

Hamish Coates Neale

20 August 1914 - 24 September 2009

When Hamish Neale was farewelled at St Barnabas in Stoke in September, his life had come full circle as he grew up just over the road at Whareama - his family home.

Dr Neale was born in Grove Street, Nelson, in 1914, the middle child of a family of seven. His father, Thomas Neale, owned the Puponga Coal Mine, the Karamea Shipping Company and Neale and Haddow, Grain and Seed Merchants of Nelson (1868-1986). After their father's death, Ian Neale, became managing director of the family business and Dr Neale remained an active partner.

Dr Neale attended Nelson College where he was a very able student. He qualified from Otago Medical School in 1937 and worked as a house surgeon at Wellington Hospital. There he met a nurse, Gwynneth Laver. But World War Two intervened and they were not to see each other for six long years.

In 1939, Dr Neale joined the Territorials and transferred to Burnham Army Camp. After the outbreak of war, he volunteered and was shipped out to Egypt with the 4th Field Ambulance, a unit in the 1st Echelon of New Zealand soldiers to go to war.

He served at the Second Tenth General Hospital in Cairo, and also in Greece. In 1941, when Greece was threatened by the Nazis and Mussolini's Army, Dr Neale's Division was deployed in the north of Greece. After a retreat to Attica, Dr Neale and many other soldiers were taken prisoner. They were shifted north in cattle trucks and he remained a prisoner of war in Germany and Czechoslovakia for the next four years. ((More of Dr Neale's P.O.W. story can be read at www.theprow.org.nz -Your Stories)

During these years, Dr Neale was medical officer to his fellow P.O.W.s, and also helped some prisoners escape. "He chose not to escape himself, I imagine because he felt as a doctor that his duty was to help whoever he could in the camp," says his daughter Sue Neale-Brown.

Dr Neale returned to New Zealand in August 1945, married Gwynne with whom he had three children and 60 happy years of marriage. A Major in the army, he continued active involvement in the Territorials, became a Lieutenant Colonel and was awarded an M.B.E. for outstanding service and bravery during the war.

During his working life, Dr Neale was involved in establishing New Zealand's first group medical practice in Levin in 1957. As there was no hospital in Levin, the practice dealt with emergencies and accidents and set up its own small casualty department.

Stints as a general practitioner at Queen Mary Hospital, Hanmer and Sunnyside Hospital, Christchurch followed; before Dr Neale returned to Nelson in the late 1970s to work at Ngawatu.

I met Dr Neale through a poetry group at Oakwoods Retirement Village, where he was a well-liked resident for 12 years. A few weeks before he died, we were reading the poetry of Czech/German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. After one particularly poignant poem about a panther trapped in a cage, Dr Neale said “About 50 years ago, I had to translate this poem from German for an exam...and I think I did a better job of it!” He had completed a BA in German and French in the 1960s.

Dr Neale was known and respected as an erudite man of integrity, charm, resilience and humour, who was also a consummate storyteller. He was predeceased by his wife Gwynne and son Jim, and survived by daughter Sue, son Rob, and their families.

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