

Doctor Jim Rickett, GP

by Christine Bury



Back in 2002 in *The Emsworth Echo* Dr Robert Barnard, former member of the Emsworth Victoria Cottage Hospital team, recalled Jim Rickett's first visit to Emsworth. At an interview, on a tour of the hospital, Jim was shown a gangrenous foot and asked what treatment was required. "He'll need an amputation above the knee" said Rickett. "Very well; go ahead and do it", he was told. Something of an ordeal by fire! But good stead for what was to come.

James (Jim) Rickett was born in Ecton, Northamptonshire in August 1905 and later studied medicine at Guy's Hospital in London. Two years after qualifying in 1929, he married Dorothy Young and the couple set up home in Hampshire. Dr Rickett joined the practice of Doctors Howard Glanville and Ralph Soames, and lived in East Street, Havant. He settled in as a GP and also operated regularly at the Emsworth Cottage

Hospital doing straightforward surgery, orthopaedics and midwifery.

The facts below about Jim Rickett's colourful life during WW2 are taken mainly from his son's (John Rickett) book *Stretchers Not Available* and Bill Strutton's book *Island of Terrible Friends*.

In a letter to Dorothy dated 10 September 1940 Jim mentioned that "there is a new game here called potting the red. Thorney airfield has a red landing light, and naturally it is very attractive to the German night bombers." The RAF decided to move the light each night and the resultant bombs caused some local damage. A day or two later Jim wrote of a large bomb in Farlington which destroyed 120 houses. The blast "opened our kitchen windows, broke the co-op windows in North Street and blew open doors and brought down ceilings in Warblington and Denvilles".

On 6th October 1940 there is a long diary entry relating to a girl suffering from German measles who needed a caesarean. The Emsworth Hospital was full to overflowing, but the patient was refused entry to Portsmouth Hospital because of the infectious German measles and there was no operating theatre at the Hospital for Infectious Diseases.

"I got back to Marion Reece, matron at Emsworth, whose reaction was magnificent. She told me that despite the hospital being full she would move out of her office to make an extra bed. She decided that to operate in the theatre would contaminate it and result in spreading the infection...So her office was cleared and the dining room would be used as an operating theatre. Supporting her, the whole staff rose to the occasion." They rushed around providing nurses, instruments, lights, heaters, everything to make the operation a success, which it was, and mother and baby lived to everyone's delight.

Overseas to Vis

In the summer of 1942 came the news that the three services required 2,000 more doctors. Bomb damage was no longer a problem and Jim felt he could leave with a clear conscience so, resigned to the inevitable, he told the local medical committee that he was ready to go. In January 1944 Jim was posted from North Africa to Trani in Italy and then in February to Vis, a beautiful mountainous island some 30 miles from the Yugoslav mainland.

Bill Strutton in his book gives us a pen portrait of Jim at this time.

Major "Rickett was tall, thin, bronzed by a summer-long in North Africa. Work had trained his shoulders high into something of a perpetual shrug. His speech was a product of the operating theatre too – soft, yet abrupt, the words landing with almost feathery gentleness."

Jim joined SOE Force 133 and the Vis posting was to the German-occupied east side of

the Adriatic. His orders were to get what was necessary and go across and set up a field hospital to look after commandos injured in raids. Re-supply would be difficult. Technically Vis was behind enemy lines and in the hands of Tito's partisans. Jim set out with ten tons of kit and two members of his newly-recruited team to Vis aboard a landing craft.

On the island, Dr Rickett and his team had to improvise pretty well everything: including the operating theatre which he set up in a dilapidated farmhouse on the mountainside at Podhumlje. The first theatre light was a Tilley lamp operated by rakia, an explosively strong local alcohol that apparently tasted vile. There were very few drugs on the island. Jim had sulphur but no penicillin. Indeed Rickett observed that even Nelson's leeches would have been better equipped for war surgery than he was.

The x-ray machine arrived in bits courtesy of the partisans who had risked their lives to bring it back to the island. Put back together by the Signals engineers and an RAF electrician, Rickett was the first to use it. Others watched fascinated and informed him that they could see his heart beating.

Field surgery

Periods of quiet were interspersed with frenetic activity when major battle casualties arrived needing surgery. Often he operated continuously day and night stopping only when exhaustion set in and keeping going on Bensedrine pills.

By May 1944 the island had become a fortress and the Army, belatedly coming alive to the medical situation, proposed to send across a fully-equipped field hospital. This they did with 100 personnel and tentage for 200 hospital beds but only one surgeon. He fell ill and had to be airlifted off the island. Jim found himself back in the thick of it again; he no longer knew what day it was.

Continued on bottom of next page

Doctor Jim Rickett, GP continued

Tito arrived in Vis and the island's character began to change from a precarious outpost facing the enemy host alone into a busy and thriving base. The buccaneers were leaving and eventually Jim did too. He had nicked his finger with a scalpel while operating and mild sepsis set in. He flew back to the mainland. In August 1945 Jim returned to Havant, was demobbed and found to have contracted TB,

probably while in Vis. He recovered, went back into general practice and died in 1968.

What about Vis? Some of you may know it better as the beautiful Croatian island that starred in Mamma Mia 2. It is still a relatively unspoilt tourist spot as the island became an important Yugoslavian naval base after the war and was off limits to tourists until 1989.