

Bruce James Cheffins, Surgeon Lieutenant RAN 1965-1971

8 January 1940 – 14 March 2008

CMDR Neil Westphalen, RAN

Dr Bruce James Cheffins died at the Fremantle Hospital on 14 March 2008, as the result of a vehicle accident. He left behind his wife Andrae, sons Peter and Richard, daughters Bridget and Susie, and four grandchildren. His RAN service was noteworthy for his compassion and leadership aboard HMAS *Perth* (DDG 38, Captain P.H. Doyle RAN) during her first Vietnam deployment from October 1967 to March 1968.

Bruce Cheffins was born on 8 January 1940 in the family home at Subiaco WA, to Harold and Lavinia, the second of two children. Following his schooling at Perth Modern School, Bruce studied medicine at the then-new medical school at the University of Western Australia, in the second student intake. During this time he met Andrae and they married at CASubiaco on 1 May 1965.

At that time Bruce had recently entered the RAN as an undergraduate, on 13 January 1965. He undertook his internship at Fremantle Hospital and was promoted to Surgeon Lieutenant on a short service commission on 1 April 1966. He commenced full-time service on 25 May 1967, when he joined HMAS *Perth*.¹



LIEUT Bruce Cheffins, probably aboard HMAS PERTH, 1967

At that time HMAS *Perth* was working up for her first Vietnam deployment (the second by an RAN guided missile destroyer), on which she sailed from Sydney on 2 September 1967 to relieve HMAS *Hobart*.



HMAS Perth sailing from Sydney Harbour on her first Vietnam deployment (AWM NAVY14006)

During gunnery exercises off Subic Bay she was asked for medical assistance from the oiler USS *Neches* (AO 47). Surgeon Lieutenant Cheffins confirmed the patient had appendicitis and took him back to HMAS *Perth* for a rapid return to Subic Bay.²



HMAS Perth (right) alongside HMAS Hobart in Subic Bay, Sep 67 (AWM NAVY14110)

HMAS *Perth* arrived in the Area of Operations on 26 September and had her first fire mission the same day, in support of US Army elements in the northern Binh Dinh province of South Vietnam. Three days later she was reassigned to duties with the cruiser USS *St Paul* (CA 73) (relieved by CA 148 *Newport News* on 17 October) and the US destroyers *Collett* (DD730), *Edwards* (DD 619), *Morton* (DD 948), *Goldsborough* (DDG 20) and *Berkley* (DDG 15). These ships had recently received fire from coastal batteries in the Cape Lay area (about five nautical miles north of the Demilitarised Zone, or DMZ), and as a result were conducting counter-battery and suppressive fire missions. After joining them HMAS *Perth* expended up to 400 rounds a day over the next three weeks.³

On the morning of 18 October USS *Newport News* and HMAS *Perth* were off Chau Khe, about 150 nautical miles north of the DMZ. They had just identified a group of suspected Water Borne Logistic Craft (WBLCs) as fishing junks when they came under fire from 12 or more coastal defence batteries, at a range of 16,500 yards. The two ships immediately altered course and had begun counterbattery fire when HMAS *Perth* was hit by a 85mm or 100mm semi-armour-piercing round, which glanced off the rear of the after five-inch gun mount (Mount 52), penetrated 01 deck forward of the turret and exploded in the registered publication vault.⁴



Shell hit, HMAS *Perth*, 18 Oct 67. Entry hole in 01 deck forward of Mount 52 after ricochet. (AWM NAVY14773)



Unidentified (and very young) stoker, and below-deck damage from shell hit, HMAS *Perth*, 18 Oct 67. The shell exploded in the registered publications vault on the right (note the blown-out door frame). Also note the width of the passageway. (AWM NAVY14761)

Although the ensuing fire was quickly extinguished and it was decided the ship could remain on station, Surgeon Lieutenant Cheffins, Leading Seaman Sick Berth Attendant John Wilden and the first aid parties had four (later seven) casualties, who had been moving along the main passageway when she was hit. The injuries included shock, burns, concussion and shrapnel wounds. Two were later evacuated by helicopter to the US carrier *Oriskany* (CVA 34), thence to the USN hospital at Subic Bay in the Philippines.⁵



