

## Healer to the world

The first thing you notice about Dr. Norman Merkeley is his eyes. Like a field of flax in bloom, they suggest the blue peace of a summer sky and the wild dance of a wind-blown prairie field. At 82, Norman Merkeley is both of these things: a quiet humanitarian who has dedicated his life to healing the sick of many nations and a traveller whose wanderlust remains untamed.

His travels and humanitarian work have taken him to Malaysia, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Jordan, East Africa and beyond. At age 80 he was still operating on children with cleft palates in Nepal, something he had done for the past quarter century.

Merkeley's medical career began in 1940 when he graduated from the University of Manitoba and completed postgraduate surgical training at the Winnipeg General Hospital. He then joined the 8th Field Surgical Unit during WW II and spent more than 2 years with Canadian troops in Normandy, Belgium and Holland.

Merkeley, a captain, and his colleagues were often under fire because their operating theatre was always set up close to the troops, who were being pounded by German shells.

"We stitched up a lot of belly wounds and performed hundreds of major amputations," said Merkeley, who is mentioned many times in Dr. John Hillsman's book, *Eleven Men and a Scalpel*.

At one point Hillsman, the unit's commanding officer, describes Canadian landings near Antwerp, when it took "Captain Merkeley's ship five tries and three hours to finally land." Merkeley recalls that on the final approach ships on either side of him were blown out of the water by the Germans.

"To make matters worse, a German soldier on a ridge with a mortar was lobbing bombs at our ship. Every time a bomb landed close it would blast up a plume of icy sea water which ran down the back of my neck. Finally, the ship's captain radioed a Typhoon fighter plane, which blew up the mortar with rockets."

Although Merkeley was never wounded, the death and suffering he witnessed left an impression that would eventually change his life. "The happiest moment of my life was returning home to Winnipeg at the end of the war. I was met

at the CPR station by my wife Nan and my parents. I had tears of joy in my eyes."

After the war, Merkeley completed further training in Toronto and New York and became certified in both plastic and general surgery. He set up practice at the Medical Arts Building in Winnipeg, where he worked for 20 years, until 1968.

Even though his practice was successful, Merkeley was never completely satisfied. He was haunted by images of the suffering he had witnessed overseas and he was becoming increasingly disillusioned by government interference in medicine. As early as 1963, he made a trip to Malaysia to work among the less fortunate of the world as a surgical volunteer.

"Malaysia was like a breath of fresh air," recalls Merkeley. "I went into medicine to help people, but in Canada I felt hamstrung by government intervention. There were never enough beds, and patients I had scheduled for surgery [had their operations] cancelled. I finally slammed my office door in 1968 in disgust and walked away from my Canadian practice."

Merkeley was 50 years old. For the next 30 years he worked at his own expense as a volunteer surgeon in all parts of the world. He is per-

haps best known as the surgeon who performed the first skin grafts on Kim Phuc, the young Vietnamese girl whose back was badly burned in a napalm attack. Phuc was photographed in 1972 running naked from her village by Nick Ut, who won a Pulitzer Prize for the image, one of the most memorable photos to emerge from that war. At the time, Merkeley was working in the major burn ward of an international children's relief hospital in Saigon. He spent 4 winters there before being evacuated at war's end in 1975.

Merkeley and Kim Phuc, who now lives in Canada, were reunited in 1995 and again in 1997, the year he became the first recipient of the Manitoba Medical Association's Humanitarian Award for outstanding contributions in the service of humanity.

Today, Merkeley and his wife, Nan, live near Portage la Prairie, Man., with their miniature poodle, Honey. They have 2 sons, a daughter and 10 grandchildren. One of their grandchildren, Christine Sammartino, recently graduated from medical school at the University of British Columbia and is interning in Ottawa. — David Square, Winnipeg



Dr. Norman Merkeley: a wanderer