

## Obituary



**John Marquis Converse, M.D.  
1909-1981**

Dr. John Marquis Converse, known throughout the world as a master of both reconstructive and aesthetic surgery, died at the age of 72 on January 31, 1981, at his country home in Southampton, New York. Until the day of his death, despite a persistent cardiac disorder, he continued with his usual vigor and unabated curiosity to involve himself in what seemed to be almost every facet of activity in the development and the technology of our specialty to which he had devoted most of his adult life.

Dr. Converse was born in San Francisco on September 29, 1909. He was a ninth-generation American who could trace his family roots in the United States back to the year 1634. Both of his parents were native second-generation Californians.

His father, George Marquis Converse, a Public Health Service physician, was placed in charge of preventive medicine in the Public Health Service of the American expeditionary forces in France in World War I. Following that war, his father remained in Paris and eventually became the head of the American Hospital in Neuilly. The French influence in Dr. Converse's family was well known to many of his close friends and intimates who were familiar with how excellently he spoke French and how much he loved France and its culture. Although Dr. Converse's early grammar school education took place in San Francisco and for a brief period in Norfolk, Virginia, the remainder of his education took place in Paris, where, at the age of 15, he graduated from the École Gerson in 1924,

obtained the AB degree at the Lycée Janson de Sailly in 1928, and his M.D. degree at the University of Paris in 1935. While studying for his medical degree, at the age of 23, he married Sheila Delaney, at the Église de Chaillot in Paris on November 10, 1932. He served his internship at the American Hospital in Paris during the year 1935.

It was the famous surgeon, Dr. Thierry de Martel, who had the greatest influence on the young Converse's choice to go into the field of plastic surgery. De Martel was Chief of Surgery at the American Hospital at the time. De Martel wanted Converse to study at Johns Hopkins Hospital, but Converse had relatives in Boston. Dr. Sumner Jackson of Philadelphia, who had been in the American army in World War I with Dr. Varaztad H. Kazanjian [6] wrote letters to the great Armenian to introduce young Converse to him.

Dr. Converse was chosen by Dr. Kazanjian to serve as assistant in surgery at the Massachusetts General Hospital from the end of 1935 through 1936, and at the same time he was a resident in otolaryngologic surgery at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary from 1935 to 1938.

Following his residency services in Boston, he returned to Paris and then ventured forth on a visit to the most prominent plastic surgeons in pre-World War II Europe. After watching Dr. Frantisek Burian, who had one of the best residency and training services in Europe at his clinics in Prague, Dr. Converse then traveled to England in January and February of 1939, where he spent several months with Sir Harold Gillies. He then returned to New York where Dr. Dickinson Richards, the subsequent Nobel Prize winner in medicine, introduced him to Dr. John Mulholland at New York University's Department of Surgery. At the time World War II broke out in September 1939, Dr. Converse, therefore, was an assistant surgeon at St. Luke's Hospital and at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. It was at the latter hospital, Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital, that his future was to become so intimately involved, thanks largely to the interest and friendship of a remarkable woman, Mrs. Aida de Acosta Breckenridge.

As soon as the war broke out he volunteered immediately to return to Europe and fight with the French army. However, on the urging of close friends, Dr. Converse joined a Red Cross unit that was going to France to help at the American Hospital. He left on a Pan American Clipper plane flying to Europe on that very day in 1940 when Paris fell into German hands. Stranded in Lisbon, he and his wife headed on a train north through Portugal and Spain into the Bordeaux region of France where a temporary French government had been set up. The onslaught of the German army, however, forced Dr.

Converse and others to return to Portugal where they were evacuated back to the United States on the S. S. Manhattan.