Rear Admiral Combs USN (right, in doorway) examines the damage, probably at Subic. Left to right: possibly Commander A.F. Lade RAN (HMAS *Perth*); Captain P.H. Doyle RAN (Commanding Officer HMAS *Perth*), and Chief Petty Officer Coxswain S.J. Parke (who was one of the wounded crew members). (AWM NAVY15107)

The difficulties in managing these cases aboard HMAS Perth should not to be underestimated. DDG's were originally designed by the US Navy as aircraft carrier escorts, which permitted the centralisation of all health services on the carrier – a mode of operation which often did not apply to the RAN. As a result the DDG sickbay was a very small compartment on the starboard side midships, sandwiched between the cafeteria forward, the Chief Petty Officer's mess aft, the weather deck outboard, main passageway inboard, and the number 2 fire (boiler) room immediately below. It was not practicable to use the sickbay to treat more than one patient at a time, and those who required bed rest had to be sent to their own bunk. Stowage space was minimal and noise from the fire room below made patient examination somewhat hit-and-miss.⁶

As a result, the cafeteria was used as the battle dressing station. In this case, access from the damaged area to the sickbay entailed using a passageway that did not allow ready movement two abreast (let alone stretchers), and were in any case full of damage control personnel.



Sickbay HMAS Perth, 1996. The photo was taken through the entry door, looking aft. To the left is the patient examination couch, with the lower end folded to permit access. Forward of the couch (out of sight) was a filing cabinet for medical documents and a small desk. Aft of the couch is another file cabinet for medical documents. Across the aft bulkhead is the sink and storage cabinet. Behind the door on the right was a drug fridge and wall-mounted laptop computer. Although the equipment had been updated over the preceding 20 years, the lack of space is evident. (Author)



Passageway HMAS Perth, 1996. This photo was taken from the same place as the previous one, looking aft. Beside the width of the passageway, of note is the Oxy-viva and Paraguard stretcher, located outside the sickbay for lack of space. (Author)



Toxic gas casualty exercise, cafeteria HMAS Perth, 1996. The cafeteria was located forward of the sickbay. Of note is the number of people required to manage two casualties in the space available. (Author)

Shortly thereafter HMAS Perth picked up five survivors from a sinking junk during a fire mission of the Red River; two more were picked up by USS Newport News but another was taken by a shark. Surgeon Lieutenant Cheffins' strong moral sense ensured they were treated compassionately, notwithstanding HMAS Perth's own recent casualties.⁷

Recent correspondence received by Bruce's son Peter from Commander Geoffrey Furlong RAN (Rtd) recounts the incident:

I was the Gunnery Officer of HMAS *Perth* on the Vietnam deployment, and I felt that you might like to hear of one incident onboard the ship in which Bruce demonstrated with his medical skills his concern for people, even though they were on the "other side" in that war.

The ship's radar detected a trawler which was steaming south, close to the coast, and we proceeded north at high speed to intercept this craft. At the same time, we called in a US Navy A10^{*} aircraft to identify and attack it if she proved to be an enemy vessel. As we closed from a range of about 10 miles on a bright clear day, we saw that the A10 had hit the vessel and it was sinking. As we neared the trawler, it sank and left the surviving members of the crew floundering in the water.

Unfortunately, due to the explosions and the blood in the water, many sharks had been attracted to the area and were attacking the survivors. We attempted to shoot some of the sharks who were endangering the men in the water but many of the crew were taken. I suppose we managed to rescue just over half of the twenty or so who had been swimming towards us.

The reason that I mention it at all is to emphasise the compassionate care of Bruce and his medical team as they provided first aid to the shocked and wounded and bleeding survivors as they were brought on board and then taken below for follow up and surgical treatment.

Bruce's obvious compassion was infectious, and the sailors took their lead from him and treated the survivors with dignity and kindness. He made a big impression on all of us that day.⁸

Having fired 13,351 rounds and coming under fire on three more occasions, HMAS *Perth* returned to Sydney on 10 April 1968. Surgeon Lieutenant Cheffins was posted ashore to HMAS *Cerberus* from 20 May 1968 and was granted a two year extension to his short service commission from 13 January 1969. Following a posting to the destroyer escort HMAS *Derwent* from September to November 1969, he returned briefly to *Cerberus* before joining the Junior Recruit Training School at HMAS *Leeuwin* in Fremantle as the medical officer from 2 March 1970.



