

**Robert Lyons Pearce AM CStJ RFD OM (Fr.)**

**20 April 1940 – 17 November 2020**



Robert Pearce died suddenly and unexpectedly, the result of a pulmonary embolus, on 17 November 2020: always interested in working with his hands, at the time of his death he was working at the local *Men's Shed* with his fellow weekend carpenters, making a table for the Museum in Mandurah, Western Australia.

Robert Lyons Pearce was born on 20 April 1940, the son of Edward 'Ted' Pearce, the Chief Stipendiary Magistrate in Queensland, and his wife Jean, née Lawson Lyons. Robert completed his High School education at Gympie in December 1957 and enrolled with the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Queensland the following year.

He graduated MBBS Qld in 1965 and served as a Resident Medical Officer at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane, 1966-7. Following his desire to pursue a surgical career he worked as a surgical registrar at the Toowoomba General Hospital in 1968 and then as a research assistant in the Lyons Renal Research Laboratory at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in 1969, subsequently winning the National Heart Foundation Essay Prize for his work on maintenance of normal blood pressure.

In 1970 he was appointed as a teaching registrar/surgical registrar at the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane, 'backfilling' the service of physicians and surgeons who had volunteered to serve in the Vietnam war.

He married Penelope Ann Wilson, a physiotherapist, and the couple ultimately had three children: in keeping with the then surgical fashion, Robert and his family travelled to the United Kingdom where he worked as a Surgical Registrar in Northampton and Edinburgh over 1971-2 and as a Registrar in Plastic and Reconstructive surgery at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford.

Returning to Australia, he worked as a Senior Registrar in Plastic Surgery at the Royal Perth Hospital 1973-4 and subsequently was appointed as Visiting Plastic Surgeon to the Repatriation General Hospital, where ultimately, as Senior surgeon, he served over the period 1975-2017. Robert developed special interests in hand surgery and more specifically in the deformities associated with Dupuytren's contracture.

After the dissolution of his first marriage, Robert subsequently married Suzy Thomas, at Cottesloe in March 1983, and three children were the product of this union. The family lived at City Beach in Perth until Robert's retirement in 2018, when they then moved south to the Mandurah region.

His life was one of service, leadership, and loyalty, specifically, one of loyal friendship to all who were privileged to know him. His lifelong friend and fellow medical school classmate, Professor John Pearn observed that Robert suffered from the syndrome of '*Volunteer Uniform Addiction*'. Robert served as a volunteer, often in uniform, in many volunteer community societies and associations, in addition to serving on the executive bodies of many professional organisations.

Robert served the St John Ambulance Association for several decades, being involved in events such as the America's Cup events in Fremantle. His services were recognised by Queen Elizabeth II with the decoration of Commander of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, a Royal Order of Chivalry founded by Queen Victoria in 1888.

He was involved in a bewildering number of activities, including the Surf Life Saving Association, the Child Accident Prevention Foundation, and the Australian Resuscitation Council: he served on the Council of the Royal Agricultural Society in Perth for 23 years, was active in Rotary International, Scouting, and the Save the Children Australia organisation, which elected him as a Life Member.

Always interested in toxicology, he became interested in the anti-cancer properties of plants: he wrote papers on tick envenomation: the scorpion of the Pilbara region; *Urodacus pearcei*, was named for his contributions and is one of his enduring memorials.

At the RACS he served on the National Road Trauma Committee, as Chair of the Senior Surgeons Section, and for many years as a member of the Executive of the Section of Surgical History: a longtime member of the Heritage and Archives Committee, in 2001 he was appointed the Herbert Moran Memorial Lecturer in Medical History, in 2005 he delivered the Rupert Downes Memorial lecture and in 2010, the Sir Edward (Weary) Dunlop Memorial lecture.

He found the time to enlist in the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps; as a Captain he was an active serviceman in the Defence Reserves: he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and was appointed as Commanding Officer of 7 Field Ambulance, based in Fremantle.

In July and August 1995, he served on operational deployments to Bougainville, working both as a surgeon and as a member of the Australian-led International Peace Monitoring Group: here he undertook many surgical procedures, ranging from Caesarean sections to correction of congenital cleft lips and palates.

Robert served as Senior Medical Officer 5 Field Force Group, based in Swan Barracks, Perth, and following promotion was appointed as the Honorary Colonel for the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps in Western Australia. As an enthusiastic historian, he served as President of the West Australian Chapter of the Naval Historical Society, and latterly, as President of the Western Australian Military History Society.

Robert was an artist and sculptor who loved art in all its forms: he was a keen collector whether it be paintings, rare books, fossils, or medals: he derived great joy from demonstrating his 'treasures'.

In the 1990's he served as the Honorary French Consul in Western Australia for nine years and was President of the *Alliance Française de Perth*. In June 1995, the French Government planned to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific, and the French Consulate, in fact Robert's professional rooms in West Perth, was firebombed in the resultant protests and the building destroyed: Robert lost his Surgical Rooms, much of his artwork and many personal treasures.

Initially under police guard, Robert re-established the Consulate and new rooms in the suburb of Hollywood: appropriately, the French Government decorated Robert as an Officer in the French Order of Merit. In 1991, he was awarded Membership of the Order of Australia (AM), for service to community health.

To conclude, the writer is indebted to Professor John Pearn, of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Queensland, for generously making available much of the material provided in this record of the extraordinary life of Robert Lyons Pearce, no ordinary man.

Mr Peter F. Burke FRACS

***Credit: RACS Surgical News***