It was soon thereafter that Dr. Converse was asked to become the plastic surgeon in a unit being sent to England under the direction of Dr. Philip Wilson, a renowned orthopedic surgeon in New York City. Following his arrival in London, Dr. Converse once again met Sir Harold Gillies during a bombing raid. Sir Harold had a very high regard for Dr. Kazanjian, and as a result was apparently friendly to Dr. Converse at that time. Dr. Wilson installed the American unit at Basingstoke in Rooksdown House and on several occasions Dr. Converse remembers ". . . going down to work with McIndoe in a nearby town." During this first year of work with the American unit, the British War Relief had built the Churchill Hospital at Oxford, and Dr. Converse worked at its Nuffield Infirmary, treating the numerous civilian and military air-raid burn victims. After Pearl Harbor, the Churchill Hospital was taken over by the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center unit, and Dr. Converse returned to the United States in October 1942.

It was during this period that Free France took political power in Algeria, and French troops were with the Allied Forces fighting against the Germans and Italians retreating from Libya through Tunisia. In this campaign, many French soldiers were wounded. Thanks to the intervention of Robert Murphy, President Roosevelt's Special Envoy, the State Department arranged for Dr. Converse to be attached to the French Military Mission in Washington, DC, where he was asked to go to North Africa to take care of the war wounded and especially the facial injuries. Just prior to this North African trip, for several months in late 1942 and early 1943, Drs. Converse and Kazanjian started to work on the book which was to become the first publication of several texts written by these two surgeons. It was finally published in 1949, after the war, with the title, *The Surgical Treatment of Facial Injuries*, with a second revised edition in 1959, and a third, two-volume edition in 1974 [7]. While in Algiers in April of 1943 and thereafter for the next 10 months, he operated on approximately 375 patients with maxillofacial injuries at an Algerian hospital, the Hôpital Barbier Hugo, where he had set up a reconstructive surgical service. Some of these surgical cases were discussed later in the book by Drs. Kazanjian and Converse. During that time he met and came to the personal attention of General Charles de Gaulle because of his surgical activities and his long-standing desire to help the beleaguered French among whom he had lived and had been raised for at least 2 decades.

He returned from North Africa to the United

States in February 1944. Volunteering for the American army, he was sent to Carlisle Barracks, where Dr. Wallace Steffensen was Chief of Plastic Surgery. In October of 1944, in the midst of an operation at the Carlisle Barracks, Captain Converse was ordered to the Pentagon in Washington on a priority I request from General de Gaulle. One day later, he was flown to Prestwick and then to London, where arrangements were made to transport him to Paris.

After Dr. Converse had spent approximately six weeks in that bitter cold winter weather of Paris treating "everyone and anybody who slipped and sprained their ankles," he soon learned from General Beedle Smith, who was General Eisenhower's No. 2 man, that General de Gaulle personally had requested that Converse be brought over to help with the French war wounded and to organize a plastic surgery service at one of the French hospitals. With the military efficiency typical of wartime, the Hôpital Léopold Bellan, a private hospital, was requisitioned, and on February 10, 1945 a plastic surgery service was set up there.

It was at this time that France first discovered the usefulness of the Padgett dermatome, and Converse brought it along with his small team to treat the numerous French burned and mutilated, and in more than 225 operations he utilized the dermatome extensively in the repair of very severe burns of the face and the extremities.

Working with him at the time were Drs. Maurice Aubry, who eventually became Professor of Otolaryngology, and Paul Tessier, who had just finished his medical studies. Their work consisted largely of treating injured and burned hands and extremities and not the maxillofacial injuries that chiefly interested Dr. Converse. In July of 1945, Drs. Converse and Gaston Duchet performed the successful skin homografting (the grafts removed with a dermatome) of a burned soldier using an identical twin as the donor, thus revealing Dr. Converse's early interest in the field of homotransplantation.

It was at the end of the war in 1945 that he and others were able to obtain a requisitioning of the Hôpital Foch, which would become a great center for reconstructive plastic surgery. However, Dr. Converse decided to leave France and return "home to the good old USA."

He made the decision to return to the United States to try to set up a plastic surgery unit at Bellevue Hospital where he was appointed as an Assistant Professor of Surgery. Dr. John Mulholland had by then become the Chief of the Department of Surgery at New York University and a long-lasting friendship developed between the two men. Inspired by Philip Wilson's pioneering activities in setting up a bone bank in New York, Dr.

