W. Robert Harris (1922-2005)

On 13 December 2005, Canada lost one of its most distinguished academic orthopaedic surgeons with the death of Dr. W. Robert (Bob) Harris from pancreatic cancer. After a private funeral, a splendid Memorial Service in celebration of his life was held in Massey College of the University of Toronto.

Born in Canada, he was the son of Professor Robert I. Harris, who was the first Professor of Surgery of the Division of Orthopaedic Surgery of Toronto General Hospital. Bob received his primary, secondary, and tertiary education in Toronto culminating in his graduation with Honours in Medicine in January, 1945. On that occasion he was awarded the Canadian Medical Association Prize in Public Health and became a member of the Alpha Omega Alpha Honour Society. He immediately enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) in which he served for one year as a Surgeon-Lieutenant.

In 1946 Bob married Barbara Drew-Brook and together in an ideal marriage, they raised four children, Nancy, Janet, Rob and Pam and then came ten grandchildren. He was a loving and much loved husband, father and grandfather.

In 1947 he studied histology with Professor Arthur Ham, the author of the classic textbook, to which Bob contributed an important chapter on fracture healing. There followed three years of postgraduate training on the W. E. Gallie Course on Surgical Training. It was during that residency that he was awarded the Reeves Prize.

He then spent a year as an Orthopaedic resident in the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. In 1952 he won an R. S. McLaughlin Travelling Fellowship that enabled him to continue his orthopaedic education in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Italy, and France.

As a fully trained orthopaedic surgeon he was appointed in 1953 to the Division of Orthopaedic Surgery at the University of Toronto in which he served with distinction throughout his academic career.

In due course he succeeded Professor F. P. Dewar and was promoted to the rank of full Professor. He developed a number of special interests including slipped capital femoral epiphysis, epiphyses and their transplantation, amputations, and the rehabilitation of injured workers.

Bob Harris and I collaborated on a combined research project on injuries involving the epiphyseal plate. He insisted that since his part of the project (basic research) was smaller than mine (clinical research) his name should appear second on the title, hence the Salter-Harris classification of injuries involving the epiphyseal plate. Both he and I were quite young when the classification was

published (1963). Indeed, sometimes when being introduced to a foreign orthopaedic surgeon, the statement was made to one, or both of us that "In our country we use the classification that was created by your father(s)".

Bob Harris was elected to the American Orthopaedic Association, the most prestigious orthopaedic association in North America. He was also the President of the Jones' Surgical Society as well as the Little Club (a Travel Club). He also became an Examiner for the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

In 1968 he was elected the President of the Canadian Orthopaedic Foundation and in 1975 and 1976 he served as the President of the Canadian Orthopaedic Association. It was during the Presidency that he had the honour of representing the Association at the Sixth Combined Meeting of the Orthopaedic Associations of the English Speaking World in London, England. It was during that outstanding meeting that Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, presented to each of the Presidents of their Association a handsome replica of Nicholas Andry's Orthopaedic Tree.

Bob Harris was a quiet and humble man who had a wonderful spirit of generosity and who was never heard to speak ill of anyone. Indeed he was an exemplary role model to his family, his students, and his colleagues.

The late Sir Wilfred Grenfell, Founder of the Grenfell Mission in Newfoundland and Labrador, has written that "Life in Medicine is a Field of Service" Certainly the exemplary life of Dr. W. Robert Harris has been one of stellar Service.

All of us worldwide who have known him personally and have appreciated his contributions to the field of orthopaedics will be forever grateful to him.

Robert B. Salter