

Three generations of doctors: the Harris family

Dr Richard ‘Harry’ Harris, who was recently named 2019 SA Australian of the Year, became a household name for his efforts during the Thai cave rescue earlier this year. But did you know that his father almost drowned as a small boy? Or that he comes from a line of esteemed medicos?

THROUGH water-filled culvert – little boy’s remarkable escape’ – this was the headline in the local newspaper when little Jimmy Harris, aged three, was sucked through a concrete pipe culvert carrying a full stream of irrigation water. The little boy was unconscious when recovered, but was resuscitated and suffered no long-term ill effects.

“It is remarkable that the boy should have recovered so quickly, for it is estimated that he was out of sight for some 10 minutes,” the newspaper said. “There was only a very small clearance above the water in the pipe.”

So, in that stranger-than-fiction way that life sometimes has, little Jimmy grew up to become Dr James Harris, father of Adelaide anaesthetist Richard Harris, who made world headlines for his underwater rescue work in a flooded Thai cave system.

By a sad coincidence, Jim was dying in Adelaide while Richard played his part in the rescue of the Thai boys’ soccer team and their coach, whose quick visit to a cave system at Chiang Rai turned into a potential death sentence and led to an epic international rescue mission.

Richard is a doctor’s son of a doctor’s son. His father Jim, who became a leading vascular surgeon in Adelaide, was born to Dr George and Jessie Harris.

George was a medical practitioner in Renmark, where he cared for the health of a community of 5,000, people from 1925 until 1945, when he died of a heart failure at age 47.

“Renmark was fortunate to have had a doctor of such high professional attainments for so long,” said the *Murray Pioneer* in his obituary.

“The exceptionally fine service which he had rendered to local residents during the years and the capable manner in which he had for considerable periods, and more especially in the war years, borne two men’s responsibilities, found a ready response in the hearts of the



people, and the high esteem in which he was held was apparent from the widespread expressions of regret at his passing and the striking tributes paid to him.”

Born in Sydney in 1898, George was the elder son of the late Mr and Mrs John Harris, of England, his father having come out to Australia as a naval engineer. He was educated at St. Peter’s College, Adelaide, and the Adelaide University, graduating MB BS in 1923.

George offered his services on the front line in World War 2 and was on the Army Medical Corps reserve list, having been called up for duties in the metropolitan area on several occasions.

George was a keen sportsman, and served on the committees of the Renmark Golf Club and Tintra Tennis Club, and would have been appointed president of the tennis club on the day before his death but for the annual meeting having been postponed because of the rain.

His funeral was one of the most largely attended ever seen in Renmark.

His brother John – also a doctor – served the Lock 7 community, River Murray from 1931 till 1934, then moved to the Hawker area before acquiring a practice at Kiama near Sydney.

George’s son Jim was also an outstanding sportsman, and a boarder at St Peter’s College, where he played for the first teams in football and cricket.

He studied medicine and was resident at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and the Adelaide Children’s Hospital.

Keen on surgery, he took the usual path at the time, of obtaining a ship’s surgeon position on a passenger ship and in 1955 headed to the UK for postgraduate study.

There, he quickly passed his primary examination and then joined Birmingham Accident Hospital before becoming a resident surgical officer at the Warneford Hospital in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.

That was a highly sought-after position under Geoffrey Taylor and Christopher Savage and was usually filled by an Australian. When one Australian left the role, Taylor would say "Get me another of you" – and nobody ever let him down.

Taylor and Savage were excellent surgical technicians with the latter having a large interest in vascular surgery and surgical teaching, having just come from St Thomas' Hospital London.

It was from this post that Jim passed his fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

While in England, he had met Marion Taylor and they married in 1959. Daughter Amanda was born there, while Kristina and Richard were born in Adelaide.

They returned to Adelaide in 1961, and Jim joined the Queen Elizabeth Hospital as senior lecturer in surgery under Professor Dick Jepson.

Here, his abilities were recognised and after a few years he obtained a position with Professor Jack Wiley, in San Francisco, to further his expertise in major vascular surgery.

When he returned to Adelaide in 1968, Jepson, who was retiring to enter private practice, invited Jim to join him.

It was Jepson's view that one's best academic work was done by the age of 40. Jim, 39, agreed.

Together they set up one of the leading clinics in general surgery, with a heavy leaning toward vascular surgery.

Jim was a member of the Renal Transplant Team at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

Aside from his abilities as a surgeon, he had the knack of getting on with everyone he met. He was a friend of the gatekeeper at the QEH and fished with him. He was a fellow bird lover with a mortuary attendant.

These were among his many interests outside medicine. He was on the board of the Adelaide Zoo and, through his love of birds, he became a leading member of the Adelaide Ornithologists' Club. In sport, he turned to golf, tennis, and as an owner of racehorses.

Most of all he loved fishing, from Kangaroo Island to Coffin Bay. On his last fishing trip, he was having no success until a friend cried out "Jim, Jim you've got one!"

His rod was bent over and he leapt up and reeled it in, only to find that his devoted friends had tied a packet of frozen whiting fillets to his line. Fishing-wise, he could now die happy.

Jim is survived by children Amanda, Kristina and Richard, nine grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Jim lived to learn of Richard's heroics attracting worldwide attention and fame, but sadly died while the rescue was still in progress and before the subsequent announcement of his award of the Star of Courage and Order of Australia Medal.

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Four months later, while trying to return to normal life as an Adelaide anaesthetist, Richard remains in demand to speak about the remarkable medical and other aspects of the cave rescue. In recent weeks he has given a presentation to his anaesthetic colleagues in Adelaide, and been a well-received guest speaker at the Australian Barristers Association national conference in Sydney.

This article was compiled by Heather Millar with the help of Helen Stagg, historian and author of Harnessing the River Murray: stories of the people who built Locks 1 to 9, 1915-1935 (published 2015), historybyhelen.com.au. It also draws on the Advertiser's obituary of Dr Jim Harris, published on 8 September 2018.



Courtesy Renmark Branch, National Trust

**THROUGH WATER - FILLED
CULVERT**

**Little Boy's Remarkable
Escape**

Renmark Doctor's Son

A remarkable escape from death by drowning occurred at the Tintara Tennis Courts last Thursday, when little Jimmy Harris, aged 3, youngest son of Dr. G. D. Harris of Renmark, was sucked through a concrete pipe culvert carrying a full stream of irrigation water.

Attracted to the channel by Jimmy's disappearance, a number of women players, including Mrs. Harris, made efforts to find trace of boy and fearing the worst some of them waded knee deep into the flowing water in the hope of locating the body.

Answering the women's calls, the men also joined in the search, and the possibility the boy having been drawn into the culvert where Twenty-eighth street crosses the channel drew a number there.

Eventually the mother saw the body of her son appear at the down stream opening, and rushing in she dragged him ashore. The boy was unconscious when recovered, but resuscitation methods applied by the menfolk were quickly rewarded with success, and, to the great relief of all present, Jimmy commenced to whimper and soon regained strength. He showed little ill effects by next day.

It is remarkable that the boy should have recovered so quickly, for it is estimated that he was out of sight for some ten minutes. There was only a very small clearance above the water in the pipe.