Converse visited Mrs. Aida de Acosta Breckenridge who had initiated, together with the world famous Dr. Townley Paton, the formation of the Eye Bank for Sight Restoration at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. It was at luncheon conversations between Mrs. Breckenridge and Dr. Converse in 1947 that the idea of creating an institute for the facially disfigured resulted, based largely on Dr. Converse's interest in treating the facially disfigured burned pilots in the battle of Britain as well as the "Gueules Cassées" (broken faces, broken mugs) in France. In England and France, the severely wounded and even the facially disfigured were generally accepted by the population, but Converse remembered many American people "recoiling in horror at the sight of these facially disfigured and many of these unfortunate men could only go out at nighttime." As a result, Mrs. Breckenridge and Dr. Converse started the Society for the Facially Disfigured four years later, in 1951.

Dr. Converse, because of his World War II experiences, shared the sympathy and concern of others who were confronted, especially in France and England, with soldiers "whose faces contained gaping holes, who had no lower jaws; these were the veterans whose faces could not be reconstructed." In view of the vast number of casualties, the rehabilitation task did not end with the war, but continued for a number of years until as many as possible of the mutilated veterans were rehabilitated. It is not surprising, therefore, that Converse would be concerned in the years following World War II not only with surgical reconstruction but the social and psychologic reconstruction and rehabilitation of the facially disfigured as well.

Following a fortunate meeting with Frances Cooke Macgregor in 1945 when he had returned from the war in Europe, Dr. Converse was able to give her the support she needed to conduct her now famous research studies of the psychosocial aspects of plastic surgery, and the cooperation she needed for her studies of the past 35 years [8-10].

In 1946, he once again found his old colleague and good friend, Dr. Kazanjian in Boston, to continue working on their first book together. In Bellevue Hospital in New York City he started to build a surgical group, little by little, step by step, to eventually form his long cherished coherent "team."

In 1948, Dr. Ross Campbell, Dr. Converse's first associate, came to work with him at the New York University unit. Campbell is known for his meticulous bone graft operations, especially in the facial region, and for his expertise in treating decubitus ulcers. In 1949, Dr. Blair O. Rogers, a first-year surgical resident on the general surgical service at

New York University's Division of Bellevue Hospital, started to work both clinically and experimentally in the field of skin homotransplantation with Dr. Converse. As a medical student in October of 1944, Dr. Rogers had been encouraged by Dr. Jerome P. Webster to begin an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis of the literature dealing with skin homografting [2, 3, 13–16]. Drs. Converse and Rogers soon discovered after they first met at Bellevue Hospital that they had a mutual interest in the field of transplanation and this was the beginning of a partnership that resulted over the next 12 to 15 years in both of them having served as the Co-Chairmen of the first and subsequent four International Biannual Conferences on Tissue Homotransplantation that were held at The New York Academy of Sciences. In the opinions of both, these were the "golden years" in the growth of tissue and organ laboratory and clinical transplantation research.

In the summer of 1949, while Dr. Converse was operating in Paris, he met the daughter of the President of France, Jacaueine Auriol. Severely injured with facial burns and fractures in an aviation accident, this famous young aviatrix was invited by Dr. Converse to come to the United States, where over a period of the subsequent 3 years he reconstructed her face. Thanks to her friendship with Lawrence D. Bell, the head of Bell Aviation, in 1951 she was able to interest this enterprising American industrialist in the formation of the Society of the Rehabilitation of the Facially Disfigured. "Larry" Bell became its first President when the Society was founded in October of 1951, and in 1952, Dr. Converse became the Chairman of the Department of Plastic Surgery at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital, and Director of the Society for the Rehabilitation of the Facially Disfigured at this same Hospital, both positions which he held until his retirement in 1975.

