



Albert Ernest Coates (1895-1977) OBE 1946 Knight Batchelor 1955 MBBS 1924 MD 1926 MS 1927 FRACS 1932 FRCS 1953 Hon. Doctor of Laws 1962

There is no doubt Albert Ernest Coates was an exceptional Australian.

Australian Medical Association Victoria has much pride in honouring him not only for his contribution to Australian society but for his contribution to this Association.

In 2023 AMA Victoria dedicated the Forecourt of its Headquarters in Parkville Melbourne to his memory. The Albert Coates Forecourt features the Charles Web Gilbert statue *A Medic Attending a Wounded Infantryman*. This statue names the 79 Victorian doctors who died in WW1 and WW2.



“Bertie” changed lives throughout his life and now after his passing the Coates Trust in Ballarat Victoria contributes to the education of young medical science students through a yearly scholarship programme, school programmes and a yearly Oration. The portable Albert Coates Museum, which is called *Albert Coates Museum in a Suitcase*, aims to ensure young Australians have access to knowledge of his incredible life and sacrifice as a surgeon in wartime.

It was said he was a modest but forthright man. Describing his modesty and reading about his sense of humour certainly allow us to see his true self. Patsy Adam Smith notes in her book *Prisoners of War*, when he was reminded of what “miracles” he did in Thailand he answered, “Any mug could have done that.”! Despite his many “hardships”, he had perseverance and resolution to succeed whatever the circumstances.

Albert Ernest “Bertie” Coates was born in Ballarat East to Arthur and Clara Coates in 1895. His grandparents who came to Ballarat in the 1850’s from the south of England to work on the Goldfields.

He attended primary school at Mount Pleasant School in Ballarat but left school to work at the age of 11 but did gain a Merit Certificate. He was apprenticed to a butcher but was sacked after accidentally upsetting and smashing the butcher’s cart!

At the age of 14 he was indentured to a printing company to become a book binder. He was bored but persisted with the work and in his spare time he read. He was inquisitive and keen to learn. There is no reason given for his keen interest to become a doctor. In his biography, it is said the Coates children played “hospitals” with his sisters being nurses and patients and of course him being the doctor!

Fortunately, he had an astute teacher at Mount Pleasant School who realised Albert’s potential. Whilst he was working at various jobs to earn a living for the family, he attended a small night school run by a neighbour, his teacher and friend, Leslie Morshead. Leslie taught Albert Latin, French, History and English Literature preparing him to the Junior Public then Senior Public Examination so he could enter the Medical Course at University of Melbourne. Leslie also taught him about study techniques and self-learning. Leslie was seven years his senior but the two became close friends.

A Ballarat doctor, Dr Charles William Hardy understood Albert’s desire to become a doctor. Often Albert tagged along with Dr Hardy and learnt a variety of basic medical skills.

By the time he was nineteen he was determined he would become a doctor. He obtained the Matriculation Certificate to enter the medical course at the University of Melbourne. He obtained this in 1913 but did not have the money to go to Melbourne to commence University studies.

He was working in Wangaratta in Victoria close to the border with New South Wales for the Postal Service when the War broke out and he enlisted on 6th August 1914, a week after the declaration of War by Australia. His rank was Driver and Private. A comment on his Enlistment papers simply said, “very good man”.

He served in Gallipoli and France as a Driver because of his “little medical knowledge” he was assigned to the role of medical orderly. He wrote home, *“driving a springless Maltese cart, often with two horses in tandem, loaded with stretchers and medical panniers is not my idea of tending the sick and the wounded”*

He had well-earned linguistic skills so eventually he was transferred to the Intelligence Police. Unfortunately, there is a little-known story of him being thought to be a spy in France and was nearly executed by the Germans. He escaped out of a high window with a blanket as a rope. At the end of the War in 1918 he was discharged and returned home to follow his dream. He enrolled in Medicine in 1918, graduating in 1924.

Albert’s life was full of connections that were unpredictable!

Albert and Leslie.

After leaving Ballarat, both men choose to pursue their own careers. Leslie Morshead, his teacher and friend joined the Military, serving WW1 and in WW2. He was an Australian military hero leading the Australian Army in the Battle of Tobruk, the commander of the A I F in the Middle East and then in command of the New Guinea Force and the Second Australian Army in 1944. Albert did succeed in graduating in Medicine and devoted his life to the profession in all forms.

Both were knighted, Leslie in 1942, Albert in 1955. Dr Albert Coates and Lieutenant General Alan Morshead are the only two men from Ballarat knighted because of their military service. Their association was long, commencing when living in the same street in Ballarat, attending the same school and having the same drive to achieve and of course the same humble humanitarian values.

