



John Joseph Horan

Doctor John Horan was called to a high mountain rescue on the morning of his wedding day.



He joined alpine guides and police officers to rescue a climber and recover a body, before getting to the church on time for marriage to Merle Halliburton in 1951.

Mountain rescues were all in a day's work for the self-effacing doctor. Though no outdoors man, he was involved in many climbs in his medical career—winched from helicopters on to glaciers and snow-covered ridges, knowing at any moment the chopper might have to leave and he would need to climb down to safety.

Not all rescues were in the mountains. He was winched on to a Taiwanese fishing boat in Lyttelton Harbour, because of a typhoid outbreak on board.

He made mercy flights to the Chatham Islands for women in difficult labour. He brought a Russian seaman with a severed arm off a ship in the Southern Ocean to Christchurch, where a plastic surgeon successfully re-attached the arm.

Horan was committed to care. He had a gift for making patients feel at ease. He never charged a patient, relying on government subsidies. He said he could not focus on a person's needs if he was considering how much to charge. He never employed a practice nurse, insisting a GP should perform all medical duties. (Merle worked as his receptionist.)

In death, he gave his body to science. He was grateful to have learned on human bodies at Otago University Medical School and wanted to give something back.

He attended St Albans Primary School, Shirley Intermediate and Christchurch Boys' High. His mother encouraged him in music and he gained "letters" in violin while at school. He was a lifetime music lover and played in orchestras and with the New Zealand Army Band.

Horan graduated from medical school in 1948 and worked as a house surgeon in Ashburton, where he met Merle. He took on the sole-charge medical practice in Whataroa, South Westland, to fulfil his government bursary commitment. Before the road south of Fox Glacier was complete, he flew once a month to Haast for day clinics.

After two years in South Westland, Horan returned to medical school as a demonstrator in anatomy. He then moved to Granity, in Buller, for a year. From

1954–71 he was in general practice in Ashburton. For much of that time, he was also visiting physician to Ashburton Hospital.

He learned to fly with the Ashburton Aero Club. Merle says: “He just wanted to do it. Anything he wanted to do, he did. He was quietly determined.”

He joined the air force reserve in 1967. The air force appointed him to provide medical cover to Prince Charles and Princess Anne for their 1970 stay at Mt Peel Station in South Canterbury.

He moved to Burnham military camp as senior medical officer in 1971, then went back to Otago and gained the diploma in public health. He was appointed deputy medical officer of health in Christchurch and medical officer of health in Palmerston North, with oversight for Whanganui.

Merle says he disliked office work and longed for closer contact with people. He became a lecturer in community and preventive medicine at the Christchurch Clinical School and enjoyed working with students.

However, involvement in administration for the Department of Health and North Canterbury Hospital Board irked him. His hankering for another taste of military life drew him back to Burnham in 1977. He became senior medical officer of health for the army and assistant director of military services, with the air force rank of wing commander, while continuing as part-time lecturer and examiner for Christchurch Clinical School.

The next year he was appointed base medical officer at Wigram Air Base, in addition to his duties with the army. He was appointed also honorary physician and surgeon to then Governor-General Sir Keith Holyoake.

Horan was involved in development of air force ambulance flights for Canterbury hospitals and the promotion of life- support apparatus for use on planes. He made many trips in air force Friendship planes and Iroquois helicopters on mercy missions. He supervised the use of neonatal incubators that his team had developed for recharging by aircraft generators.

He was a foundation member of the NZ College of Community Medicine, in 1980.

Retirement from the air force in 1988 brought little rest for Horan. He continued to serve on the aged people’ care and advisory group of Presbyterian Support Services. He was adviser on war pensions in Canterbury and Westland for the Department of Social Welfare.

He and Merle regularly prepared and served meals at the Christchurch City Mission, on a Masonic Lodge roster. He wrote articles and papers for the Medical Association.

Music was his great love and he was an excellent violinist. He enjoyed touring with the NZ Army Band by invitation, and playing with the band and in solo items.

Merle says he was a lovely, humble and caring man.

John Joseph Horan, born Christchurch, 10 December 1922; died Rangiora, 22 April 2010. Survived by wife Merle.

Mike Crean wrote this obituary; it first appeared in *The Press* newspaper (Christchurch).