The happiest event in the year 1950 was the birth of his son, John Marquis Converse, Jr., on October 28th. Jean Louis Robin wrote that Dr. Converse at that time "had to make numerous contacts in New York Society" to support the work of this new Clinic, and "he certainly excelled in this domain with an almost affable British elegance; often smiling, he was able to present to those who observed him several different personality facets, and although he was sometimes burdened by a certain dandyism in his youth, he was able to create an effect that synthesized the spirit of old Europe with a typical American efficiency" [12].

In December of 1955, the Society's first major fund raising campaign of \$100,000 culminated in the dedication of a new physical entity, the Clinic for the Facially Disfigured at the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. At an anniversary party of the Clinic for the Facially Disfigured in 1956, Dr. Con-



Fig. 2. Dr. Converse discussing a patient at the University's plastic surgery clinic with a colleague. (From the General Report of the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery, 1970.)

verse was able to interest the President of the Avalon Foundation to give him and New York University Medical Center a conditional grant of \$1,000,000 to start the building of an Institute for Reconstructive Plastic Surgery, to be sponsored by the Society for the Facially Disfigured at the Medical Center. From the year 1957 until the time he died, Dr. Converse was the Lawrence D. Bell Professor of Plastic Surgery, said to be the first full professorship of plastic surgery at any university in the United States, and Director of the Institute that opened its doors in 1963 in the new University Hospital of the New York University Medical Center.

Under his direction, the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery at New York University (1963 to 1981) rapidly achieved one of the most famous reputations throughout the world as a center devoted entirely to plastic and reconstructive surgery. With four separate hospitals involved in its training programs, the teaching group of 18 attending surgeons surrounding Dr. Converse, together with the help of 15 or more consultants and collaborators in allied fields, helped to establish a residency program which now trains 8 residents during a 2-year residency. During the past 27 years the Institute has been responsible for completing the training of 58 residents who branched out to all portions of North and South America, Europe, and Asia. Hundreds of visitors and Fellows came to the Institute during Dr. Converse's tenure to train and to observe the activities of Dr. Converse and his associates (Fig. 2).

Dr. Converse was able, in the 1950s and 1960s to attract to the Clinic and to the Institute a group of plastic surgeons and medical scientific specialists whom he constantly referred to as "his team." He thrived on gathering around him a diversity of



**Fig. 3.** Drs. Converse and Rogers and Miss Mary McFaran at the opening of an exhibit at the Smithsonian in May 1971 on the "Development, History, and Scope of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery." Miss McFaran's tireless efforts on behalf of the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons were largely responsible for the setting up of this exhibit and made it possible for it to be placed in the Smithsonian.

talents in his associates, and until the very week of his death, he commented on how satisfied he was that his plastic surgery colleagues at the Institute were able to work together so effectively in "his team" despite their very divergent personalities, interests, talents, and very different capabilities in all the various aspects that now make up the specialty of plastic surgery today. Among those surgeons of whom he was quite proud who became members of the Institute and the Clinic in order of seniority and their joining the Institute were Drs. Ross M. Campbell (the former Associate Director), Blair O. Rogers, Augustus J. Valauri, Thomas D. Rees, Robert W. Beasley, Cary Lee Guy, V. Michael Hogan, Donald Wood-Smith, Philip R. Casson, Joseph P. Delgado, Philip C. Bonanno, Joseph G. McCarthy, Robert W. Bernard, Sherrell J. Aston, Daniel Morello, Daniel C. Baker, William W. Shaw, Robert E. Reber, and Glenn Jelks.

Dr. Converse took special pleasure in meeting with the Resident and Fellow graduates of the training program of the Institute at the Annual Meetings of The American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons where, during the "Converse Society" dinners, he continually emphasized at a dinner "talk" the contributions of his former Residents and Fellows.

After the first five International Conferences on Tissue Homotransplantation, held between 1954 and 1962, subsequent years his Conference Co-Chairmen were Felix Rapaport and Jean Dausset. Dausset was recently awarded one of the Nobel Prizes for his work in the field of homotransplantation and had spent a year as a Visiting Professor at the Institute at New York University Medical Center between 1970 and 1971.

