war. For the next three and a half years, his focus was to provide medical care for the thousands of fellow Australian prisoners experiencing the inhuman conditions in the camps. The care that Richards dispensed is thought to have saved the lives of hundreds of prisoners.

After the fall of Singapore, Richards briefly spent time in Changi prison before becoming one of 12 medical officers of "A Force," a group of 3000 prisoners shipped to Burma as slave labourers. They were initially forced to build roads and airstrips, and then began construction of the Thai-Burma Railway—later the topic of a novel and the Academy Award winning movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

Slave labourers on the Thai-Burma Railway included about 60 000 allied prisoners of war, of which 13 000 were Australian, and some 200 000 civilian Asians.¹ Prisoners were malnourished, beaten, and overworked. Most—including Richards—had illnesses, including dysentery, diarrhoea, pellagra, dermatitis, beriberi, malaria, cholera, dementia, and so on. Some 12 000 prisoners died, including more than 2700 Australians. As many as 90 000 of the civilian Asian labourers died.

Richards, with the help of his medical orderlies but with limited medical supplies, struggled round the clock to care for his fellow prisoners. Sometimes he was forced to practice dentistry with simple tools, such as pliers. Richards, who was occasionally struck by guards, demanded that men under his care practise the strictest standards of simple hygiene: Beware of flies and faeces, wash hands and dishes, and take care with food.

In September 1944 Richards learnt that he was to be sent by ship to a prison camp in Japan. Fearing that the Japanese ship would be attacked by US submarines, Richards gave his diary and notebooks of meticulous medical records to Major John Shaw for safe-keeping. As back-up, Richards also wrote a six part summary of his diary and notebooks on tissue thin paper, which he then buried in a bottle in the grave of Corporal Sydney Gorlick on an island off the coast of Singapore.

On the trip to Japan, Richards's ship was struck by torpedoes and sank. After three days at sea in lifeboats, Richards and other survivors were rescued by a Japanese tanker and transported to the Sakata camp in northern Japan. Richards and Jim Roulston, a British medical officer,³ cared for nearly 300 men. Again, conditions were horrible, the winter one of the coldest on record, and Richards contracted a smallpox infection.



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Return to Sydney

After the war, Richards returned to Sydney in October 1945. Two months later Major Shaw returned the diary and notebooks to Richards. The summary buried in the grave was returned to Richards in 1947. The papers are now in the collection of the Australian War Memorial.⁴ Richards was active for the rest of his life in military organisations, serving as president of the 2/15 Field Regiment Association, and the 8th Australian Division Association.

He was born Charles Rowland Bromley Richards on 8 June 1916 in the Sydney suburb of Summer Hill. His parents were both deaf but could speak clearly, and both hoped that he would become a doctor. His honours include becoming a member of the Order of the British Empire, the medal of the Order of Australia, the Australian centenary medal, and an honorary doctorate of medicine from the University of Sydney.

Over the years Richards remained in contact with two Japanese men who—at great risk—had provided him and other prisoners support at the camp in northern Japan. In 2011 he was able to visit the families of the men while on a trip to Japan (along with a handful of other Australian former prisoners of war) to receive an official apology from the Japanese government.^{5,6} David Richards, who accompanied his father to Japan, says of the visit with the families: "It was very clear that Rowley was held in high esteem, and that they valued greatly his forgiving spirit to Japan in general."

Richards's wife, Beth, died in 2005 and his youngest son, Ian, in 2008. In addition to his son David, he leaves eight grandchildren.

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John Breeze



Former consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology (b 1926; q Aberdeen 1951; FRCOG), died from heart failure on 26 April 2015.

John Breeze was the son of missionary parents. He studied medicine in Aberdeen with the aim of returning to India, the country of his birth. From 1952 to 1967 he worked in mission hospitals in Gujarat, in the north west of the subcontinent. After his return from India, he worked as a medical assistant in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. In 1968 he was appointed to a consultant post in obstetrics and gynaecology on the east coast of England, where he was responsible in this specialty for hospitals in both Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. At the age of 60 he retired because of ill health. He leaves his wife, Jo; two sons; two daughters; 12 grandchildren; and three great grandchildren.

