

# THE LIVING MEMORIAL

**The Newsletter of the AIF Malaya Nursing Scholarship Trust**

Patron: Lieutenant General Peter Leahy AC (ret'd)

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## Our student for 2020-21

**Tan Sheng Lian** from Singapore, our current scholarship holder, is almost through the first of her two years studying at Curtin University. She is making excellent progress, and here talks about her time in Perth so far:

*I am nearly at the end of semester two of my master's degree and am enjoying my learning very much. It has been a different form of learning for me, as most of the classes took place online due to COVID-19, which requires a lot of self-discipline and self-directed learning. But, the modules that I am taking provided me with new insights and knowledge of patient safety and quality, clinical teaching, as well as clinical management, which would be very helpful for me when I return to my role in Singapore. Besides that, I am taking the opportunity to explore Perth with my husband. We love going for coffee and enjoy nature while taking evening walks at Lake Monger and Matilda Bay. We also had the chance to visit Rottneest Island and took a selfie with the quokkas! Cheryle [Poultney]\* also took great care of us and brought us to many lovely places, like Cottesloe Beach and Lesmurdie. I am looking forward to visiting other parts of Western Australia during the upcoming summer holidays.*



**Tan Sheng Lian** with the scholarship's student liaison,\* **Cheryle Poultney**

## News from our alumni

The following is from **Sze En**, the scholarship recipient in 2017. She is currently working at the Changi General Hospital in Singapore. Here she explains the challenges of COVID-19 and looks back on her time in Australia:

*I am glad to be able to contribute my share in this critical period of Coronavirus.*

*Our ward was converted into a CAPARI, (Community Associated Pneumonia Acute Respiratory Infection) unit for a month. As the isolation unit for patients with suspicious respiratory symptoms, we took over patient care and sent them back to the general ward after being tested Coronavirus negative. It was a big challenge to all of us, especially for those who were pregnant. But I'm glad that we made it.*



**Sze En**

*It's been three years since I completed my studies in Perth. And definitely I miss those days. I am and I will always be glad and appreciative about the opportunity to further study in Curtin, Perth. It was really a good reset and relearn in my nursing career. It will always be a wonderful skills and experience to unload the old practice and relearn in a new environment. Being open and receptive to new*

changes and outcomes prepared me for the upcoming challenges! I am grateful to meet some good friend in Perth too! And we are still in contact! Wish the best to all of you. Be safe, be healthy, be happy!

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And news from **Jia Wang** who studied at Curtin in 2011 – the following is an extract from an email written in July to scholarship board member Professor Robin Watts:

*As the COVID-19 pandemic has been attacking the whole world, this year is indeed a tough one for everyone. In Singapore, the doctors and nurses, including myself, have been fighting hard to save lives. As I work at the Institute of Mental Health --- a psychiatric hospital, many may think that we are not the frontliners, but this is not true --- our patients are from the community and they too have a risk of getting the virus. In fact, it is even more challenging to take care of COVID positive patients with mental illnesses. Our hospital has done a mass swab screening for all the patients to ensure they are not infected by the virus, and that we could immediately quarantine them if tested positive.*



Dressed in full PPE and about to take nasal swabs for the coronavirus.

*Some other happy news I could share with you is that I was promoted to Senior Nurse Educator last year. I am now responsible for charting the future of mental health education, developing an educational framework, and leading some educational research, so my plate is pretty full.*



**Jia Wang** (far right) and colleagues at a departmental retreat earlier this year.

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## ***The ‘Egg Man of Changi’***

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From February 1942 to September 1945, **Captain Ian McGregor** (27 Brigade, Australian 8th Division) was one among thousands held in a vast prisoner of war (POW) camp on Singapore’s Changi peninsula. At war’s end, Ian McGregor, and a number of his fellow officers, formed a committee to work out how best to pay tribute to the people of Singapore and Malaya. During the prisoners’ darkest hour, many of the locals had provided vital aid – often at great risk and without a thought for their own safety. The AIF Malaya Nursing Scholarship is the direct result of that committee’s initial deliberations as the 8th Division awaited repatriation to Australia, 75 years ago this September just passed.

The following is an edited extract from **‘The Egg Man of Changi’** by Ian McGregor’s son, Alasdair. The article appeared in ***Australian Geographic*** magazine for Sept-Oct 2020.



**Lieutenant Ian McGregor** (as he was before the war), 11th Light Horse Regiment, Darling Downs, Qld. 1938

**After** only a month of incarceration, a meeting of AIF HQ heard that the IJA [Imperial Japanese Army] could only provide a further two months supply of food. The POWs needed to become as self-sufficient as possible, and fast. A 40-hectare vegetable garden was developed, and 'without it', McGregor later wrote, 'the camp would have practically no green vegetables at all'. ... But a meagre rice ration and a few vegetables would not stave off starvation. Critically, where was their protein to come from?