After the War, his career progressed well studying to become a Surgeon passing the Fellowship examination in Australia in 1932. He had a successful medical practice in Collins Street in the Melbourne as well as working in the hospital system and a University teaching career. He was an honorary surgeon at Royal Melbourne Hospital for 27 years being a Stewart Lecturer in Surgery (training young doctors and medical students) in 1926.

He had maintained his military connection in 1925 continuing in the Army Reserve. By 1941 when he enlisted in the AIF, he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He worked with the 10th Australian General Hospital being set up in Malacca in February 1941. The hospital was relocated to Singapore in November 1941 due to the Japanese advancement. It is known he left Singapore two days before Singapore’s capitulation in

February 1942 and escaped to Sumatra where he was captured by the Japanese. It is said he sacrificed his own liberty to be able to tend the many hundreds of sick and wounded. By December 1943, according to his military record, he was placed on the Missing List and then noted he was interred as a POW in a Japanese Burma Thailand Camp. He remained a POW from February 1942 to August 1945.

There were 43 Australian doctors interred by the Japanese at the prison camp railway. Albert was the chief surgeon at Camp Hospital at Nakon Pathon Siam. The surgery in the Prisoner Camp hospital was primitive and despite the lack of equipment the medical doctors were innovative under Albert's leadership and many lives were saved.

He was a formidable spokesman and negotiator with the enemy. At times he, too, was brutalised and suffered personal violence, but his skill and reputation were also respected by the Japanese. It is said he was requested by the Japanese surgeon to assist in a difficult operation and rewarded with a tin of condensed milk.

Much has been written about his WW2 experiences which one can read in many other places rather than reiterate here. His military record describes him *as selfless and having outstanding devotion to duty worthy of all traditions of the service. He was an outstanding leader and first-class professional man.*

It is the personal anecdotes that explain the man. Again, his connections profound us.

Albert and Weary.

Before WW2 he had one student of note at the Melbourne Hospital: "Weary" Edward Dunlop. A friendship continued at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and then in War both were Prisoners of War on the Burma Thailand Railway. Their friendship was long term and respectful of their surgical skills.

The last laugh between the two, according to Albert's grandson, Coates's first patient once freed from the Camp in Thailand was "Weary." He cut tendons in his hand opening a bottle of Fosters (beer) with a pocketknife. "Bertie" repaired his hand!

Albert joined British Medical Association Victoria after graduation as most graduating doctors did at the time. He was elected as President in 1941 of the BMA Victoria but resigned when he enlisted in the AIF in 1941.

He was again President of the BMA Victorian Branch in 1947. Again he demonstrated reform, respect and renewal of the medical profession with awareness of returned soldiers, and care of war widows. He was made a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Medical Association in 1964.

In 1952 he was honoured as an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons England.

After the War Bertie returned to Melbourne. He saw the backlog of surgical cases and developed a plan. He organised to have surgical sessions at the small operating theatre at Fairfield Hospital to ease the burden hence reducing the waiting lists at the main public hospitals.

The list of his “after WW2” achievements below is not complete!

Being a community speaker explaining features of the War in Southeast Asia especially to relatives and friends of servicemen and women.

And an advocate of peace and forgiveness. “Don’t scratch wounds, let them heal”

A witness at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal 1946.

A Returned Services League delegate at the signing of the Peace Treaty in the USA 1947.

Helped establishment of War Nurses Memorial Centre. Chairman of the Edith Cavell Memorial Trust

Chairman of the Board of Fairfield Hospital.

Medical Officer to the Country Fire Authority

Delegate to the International Red Cross in Monte Carlo

Member of the National Council of the Red Cross

Member of the Dental Board of Victoria

President of Melbourne Rotary

Medical Advisor to International Harvester Company

Medical Advisor to the 1956 Olympic Committee

A “Knight of Mark Twain” American International Mark Twain Society

A Laneway named after him in the QV (Queen Victoria) Shopping Centre (the site of the Old Queen Victoria Hospital).

And so on.....

The Coates Trust in Ballarat has a significant reputation not only in the medical field but in the wider committee. People from all over Australia travel to Ballarat for the Coates Oration.

The City of Ballarat with its strong Heritage theme has a Military History Walk with Albert’s statue and story in its forefront.

You can ask about Albert’s involvement with the AMA history, but it is but a small part of his involvement in Australia’s history.

Weary Dunlop gave the Eulogy at Albert's funeral.

“It is hard to imagine a man more fitted to be the image of a true Australian or a man more suitable as an Ambassador for our Nation. All in all, I think we can say “There was a man, we may not see his like again”



Last updated 1 March 2025.

Draft compiled by Jean Douglas