Sickbay staff HMAS Leeuwin, 1970 (original at Fleet Base West Health Centre, HMAS Stirling)

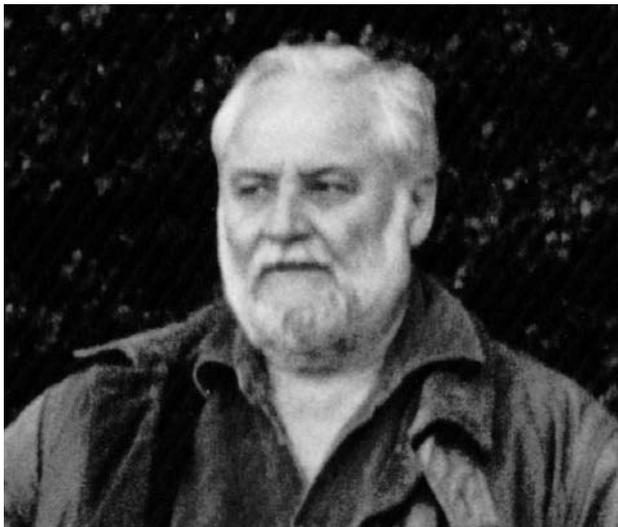
Rear row: Sick Berth Attendant P.T. Millen, Leading Mechanician L. Chaplin-Ardagh, Sick Berth Attendant M.L. Bell, Sick Berth Attendant T.R.A. Elvard

Middle row: Leading Mechanician J.G. Flood, Leading Sick Berth Attendant S.F. Reilly, Leading Cook A.E. Petty

Front row: Sick Berth Petty Officer J.L. Chapman, Senior Sister C.T. Scarfe RANNS, Surgeon Lieutenant B.J. Cheffins RAN, Sick Berth Chief Petty Officer (X-ray) R.J. Chilby

After he left the RAN on 5 May 1971, Dr Cheffins joined the WA Mental Health Service, as a residential medical officer for hostel patients at Graylands and Heathcote Hospitals, until his retirement in 1996. It was during this time that his compassion towards those in need of assistance, and his ability to engage with people from all walks of life, were called on in stressful conditions not dissimilar to those he had already encountered off Vietnam (Graham C. pers comm., 05 Sep 2008).

* It is not certain what aircraft type CMDR Furlong refers to, but it is likely he meant the A-1 Skyraider, a carrier-borne piston attack aircraft. The 'Spad' first entered USN service in 1946 and was still pivotal to Vietnam combat operations in the mid-to-late 1960's. The A-10 Thunderbolt II is a US Air Force attack aircraft that did not enter service until 1977.



Dr Bruce Cheffins, France, 2002 (Cheffins family)

Bruce Cheffins was held in high regard by those with whom he worked, both in the Navy and the WA Mental Health Service. His life priorities were his family, medicine, travel and cooking.⁹

Bruce James Cheffins was buried on 22 March 2008 at the Karrakatta Cemetery, alongside his parents.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Cheffins family for their assistance with this obituary.

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4. Perryman, J, Mitchell, B. *Australia's Navy in Vietnam: Royal Australian Navy Operations 1965-72*. Topmill, Press, 2007, p11.
5. Perryman, J, Mitchell, B. *Australia's Navy in Vietnam: Royal Australian Navy Operations 1965-72*. Topmill, Press, 2007, p11.
6. O'Keefe, B. *Medicine at War: Medical Aspects of Southeast Asian Conflicts 1950-1972*. Allen and Unwin, 1994, pp 261-6. The author also served aboard *Perth* in April-July 1996.
7. Burrett KE. BJ Cheffins funeral oration, Karrakatta Cemetery, 22 Mar 08.
8. Furlong, G. Email to P. Cheffins dated 20 Mar 08.
9. Burrett KE. BJ Cheffins funeral oration, Karrakatta Cemetery, 22 Mar 08.