

Miss Alison Cairns: 1918 - 2010

by Tessa Jupp

It was with great sadness that I attended the funeral of Alison Cairns on 21 June this year. Alison rang me soon after the Network began in 1989 and we enjoyed many lengthy phone calls over the years. I visited her in the old family home where she continued to live on her own after her mother died. Confined to a wheelchair now, Alison still wore a full length caliper to stand but that was all she could manage at 71 years of age.

It was Alison who introduced me to the autobiography "*Over My Dead Body*" by NZ polio June Opie who caught polio on her way to the UK by boat in 1947.

I was thrilled to be given a tattered paperback copy of this out-of-print book which I avidly read unable to put down, and thrilled even more so to actually meet June Opie in the flesh at the Sydney Polio Conference in 1996. Alison was thrilled to hear of this meeting too and to read her follow-up book "*Over My Dead Body - 40 Years On*".

Some years back Alison moved to the St Louis Estate and I regularly visited her there to give B12 injections which she said gave her an important "lift". In 2005 Alison, just for us, meticulously wrote some pages on her story of polio for our book on Polio in WA and the whole story will be published in the next book. Here is a summary of what she wrote.

I was age 23, when, on the 20th February 1942, I awoke with a nasty dose of the flu. Next morning I couldn't move from the waist down. My GP agreed I had "Poliomyelitis". I had to go to the Infectious Diseases Hospital at Shenton Park. I was put in a room by myself - a group of masked nurses were appointed to look after me - and no visitors. It was a nightmare. After some "pleading" my mother was allowed to see me for an hour each day, but not touch me. That visit kept me alive, gave me the will to live.

Singapore had fallen to the Japanese the week before, and the evacuees were pouring south to Australia and there was no time to screen them. It was thought that I might have picked up the infection from one of them as there was a lot of polio in Singapore at that time. An orthopaedic doctor was called in - Dr. Reg McKellar Hall, who had some knowledge of polio.

In order to keep my spine straight he ordered a steel splint to encase my body, leaving my head and arms free. The bottom section allowed for a bedpan.

Old friends of my late father got together and engineered a trolley that would hold the splint. This was "my home" for two years and in it I could be taken to the dining room to have dinner with my family each night and on to the veranda by day where I could enjoy "fresh air". As time went by I grew quite strong and after about a year we had a full sized bath put on the veranda. Once or twice a week it was filled with warm water and I "hoisted" myself into the water and did kicking and other exercises.

During this period I was blessed by having a great number of friends who visited me regularly. In those days the telephone was on the wall with a mouthpiece attached and the earpiece hooked on a cord at the side. My brother made an impervious tube to fit over the mouth piece and extend down to my mouth so that I could chat on the phone. That was a tremendous psychological lift!

I had a passion for singing and the year before I contracted polio had started singing lessons.

After about eight months "confinement" I began to have "positive thoughts" about my singing and decided to allow myself five years and then I had to start lessons again - I actually did it in 4½ years!!

After two years my strength all over had increased tremendously, particularly my arms. So it was decided to try - with help - to stand me up. My good old friends came to my rescue once more and a walking frame was made. I progressed to walking with the frame until I could walk all round the house and "sit in a chair with arms!" This bought home to me how very important such little things are!

I graduated to "armpit crutches" and my walking radius increased till I was able to go to the local shop to buy and carry some little items home. Eventually my radius increased till I and my dog could walk over to and back (a matter of several miles), the beach at North Street.

I was still sleeping in my splint at night, so that "tired muscles" would relax in proper alignment. I had reached the stage where I could negotiate a few stairs, with the help of a strong friend. So that too extended my horizons. By then too, I was able to sit at the piano and practice some vocal scales and sing exercises!! I could also now, sit in a car and each weekend my dear friend Mr Hamilton would take me for a drive. So I was gradually coming "back to the world again!"

By this time the nurse had left, and we had the house to ourselves again. A physio came twice a week for massage and exercising, and the rest of the week I exercised by myself. I was able to do more and more for myself and help mother with domestic chores. Sweeping a floor was quite an exciting achievement!!

My horizons extended to a more normal level and I resumed my singing lessons - what a thrill! There was an Annual Music Festival held, organized by the Music Teachers Association with visiting adjudicators. Several times I entered for the mezzo-soprano solo section and the champion solo section. I won both sections and received excellent reports - on one I gained 99 marks out of a possible 100. A bit later I auditioned at the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and was selected to broadcast and for the next few years gave solo broadcasts. I was one of a quartet that featured each week in "Memory Time" organised by Dave Howard. Later on I was a soloist with the WA Symphony Orchestra, which was an absolutely wonderful experience. I became a member of the University Choral Society. That too, was a wonderful experience and on a number of occasions I was a soloist with the choir and orchestra.

All this time I walked with elbow crutches. I always had to have that support - but I was treated as normal even though I needed help with stairs that had no handrail. It is amazing how, when one

has an obvious disability, how some people immediately assume you are “deaf” or “not quite normal” and their conversation had to be “simplified”. Over the years I have found children accept an “odd-bod” like me, much better than adults do.

For a period of ten years I ran the local Girl Guide Company and found it a fascinating experience. Then I took up the position of International Post Box Secretary for WA for the Girl Guides Association and found the world wide contact with other Guides most fascinating as well as allocating or linking overseas Guides with our Guides throughout WA.

For about 25 years I was also a Member of the Myola Club in Claremont which was a rewarding experience as each week a noted speaker would come and talk on either, music, literature, drama or general topics followed by question time and afternoon tea. Another of a couple of interests I took up and found great enjoyment in was pottery - that was about 25 years ago. My other delight was water colour painting and pastel drawing. I discovered I had a talent that I never knew I had and derived much pleasure from it. A number of my paintings adorn the walls of my unit at St Louis Estate in Claremont.

I stayed on for six years in the old family home - Nyleeta - the last two without a dog! Then very reluctantly I moved to St Louis, a retirement estate not too far away in a vicinity I knew well. After 75 years I had to leave the house in which I had been born. It was a great but necessary wrench.

All in all, I've had a wonderful life enhanced, strangely enough, by my experiences due to contracting polio.

Alison Cairns, May 2005