

Plastic and Reconstructive surgeon, MBBS, FRCS, FRACS

14 April 1931-31 July 2009

I first met **Robert (Bob) Vance Sutherland Thompson** in 1956 at the Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH) when he was a registrar in the Thoracic Surgical Unit and I was a first year resident. Since that time we have worked and played together until his final illness. Bob was a complex character and even after 50 years he remained, to me, something of an enigma.

A CV, like the campaign medals on a soldier's chest, can tell where a man has been but often very little about the man, and so it was with Bob. He had grown up in Country Victoria and secured a University Scholarship and Residency at Queens College, Melbourne University. Bob ultimately proved to be a good scholar, graduating from Melbourne University in 1954 with MBBS (Hons). During his course he was Prosector Anatomy in 1950 and won the Gold Medal in Anatomy the following year. After three years at the RMH, from 1958 to 1960 saw him in London at the St. James Hospital, Balham where in 1960 he gained his FRCS in general surgery. At that time he was working under Sir Norman Tanner, a man for whom he had the highest regard.

However, Bob's heart had always been set on plastic surgery. When he returned to Australia in 1960 he commenced a testing apprenticeship as Assistant Plastic Surgeon under the stern and demanding eyes of Sir Benjamin Rank at the RMH and the Vicar, Allan Wakefield at the Royal Children's Hospital. Over a period of 1960 to 1970 he occupied various positions at the RMH, including as the Director of Accident and Emergency focusing on repair of soft tissue and facial injuries.

It was in 1965 that I met him again in South Vietnam where I saw for the first time his surgical and teaching mastery. At that time he was a critical part of the RMH's first surgical team to South Vietnam, based in Longxuyen. If ever any one could be said to have "captured the hearts and minds of the population of Longxuyen", it was Bob. In most adverse circumstances he remodelled faces and limbs grossly disfigured by war, disease and heredity.

His return to Australia in 1966 was marked by his appointment as Senior Consultant Plastic Surgeon to the Western General Hospital, a very busy unit in the industrial heartland to the west of Melbourne. Here he had to contend with a tremendous and complex work load. During this period, which coincided with his appointment to the Guy Miller Tutorship in Operative Surgery at Melbourne University under Professor Maurice Ewing, he was working on a minor surgical classic. His book, entitled "Primary Repair of Soft Tissue Injuries", was published in 1969 by Melbourne University Press with a foreword by Professor Maurice Ewing. It was illustrated with his own photographs and draughtsman like illustrations. It still holds its place today and should be studied by all those confronted by soft tissue trauma.

The quintessential professional and perfectionist, some differences of opinion with the administration eventually caught up with him and in 1986 he resigned from WGH after a tremendously successful period. Bob was a gentle man who did not enjoy physical or face to

face confrontations but when his mind was made up on a subject or situation there was no chance of changing it. From WGH he went to NSW where he was appointed as a Consultant Plastic Surgeon to the Royal Canberra Hospital and associated hospitals at Cooma and Pambula. Bob had a house overlooking the town of Merimbula and this became his base for his operations in New South Wales. Although plastic surgery was still his heart throb he now had the chance to spend some time on many other interests which included painting, photography, fishing, sailing, golfing and deer farming.

Although he had left Melbourne, his keen interest in plastic surgery and in particular, his special focus, hand surgery and nasal reconstruction took him on numerous trips overseas to the United States, the United Kingdom (including as visiting plastic surgeon at Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge and Consultant Plastic Surgeon, Plymouth) and especially to France. Bob was a dedicated Francophile, spoke French and revelled in the atmosphere, culture and literary works of that country. In line with his altruistic traits, Bob also completed various surgical missions to developing countries in need of surgical expertise including Interplast visits to the Solomon Islands in 1983 and again in 1986. In his latter years before his illness he worked as a medico-legal consultant.

Throughout his career Bob was an active contributor to various Surgical Associations and achieved many notable publications. In 1994 Bob submitted an entry for the prestigious Kay-Kilmer Prize awarded by The British Society of Plastic Surgeons. He won with his essay entitled "What are the priorities in Plastic Surgery" (Brit. J. Plastic Surgery 1995 48 410-418). This was Bob's apotheosis.

But what of Bob the Man? He hated to be hustled. When he was operating the clock stopped. His numerous protégés all attest to his mantra "the last stitch must be as good as the first". In the consulting room his consultations could go long over time if he and his patient found a common bond such as fishing or cricket. He had great admiration for great sporting luminaries, and in fact had numerous exchanges with Sir Donald Bradman whom he greatly admired.

Sir Benjamin Rank hit the spot in his reference for Bob's appointment to the WGH. He said "this man is an artist". Sir Ben did not give praise readily. He was referring to Bob Thompson's ability, not only with the scalpel but with the pen, the brush and the camera. Apart from his skill as a draughtsman, Bob was a very talented painter and photographer. Although he greatly enjoyed deep conversations, often with complete strangers and much of his work involved facial reconstruction, he did not like to depict people in his art work.

But there was a reverse to the medal. Bob Thompson found it difficult to relate to time and space. Having shared rooms with him I can attest to the problems of finding him. This led to much angst at home and at work as he had a tendency to "go walkabout ". He would lose his keys, his bags, even his car. He could get lost. In Vietnam he once disappeared for several days causing concern that he may have been captured by the Viet Kong only to be found sketching in a local market with the locals looking after him and his every culinary need. In the Snowy Mountains at Charlotte's Pass his photographic excursions on Langlauf skis were fraught with concern that a midnight search would likely be required.

As a result of these vagaries of behaviour there arose a plethora of "Bob Thompson stories", some of which he quite enjoyed telling against himself but they tended to overshadow his surgical skill, his precise and perfectionist traits.

I will tell one story which illustrates some aspects of Bob Thompson's character. Many years ago Bob and I used to play golf in a four ball knockout competition at the Metropolitan Golf Club in Melbourne. We often did better than our skills warranted, largely due to Bob's activities on the green. He was a very deliberate putter which means that he was slow. On critical putts he would often go down on hands and knees and I have seen him lie on his stomach to study the green and the line to the hole. This would disconcert me and frustrate our opponents.

On this particular occasion the match was close, tempers were rising and our opponents requested that I make my partner speed up his play. Bob hated to be hustled and I feared that a reproach from me would collapse his game. About that time Gary Player had performed at Metropolitan in the Australian Open and we had both seen him play and Bob had later met with him. Bob had an immense regard for Gary Player, "a consummate professional" he would say. At the next opportunity I whispered in Bob's ear "We never saw Gary Player putt like that". He gave me a hard stare and I thought I had blown it. Then he gave one of his funny little laughs, we had no more problems on the green and won the match.

Bob Thompson, you were a superb surgical craftsman, absolute integrity and honesty in all that you did; you eschewed pursuit of the dollar, you treated your patients as friends and you made an enemy of no one. They do not make many people like that any more.

Bob is survived by his children Kerstin and Charles, and his grandchildren Finn, Harrison and Ondine who all reside in Melbourne.

Written by Graham Syme (friend and surgical colleague)