

OBITUARY
PAUL FREDERICK MOUNTFORT
9 MAY 1926 – 11 AUGUST 2022
GENERAL SURGEON

Paul Mountfort was born in Waverley, Taranaki, to Charles and Dorothy (nee Noble-Campbell), both schoolteachers. He had seven siblings; an older sister and brother followed by five younger sisters. The family lived successively in the rural Taranaki/ King Country towns Kohi (Waverley), Hawera, Otorohanga and Aramatai. His parents taught in the small schools in the area and were, at times, Paul's teachers during his primary school years. Enjoyment of music was fostered through violin lessons. Paul later attended the Piopio District School, this regional school providing both primary and secondary school education. There, he was a member of the 1st XV and dux in his final (fourth) year at school.

Deciding to be a doctor, 16-year-old Paul moved to Dunedin in 1943, attending the University of Otago where he gained entry to Medical School. For the first two years he boarded privately with a family relative in Green Island, cycling some six miles to and from the University. He subsequently obtained accommodation in Selwyn College. Graduating from Otago University in 1949, Paul worked as a house surgeon in Christchurch during the next year and this provided a base from which he spent time in the Southern Alps experiencing a taste for mountaineering. Paul moved to Auckland for his second house surgeon year, and there he met Wendy King, a dental nurse, and they subsequently married. In Auckland sailing became an important leisure attraction.

Paul spent the next three years at Tauranga Hospital as a surgical registrar. The hospital was small and managed by the Superintendent, Matron, a full-time and two part-time surgeons and a solitary house surgeon. There was no physician or other specialist – these services being provided on a visiting basis – but there was a radiographer and basic laboratory services. Deciding he would like to specialise in surgery, in 1953 Paul set off for England with Wendy, planning to obtain training in the new specialty of plastic surgery. Working at a number of hospitals including Guys, St Thomas and Edgeware General Hospital, he obtained experience and gained his FRCS 1955.

After four years in the UK Paul and Wendy returned separately to New Zealand by sea – Paul as ship's doctor with free passage and Wendy with three year old Ann, and two week old, David, to care for. They were subsequently joined by Sally and identical twins, Wendy and Jane. Sadly, Jane was hit and killed by a school bus 10 years later, and reflecting work in a smaller community Paul, on call, was unsuspectingly called to the Emergency Department to ascertain her condition.

As there was no vacancy in hospitals with a plastic surgery unit when Paul returned to New Zealand, he applied for a general surgery position back in Tauranga. The hospital had grown considerably, and its staff included an orthopaedic surgeon, a urologist, an ophthalmologist, a physician, and other specialists. Soon after his return to Tauranga two senior staff surgical vacancies arose and Paul commenced in a part-time role. He gained his FRACS in 1960. Consulting rooms were shared over a long period with Ralph Simmons, a physician, until they each retired from practice.

Softly spoken, Paul seldom raised his voice, and was always encouraging and supportive. Margaret Chavasse (Mollison) who worked with Paul as a surgical house surgeon in 1988

observed – “Like many first-year doctors, I was both inexperienced and often acted on little more than instinct, a potentially tricky combination. Mr Mountfort never made me feel an inferior, treating me with the kind of respect that many might reserve for a senior colleague. He had a wry wit and we often had a chuckle together. Who knew you could have fun with your hospital job? He was quietly spoken, but had a gentle and kind way of interacting with patients. He took on whatever surgical issue came through the emergency door, whilst retaining a calm and thorough approach. He retained his interest in the surgical issues of his patients whilst still treating them as people. His clear love was plastic surgery and I can recall him taking down dressings almost with the excitement of a magician’s cape to reveal the outcome of his surgery. He was humble and like many surgeons of his generation, capable of dealing with a wide range of surgical problems.” Paul retired from his public hospital appointment in 1991, but continued to work in private until 2001.

Established in Tauranga, Paul and Wendy bought a property with a large section extending down to the Waimapu estuary swamp-lands and it was here the family grew up. With Paul’s love of gardening and considerable time on call, he and Wendy transformed the area and it became a feature of local Garden and Arts festivals. The family spent many winter weekends and vacations on Mt Ruapehu, Paul being involved in the formation of a ski-club and spending considerable time on the mountain assisting in building a lodge, skiing and serving as a volunteer ski patroller. Reflecting their contributions over many years, both Paul and Wendy were elected to Life Membership of the club. Tennis, played with some ability, was also a source of pleasure. Paul joined Rotary and, a significant contributor over an extended period, was the recipient of a Paul Harris Award.

With his considerable experience of the mountain environment, Paul became well-informed on hypothermia and was regarded as an authority. In 1974, with the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council, he produced a small book - Exposure and Hypothermia. The tragic death of three university students from hypothermia, suffered while running in the hills above Wellington in 1980, stimulated Paul to examine this incident in detail.

Paul was a founding member of the Maungatautari bird sanctuary which was in effect an extension of the home garden. Sailing remained an interest and resulted in cruising in the South Pacific on a number of occasions. A return to the playing of the violin, obtaining a pilot’s licence, and bee-keeping all filled any spare time. As their daughter, Ann, lived in Switzerland he began to learn German and returned to mountaineering. Sadly, Wendy developed a brain tumour and died in 2004 spurring Paul to develop skills in cooking and baking. Paul married Grace Christie some years later.

Paul Mountfort died peacefully aged 96 years following a short illness. He was the dearly loved husband of the late Wendy and Grace, fondly loved father of Ann, David, Sally, Wendy and the late Jane, grandfather of Marcel, Anna, Helen, Paul, Katie, Laura, Luke, Jane and the late Andre, and great grandfather of eight.

This obituary is based upon contributions by Chris Dawe FRACS, Dr Margaret Chavasse, Eleanor Lane, David Mountfort and other family members.

Dr Allan Panting FRACS