Paul Breeze

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Helen Sylvia Holzel

Consultant medical microbiologist Great Ormond Street Hospital (b 1945; q Manchester 1968; FRCPATH, MD), died from complications of multiple sclerosis on 25 March 2015.

Helen Sylvia Holzel was the daughter of two paediatricians. She was consultant medical microbiologist at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children, and her sharp and incisive intellect—combined with formidable determination, discipline, and drive—enabled her to make an important contribution. Way ahead of her times in terms of antibiotic policy

and infection control, her advice was highly valued by clinicians and families at GOSH, where her legacy still has an impact today. Helen was warm, compassionate, funny, and generously kind to patients and junior colleagues. Sadly she had to give up work in 2002 because of increasing ill health. She leaves Peter, her friend of many years; a sister; a brother in law; a nephew; and a niece.

Shelley Heard

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Alan Robert Somner



Consultant physician (b 1923; q Edinburgh 1946; MD, FRCP Ed), d 21 March 2015.

Alan Robert Somner's early interest in tuberculosis developed further while he was senior registrar to the team of Edinburgh physicians who in the 1950s and 60s established the principles of drug treatment of TB. In 1960 he was appointed consultant physician at Preston Hospital, North Shields, and Wallsend Chest Clinic. He also continued to make important contributions to research in the epidemiology and treatment of TB, publishing 37 papers between 1955 and 1990. He served on the research committee of the British Thoracic Association for 22 years and was its president during 1981 and 1982. Alan retired from the NHS in 1984 but continued to serve on medical appeals tribunals for another 11 years. He leaves his wife, Joan, two children, five grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

Ian Campbell

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Richard Wellesley Spencer

Consultant chemical pathologist Royal Cornwall Hospital (b 1921; q Birmingham University 1944; FRCP, FRCPATH), d 28 October 2014.



Richard Wellesley Spencer's main interest lay in intracellular metabolic processes, and he trained in clinical chemistry in Bristol and Leeds. This was a fortuitous decision as the introduction of automation for routine assays and early computerisation led to a dramatic expansion of the specialty during

the 1950s and 60s. Spencer always favoured working in smaller centres over large conurbations, and he took a consultant post in Truro, where he set about modernising and transforming the service. He held various managerial and postgraduate teaching posts, and by the time he retired he had become so synonymous with clinical care for the people of Cornwall that no one could quite remember how the system functioned before his arrival. He leaves his wife, Jacqueline; three children, and five grandchildren.

Stephen Spencer

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Mary Douglas Buchanan



Former senior medical officer (community child health) Barrhead, Glasgow (b 1923; q Glasgow 1947; DCH Lon), d 12 March 2015.

Mary Douglas Buchanan (née Milne) trained in paediatrics at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Yorkhill, Glasgow, where she was a registrar and the boss of her future husband, Bill Buchanan, a house officer. She would follow him to southern Africa, where they married in 1955. After several years in Nyasaland (now Malawi), they settled in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she raised her family and ran an innovative programme of child nutrition for malnourished babies at Harare Hospital. After returning to Scotland in 1972, she worked in the school and community child health service. After retiring she concentrated on her expanding family of grandchildren, her church, and entertaining with her exceptional culinary talents. Predeceased by her husband by mere months (read related obituary here: <http://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h2669>), she died from old age.

Neil Buchanan, Rebecca Freshney, Sarah Orr

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William Mackie Buchanan



Former consultant pathologist Stobhill General Hospital, Glasgow (b 1923; q University of Glasgow 1952; DPH, MD, FRCPATH), died from cardiac failure and pleural abscess on 29 November 2014.

William Mackie Buchanan ("Bill") had just embarked on his first ship in Glasgow, as a navigating cadet, when war was declared in 1939. In 1963 Bill and his wife, Mary, a paediatrician, moved to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where he trained in pathology, submitting an MD thesis that demonstrated that Bantu siderosis was related to the custom of brewing beer in iron drums in that part of Africa. He was subsequently head of the Department of Pathology of the University College of Rhodesia. In 1972 he returned to the UK as a consultant pathologist at Stobhill General Hospital in Glasgow, where he stayed until he retired in 1988. He predeceased Mary by mere months and leaves four children and nine grandchildren.

Neil Buchanan, Rebecca Freshney, Sarah Orr

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