Dr. Converse paid frequent visits in the subsequent years to Dausset's laboratory at the Hôpital Saint-Louis [3], combining these trips with his role as a Councilor to the Administration of the American Hospital in Neuilly, where he had a long-standing and very understandable fond attachment based upon his father's role as its former Administrator as well as his own early training at the center.

On June 23, 1964, Dr. Converse was married by a Judge of the Connecticut State Department of Health to Veronica ("Rocky") Balfe Cooper, in Westport, Connecticut. Bill Littler was the best man at this private wedding ceremony which was held in the living room of the Judge's home, because his wife did not feel that it was appropriate for them to be married in the cold atmosphere of the courthouse.

In 1967, Dr. Converse succeeded Sir Peter Medawar, another Nobel Prize winner, as President of the international Transplantation Society. On May 27, 1971, the first exhibit on the history, development, and scope of plastic and reconstructive surgery was opened at the National Museum of History and Technology of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. This exhibit had taken several years in the planning from a historical standpoint by Dr. Blair O. Rogers and Dr. Converse and dealt with the history of plastic surgery and repair from the time of the ancient Egyptians to the present day (Fig. 3).

During his most active years of performing surgery, Dr. Converse, although interested in hundreds of operations, was especially intrigued by the problems of reconstructing the microtia ear, developing the "scalping" flap for nasal reconstruction, pioneering in the repair of "blow-out" fractures of the orbit, teaching the aesthetic intricacies of corrective rhinoplasty with special emphasis paid to the infinite varieties of "nasal tip" alar cartilage operations [1], popularizing the use of iliac bone grafts in maxillofacial surgery, perfecting facial osteotomy techniques, and introducing into the United States the brilliant craniofacial surgery of Paul Tessier. In advancing the scope of craniofacial techniques, he was helped by the dedication of his two young colleagues, Donald Wood-Smith and Joseph G. McCarthy. Preservation of the cribriform plate in extensive craniofacial operations, first suggested to him by Dr. Rogers after the latter attended one of Tessier's first teaching courses in Paris in 1968, was another of Dr. Converse's stimulating contributions to the development of this highly specialized branch of our specialty. Stimulated by the pioneering work of Tessier [17] first reported in 1967, Dr. Converse soon thereafter personally established a craniofacial center at the Institute, and, in the subsequent decade, he used his not inconsiderable influence to stimulate his associates, Dr. William W. Shaw and Dr. Daniel C. Baker, to

develop their interests and techniques in the rapidly expanding field of microvascular surgery and replantation.

In his private practice he was helped immeasurably over the years by the talents of V. Michael Hogan and Donald Wood-Smith in former years, and in recent years by Joseph G. McCarthy and Daniel C. Baker, Dr. McCarthy having been appointed Acting Director of the Institute since Dr. Converse's death.

During his lifetime he published approximately 350 papers, numerous chapters in books on plastic surgery, and books [4] of which he himself was either an author, a co-author, or an editor, including *Reconstructive Plastic Surgery* (1977) edited by Dr. Converse, Dr. Joseph G. McCarthy, and Dr. William J. Littler [5]. These latter 7 volumes are known to most of us today as "the Bible" of plastic surgery techniques, if that term can be used without theological disrespect. A 14-year review of the activities of the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery between the years 1957 and 1971 emphasized that Dr. Converse and his colleagues had published more than 500 medical articles, textbooks, and book chapters, and an analysis of the subsequent 10 years has revealed that this number has now increased to more than 900. A generous number of these papers were reports from the research activities of the staff in the laboratories of the Institute, under the supervision of Donald L. Ballantyne, Jr., Ph.D., a long-time associate of Dr. Converse, and Felix Rapaport, M.D. Thirty-two years ago, when Dr. Converse's homotransplantation research required funding, he began to have an intensive successful rapport with the funding agencies such that over the years his interests in transplantation, as well as in congenital anomalies, wound healing, craniofacial surgery, psychosocial studies of plastic surgery patients, microvascular surgery, replantation, etc., resulted in the Institute's research having the generous support of many renowned funding agencies too numerous to cite here.

