Commitment and Fulfillment: The Life of John H.C. Ranson

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It was a time of sadness and mourning for all of us in The Society for Surgery of the Alimentary Tract when we heard that our President, John Ranson, S. Arthur Localio Professor of Surgery, had died on November 30, 1995, while undergoing treatment of multiple myeloma in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was to have been my honor to introduce him at our Annual Meeting. Instead I am here today to talk about his accomplishments and commitment to his profession, patients, and family.

In hope of giving as accurate a characterization of John as possible, I have spoken with his loyal assistant Helena Logan, his colleague and friend Kenneth Eng, his chairman and friend Frank Spencer, his student Bill Nealon, other pancreatic surgeons including Edward Bradley, John Cameron, Howard Reber, Andrew Warshaw, and—most important—his sister, K. Anne Ranson, and his beloved wife, Patricia, who are here with us today and to whom I am greatly indebted for much of the information about John's early life, education, and significant events in his life. As those of you who attended the President's Dinner last night know, Patricia has faced the aftermath of John's death with grace, courage, and strength. Her gallantry and presence in the face of adversity were an inspiration to us. I have also reread some of John's landmark papers, which are as valid today as when they were published 22 years ago.

Chronology

John was born on the eve of World War II, October 28, 1938, in Bangalore, India, the son of missionaries—the Reverend Dr. Charles Wesley Ranson and Jesse Grace Margaret Gibb. John's father, Charles, was a tall, charming, jovial Irishman. He dominated every room he entered by his presence and conversation. He lived to be nearly 85 and took great pride in John's accomplishments. John's father was held in high regard by the Indian government, which awarded him a medal for public service. John's mother, a quiet, self-effacing woman, also achieved distinction. A professor of history, she was commissioned to write a history of England for Indian students. Grace Ranson was also a champion tennis player and played with the Royal Family when they visited India. The Ranson family left India and returned to England in 1945, when John was 6 years old. Then, when John was 9, the family moved to the United States, where his father worked for an international missionary organization based in New York City. At age 11, in the English tradition, John went

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away to boarding school, but not in England. He attended the Groton School in Massachusetts. He maintained throughout his life many of the friendships developed during these formative years at Groton. Two years later, when John was 13, his family returned to England. John continued his studies at Groton and commuted back and forth across the Atlantic during his summer holidays on the Queen Mary. On graduation from Groton, he faced the choice of attending undergraduate school at Harvard or returning to England, where his family now resided, and attending Oriel College, Oxford, which was his father's alma mater. He chose Oxford. Shortly after John's return to England, tragedy struck. His beloved mother was killed in a car accident on New Year's Eve 1957. She was only 50; John was 18.

A few years after his wife's death, John's father returned to the United States as a professor and dean of the Theological Seminary of Drew University in New Jersey. He was to live in the United States for the rest of his life. John had two sisters. His older sister, to whom he was very close, lived in Scotland, where she was a high school teacher of French and Spanish. Mary, who had three children, died prematurely of a brain tumor at age 48. John's younger sister, Anne, lives in New Milford, Connecticut, and is Editor-in-Chief of the Academic American Encyclopedia. Anne donated her bone marrow to John during his multiple myeloma therapy. John's Uncle Fred may have influenced John's choice of profession. Fred was a surgeon in Shanghai before World War II. He was interned by the Japanese, during which time he contracted tuberculosis. No longer able to perform surgery after the war, he retrained as an ophthalmologist.

John obtained his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Oxford University in England, an M.A. in physiology, B.M., B.Ch., and then trained at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, England. He completed his surgical residency training at Bellevue Hospital and New York University Medical Center. He then joined the faculty of New York University, where he prospered under the leadership of Frank Spencer and S. Arthur Localio. He became Director of the Division of General Surgery and Director of the Residency Training Program at the New York University Department of Surgery, the S. Arthur Localio Professor of Surgery, and Chairman of the House Staff Committee.

John met his bride-to-be, Patricia Vignolo, in New York. She was a native of California and a graduate of Northwestern University. She worked in advertising and marketing and by the time they met, she had achieved distinction as an account supervisor in a large advertising agency in New York City. Their attraction was mutual and romantic. They were married in 1982. She and John were devoted to their two children, Elizabeth, now age 12, and Gibb, age 9, and derived much joy from their joint activities. John never missed a conference with his children's teachers.

Professional Achievements

John's clinical and research interests were in gastrointestinal surgery and focused on the liver, biliary tract, and pancreas. He was the author and coauthor of 79 original publications, eight selected summaries in gastroenterology, 47 book chapters, two books and one film in the American College of Surgeons library. His skills as a surgeon and surgical educator were recognized by Dr. Spencer. Only 10 years after joining the faculty, he was appointed a full professor. He was the recipient of many honors. He was an Alpha Omega Alpha fellow, treasurer of the James the IV Association of Surgeons, and served successive terms as Secretary and President of The Society for Surgery of the Alimentary Tract. He received the Hammond Citation for Distinguished Service from the New York State Medical Society and the Rousching-Tschering Medal of the Danish Medical Society. He was a vestryman and lay reader of St. James' Church of New York and a Knight of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Over a period of 20 years, he touched the lives of many surgeons. He was in great demand as a guest lecturer, as an invited speaker at symposia, and as a member of various postgraduate course faculties. He was a member of every important surgical society in the United States, including the American Surgical Association, the Southern Surgical Association, and The Society for Surgery of the Alimentary Tract, as well as the Royal Society of Medicine in London. He was on the editorial board of the American Journal of Surgery, the British Journal of Surgery, Pancreas, and the International Journal of Pancreatology.

John made many original contributions to our knowledge of gastrointestinal disease. He was a pioneer in our understanding of severe pancreatitis. In clinical studies he noted the frequency and severity of pulmonary insufficiency, the incidence and nature of coagulation deficiencies, the optimal timing of biliary surgery, and the role of the CT scan in managing pancreatitis. In the research laboratory he and his colleagues studied complement metabolism and chemotaxis. Additionally, he examined the relationship of pseudocysts, splenic vein thrombosis, and portal hypertension.

Although John made many other contributions to the management of gastrointestinal disease, his best-known contributions relate to long-term therapeutic