Pigs were proposed, but how would hungry men find enough extra food to divert to a piggery? Separate poultry farms run by each brigade were suggested and rejected; although some soldiers began keeping one or two chickens or ducks for their own consumption, or to profit from the sale of the produce. But consistent with his gloomy prediction of years in captivity and the accompanying spectre of starvation, McGregor hatched entirely grander and more determined plans that none could dispute.

With the permission of his superiors he became 'Officer-in-charge (OIC) Poultry', and between May 1942 and the liberation of Changi in September 1945, McGregor managed a farm that grew to be more like an industrial enterprise than any old backyard chook run. ... While the farm was mostly tolerated by the IJA, harassment and arbitrary threats to have it moved meant that McGregor's activities were never settled.

Yet in a June 1945 report for AIF HQ, he was able to summarize in precise detail – literally to the last egg – his farm's remarkable output for the preceding three years. A total of 12,112 chicken, and 27,366 duck eggs had been produced, with an average of 1,012 eggs collected each month. Based on his typical weight for an egg (chicken – 1.69 ounces and duck – 2.34 ounces), McGregor even calculated a total tonnage.

Perhaps more impressive than the number of eggs laid, was the tally of 5,281 pounds (2.4 tonnes). When the farm closed upon liberation, it was producing eggs at a rate of 3,000 a month, and close to 47,000 eggs had been distributed and consumed, or diverted for breeding during its entire operation.

Apart from the size of the farm, it was the destination of the produce that set McGregor's enterprise apart. Keenly aware of the likelihood of protracted malnourishment, he also knew that the sick, and those still recovering from wounds sustained in battle, would suffer most.

McGregor's diary is dotted with references to the sorry state of the sick and how the farm's produce was to supplement their paltry rations. 'Some will never be well again', he wrote in March 1944. 'They have an intolerable burden to bear – few comforts and little food'.

The four hospitals treating Australians received McGregor's eggs, as did the 'sick in the lines upon medical request'. And the Red Cross took eggs to 'all nationalities'. The farm's produce went nowhere else, and despite their own gnawing hunger McGregor and his offsideers never indulged.

In September 1942, and just a few months after the farm was set up, Brigadier Duncan Maxwell (commander of the 27th Brigade during the Malaya campaign) wrote to McGregor before being shipped off to Taiwan with other senior officers. He conveyed the thanks of all in his hospital ward 'who have lost legs and had serious wounds and have been here since the capitulation.' One in particular said that 'since the start, back in the black days when he was so sick, he had in all 28 eggs from your farmyard and they had saved his life!'

McGregor's efforts undoubtedly helped save many lives; but unlike his egg tally, such a number would always have defied calculation. The 'Eggologist' of Changi [as one brother officer dubbed him] was unassuming throughout, writing as late as December 1944 that:

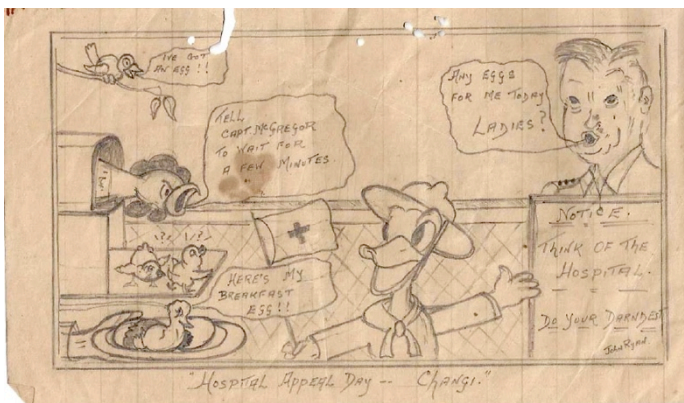
*It has been said that men's lives have been saved in some instances by these [eggs]. Perhaps an exaggeration, but if the effort has assisted in the saving of one life it has been worth it.*

Ian McGregor was mentioned in dispatches for his efforts during three-and-a-half years of captivity and recommended for an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire). The award was denied. He died in 1964.

Alasdair McGregor is a current member of the board of the AIF Malaya Nursing Scholarship.

See also this link to a recent interview that Alasdair McGregor did with Christine Layton of ABC Perth in which the scholarship, its origins, and current association with Curtin University are mentioned:

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/perth/programs/saturdaybreakfast/eg-man-of-changi/12835066>



'Hospital Appeal' - cartoon for New Year's Day, 1945

## ***Our Supporters***

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We would never be able to achieve our aims without extensive community assistance. Our helpers include:

- The Ministries of Health in Malaysia and Singapore who choose and support our scholarship holders.
- Curtin University who provide us with specially tailored educational courses for our nursing scholarship holders.
- Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its High Commissioners in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore who give us essential support.
- Victoria State Trustees, who administer our funds.
- The Australian Red Cross who provide legal support.
- Our Auditor, Mr Joe O'Brien.
- Our donors.

## ***Our Donors***

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We are indebted to all our donors, whether large or small. They keep the *Living Memorial* alive.

## ***Our contact details***

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