Of the awards that gave him a particular sense of accomplishment and service not only to the field of plastic surgery but to foreign countries as well, he received the *Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur*, and the *Commandeur de l'Ordre du Mérite Scientifique*, which were related to his service to the French Republic before, during, and after World War II, the degree of "Docteur honoris Causa" from the University of Bordeaux in 1977, and an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Göteborg in Göteborg, Sweden in October, 1980.

Jean-Louis Robin, referring to Dr. Converse's pride in the 7-volume *Reconstructive Plastic Surgery*, states that "Converse said of himself that he

only was a band leader (Chef d'Orchestre) but he was also an inspirator of accomplishments that he brought about and coordinated," as in his recent interests in microvascular surgery and replantation, and "in the work of research, lecturing, directing and publishing, he was indefatigable." "Due to his realism and his easily aroused curiosity, Dr. Converse was always open to any idea, to any original suggestion even if that questioned what he had believed and taught previously. Having remained very youthful looking and dynamic for a long time, he attracted young surgeons who found in him a man with a friendly demeanor which was tinged with humor but also a certain reserve, and an amazing great rigor in his work. In his last year, he often evoked memories of his youth and he enjoyed coming back to relive them in Europe" [12]. French colleagues and students felt a particular loss when he died, since he represented to them a truly bilingual plastic surgeon whose roots were firm on both sides of the Atlantic—here in the United States and in the France he cherished to the very end.

Denys Montandon, one of his favorite pupils, wrote and spoke for all of us when he summarized: "in 40 years of incessant activity, Converse succeeded in cementing the foundations of a specialty now recognized universally. It is not only a great surgeon who has left us but a man of vast culture and a man who never ceased being interested in the future of his former students" [11].

When he had to give up the physical act of surgically operating in the O.R. several years ago, he took up once again his keen interest in surgical and especially plastic surgery history. At the time of his passing away, he was writing for future publication an extensive biographical memoir that would cover the period of our specialty and its development from the onset of World War I until the present. He was in the act of completing a similar memoir dealing with his and our early years in developing the field of transplantation as we know it today in our laboratories and in our clinics.

On a more personal level, and certainly a more relaxing one totally free of medical content, in these past few years he had learned to become a quite respectable amateur chef, with, of course, emphasis placed on French cuisine, including the marinating of a good piece of venison. It was a delight for me to exchange ideas with him on the best way to show our "dash" in the kitchen, with as much gusto as he engaged showing the old "Converse dash" in the operating room. He took a special pleasure in having created a very serviceable and complete herb garden at his Southampton home, to help flavor those special meals he enjoyed preparing. It is a final tribute to his catholic interests, tastes, and sensitivities to reflect somewhat sadly that only a

few minutes before his untimely passing, he had gone out on a bitter cold Saturday morning to his favorite spot to mulch and turn over some of the soil of this little herb garden on a bitter cold winter day in January, a Saturday in January that many of us who knew him well will not forget for many, many years to come.

His vitality and his imagination are with us still, and his influence on all of us will certainly survive the ravages of many a bitter winter. One of my most pleasant memories of him in a more favorable and balmy season several years ago was having seen him sitting on a rare and beautiful summer day at a small Parisian cafe. He was talking academically with a few colleagues about transplantation, but I could see that his mind was elsewhere. He looked now and then musingly into the depths of the good glass of wine he held in his hands, and continuing to show a respectful interest in the "transplantation" conversation, he was still able to discreetly turn his head to catch in those ever perceptive eyes a few of the fabulously attractive young French women who were strolling by enjoying the clear light of that eternally beautiful day in Paris. It was one of those great days in Paris in the country he loved so well and which was literally and figuratively his second home and probably was primarily his spiritual home. Members of the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, equally at home in Paris as they are in their native cities, must surely feel that they could have wished this great man, a citizen of two worlds, a few more decades to spend with us on this troubled but fascinating planet.

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