

Veritas, Scientia et Misericordia

MAJOR GENERAL SIR WILLIAM DUDLEY REFSHAUGE

Kt B, AC CBE ED MID**** MBBS FRCOG FRACS FRACP FRACMA FRACOG
FRSH (Hons) MD (Hons causa) VX220, RAAMC

3 April 1913 – 27 May 2009

Soldier, Clinician, Administrator, Athlete and Diplomat



Australian War Memorial Negative Number 074520

'As a regimental medical officer in the horrendous campaigns of Greece and Crete, Sir William served with forward units, and understood very well the difficulties faced by medical officers working in isolation in forward areas. He worked in difficult circumstances during the Greece campaign, often not knowing where and when he would expect his casualties to be evacuated'.¹

On the 27 May 09 a great Australian military physician died in his 97th year. Sir William rose from harsh beginnings at his widowed mother's dairy farm north-west of Melbourne during the Great Depression, to become Chairman of the Executive Board of the World Health Organisation in Geneva, and a Knight of the Realm. It was a remarkable history of public service in both war and peace.

Much of his history is already in the public domain^{2,3}. Some of the crucial elements have not been told. Eighteen years ago Sir William revealed some of these extraordinary details in a private communiqué to his family, particularly his role as a junior and middle-ranked medical officer with the AIF in World War II⁴.

He saw active service in at least seven theatres, both on land and at sea (Bardia, Greece (Veria Pass, Servia Pass, and Brallos Pass), Mediterranean (twice), Crete, Ceylon, Milne Bay, Wau, Salamaua, Ramu Valley and Borneo). He sustained battle injuries on two successive days under heavy air bombardment in Crete, and succumbed to tropical diseases in PNG. He found himself effectively behind enemy lines twice :on one occasion, rescuing a badly wounded colleague from an Italian Field Hospital⁵. He was Mentioned in Dispatches on four occasions, and was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his leadership of medical services in Wau and Mubo. In wartime, he made significant contributions to logistics, blood transfusion and resuscitation, aero-medical evacuation, preventive medicine and the management of ex POWs. His interaction with the Executive Branch of the Army was frequently challenging, but always professional. His “Notes for RMOs” published in 1943, are just as relevant for junior ADF health officers today. Following World War II, he had a long and distinguished career as an Obstetrician/Gynaecologist, Director General Army Health Service (DGAHS), Commonwealth Director General of Health, Secretary General of the World Medical Association and Chairman, Executive Board of the World Health Organisation (Geneva).

His interests and expertise covered the spectrum of neonatal medicine through to nuclear weapons and the effects of radiation (he attended the nuclear tests at Einiwetok and Bikini as the Australian Army representative (1957/58), infectious diseases (tuberculosis), the role of the Red Cross, post traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse. He had a life-long interest in the welfare of veterans.

Of all his combat experiences, none affected him more than those in Crete. Though reluctant to discuss it openly, the experience would dominate his thinking for the rest of his career. Sir William was leading his Regimental Aid Post (RAP) in support of his regiment (2/2nd Field) in May 1941 near the cross-roads at Mournies, just south of Canea. Already personally injured in a bombing raid from the previous day, Refshauge’s unmarked RAP was subjected to another raid by Stuka dive bombers. His senior medical sergeant (Vincent) was killed instantly, as was his mess orderly who was lying next to him in a shallow ditch. Two of his other medical orderlies (Donovan and Findlay) received the Military Medal for their work with the wounded survivors under his direction. Refshauge was badly concussed by flying debris but still tended to the dying and wounded. He was Mentioned in Dispatches for that bravery. He then accompanied his regiment in a grueling 24 hour march across the mountains to a beach on the southern coast of Crete. Vessels from the Royal Navy and

Royal Australian Navy evacuated his unit under further air attack and transported them to Alexandria. His colleague, Lt Colonel Le Souef of the 2/7th Field Ambulance along with several of his men, failed in their attempt to escape and spent the rest of the war as POW’s⁶.

Sir William’s youngest brother, (John Refshauge AM OBE) was a fighter pilot with the RAF and was shot down over Normandy in 1944. He survived and became an ENT surgeon in Melbourne.

As DGAHS, Refshauge was instrumental in founding the School of Army Health (at Healesville, Victoria). It was subsequently transferred to Point Nepean (Portsea) and thence to Bonegilla.

In 1971, he chaired a Committee of Inquiry into the Integration of the Medical Services of the Armed Forces (the Refshauge report)⁷. Ultimately most of his recommendations were incorporated into the role of the Joint Health Commander / Surgeon General ADF in July 2008.

Sir William died in Canberra, on the 27th May 2009 and was buried with full military honours. He was pre-deceased by his wife, (Lady Helen), and his four siblings. Sir William is survived by his five children and their grandchildren.

A full account of his life waits to be written.

M. J. Flynn
CDRE RAN (Ret’d)

30th September 2009

Published with the kind permission of Dr Andrew Refshauge and other members of the family, and Ms A. W. Bundock, co-author of *Truth, Knowledge and Compassion*.

References

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3. A series of interviews with Terry Colhoun was subsequently recorded in 2000 and is available through the National Library of Australia – Bib ID 1897835
4. “Truth, Knowledge, Compassion - Memoirs of W. D. Refshauge 1930 – 1960” – Copyright – Sir William Refshauge & A. W. Bundock, Canberra 1996
5. Tyquin M, Little by Little (Australian Military History Publications – 2003) p 327
6. Tyquin M, Little by Little (Australian Military History Publications – 2003) p 347
7. Report of Committee of Inquiry into Integration of the Medical Services of the Armed Forces; W.D. Refshauge, F.O. Chilton, S Sunderland, H. D. Raffan, L. R. Trudinger, 1st March 1971