

## *Joel Robert Reznik (1917 – 2005)*

‘A man of many parts’ is an apt description of Joel Robert (better known as ‘Koffie’) Reznik who died on the 28th March 2005. (The headline to another obituary, published in the *Witness*, referred to him as ‘a long-serving doctor, film maker and war hero’.)

Koffie who was the youngest of four children (one elder brother also became a doctor) was born in 1917 in Koffiefontein in what was then known as the ‘Northern Orange Free State’ (hence his nickname ‘Koffie’). He attended the local school, studying among other things German, which stood him in good stead when he was later required to communicate with German prisoners-of-war captured by the Allied forces in the Second World War.



*Koffie Reznik*

After completing his schooling he obtained his medical degree at the University of Cape Town and not only passed his examinations with flying colours but also played rugby for the university first team which included Louis Babrow who later played centre for South Africa. He retained his interest in the game throughout his life, and often spent his Saturday afternoons watching rugby with his friends.

After qualifying as a doctor he joined the South African Medical Corps and elected to go on active service in North Africa. After a spell with the Field Ambulance Division he was appointed as medical officer to the Royal Natal Carbineers, joined the regiment in Egypt in September 1943 and remained with it until the end of the war, serving in North Africa and Italy.

Throughout his military career he cared for the wounded and sick members of his regiment, and to quote Douglas Alexander who had been a member of that regiment, ‘he took his warm-hearted and kind bedside manner to war with him’. He made a point of telling the soldiers as they were going into battle that he wished them good luck, and

assured them that he would be there to attend to their wounds and injuries. He carried out this undertaking under the most severe conditions, often in the face of enemy fire. His dedication to his chosen task was so intense that he not only earned the gratitude of all those men he treated for their wounds and illnesses but he also enjoyed the respect and admiration of all who came into contact with him.

His courage and devotion to duty were so strong that he was awarded the Military Cross. The citation which accompanied the award tells the whole story as follows:

On the morning of July 22nd 1944, during an attack on the approaches to Monte Fili, Captain Reznek made two separate excursions into a confined locality known to be thickly sown with anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, first to render medical assistance to the crew of a blown-up scout car and then to aid engineers wounded by shu mines while engaged in sweeping. In the afternoon of the same day a patrol was sent out to probe enemy positions and suffered heavy casualties. With utter disregard for his personal safety, Captain Reznek proceeded under concentrated mortar and shell fire to render first aid and, having no stretchers, himself lifted and carried out one of the wounded. Immediately thereafter, when tanks and infantry moved forward to attack the main enemy position, the road of advance came under intense and accurate shell, anti-tank and mortar fire, three tanks were disabled and a number of men killed and wounded. Once again, at the height of the shelling, and at the time when it seemed humanly impossible that he could escape personal injury, he took his ambulance-jeep forward to the tanks, making no fewer than three trips down the exposed road to succour and evacuate the wounded.

Subsequently a sister unit, who pressed home the attack, suffered heavy casualties. Captain Reznek unhesitatingly continued with his team throughout the ensuing night and assisted them in the treatment and evacuation of their wounded. Over a difficult period of many hours he displayed courage of the very highest order and set an outstanding example of sustained devotion to duty which was an inspiration to all who were near him.

Apart from his medical duties Koffie was also an outstanding photographer. Shortly after he first went on active service and despite having been forbidden by his superior officers to do so, he started taking photographs of war scenes and eventually was able to persuade his Commanding Officer to allow him to continue, and was later appointed the official Carbineers photographer.

After his return from active service Koffie, with some persuasion from his Carbineer friends, began a medical practice in Pietermaritzburg, the home of the regiment. Conditions were difficult for general practitioners at that time as there were very few specialists practising in the city. This meant that general practitioners had to perform a multitude of functions—including surgery, obstetrics, anaesthetics and paediatrics. These he carried out with the same aplomb and efficiency as he had done whilst involved in his military duties.

Despite the amount of time which he had to devote to his medical practice, Koffie still found time to carry on with his photography, and started making films with an 8 mm movie camera, and produced no fewer than ten films. Probably the best known of these was his 'History of the Natal Carbineers' which incorporated the photographs

he had taken while in the army. He gave a number of showings of this film, initially to his ex-Carbineer colleagues and subsequently to his other friends.

Several of his films won international awards, including 'The Last Sacrifice' which won the gold medal from the Rapallo International Film Festival. The inspiration it came from the death of a young German soldier outside the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, the site at which Leonardo da Vinci painted 'The Last Supper'. Amongst the soldier's possessions was a manual illustrating the use of hands as a means of expression. The theme of the film was the way in which Jesus Christ and his disciples are depicted using their hands to express their emotions prior to the Crucifixion. His other films included the paintings of Goya and Kokoschka, 'No Bed of Roses' and a film of topical interest 'The Dividing Stream' based on Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Settler'. The film has political undertones and shots of a black and a white man walking hand in hand, which he regarded as being symbolic of what he saw of the future of South Africa. The Censor Board was unhappy about the film, not only because of these scenes but because it showed close-up shots of Zulu maidens dancing. It wanted to ban the film, and it was only with great difficulty that Koffie was able to dissuade it from doing so.

His wife Rose, who died nine years ago, aided and supported him lovingly in all these ventures and wrote the scripts for his films.

Koffie carried on his practice with the same degree of care and consideration with which he had dealt with the sick and wounded in the army. Despite the pressure under which he worked he still maintained a happy disposition and a wonderful sense of humour.

He carried on practising, and even at the age of 88 still kept his clinic open for six days a week, until a short time before his death. He showed the same concern not only for his patients but also for his employees and in fact to everyone with whom he came in contact. He could often be seen at restaurants having a meal with members of his medical staff.

A clear example of how caring he was is evidenced by the fact that, being concerned about a friend who was recovering from a serious illness, the last words he spoke before undergoing the final operation from which he did not recover were addressed to his children, urging them to tell his friend to 'take it easy'.

Koffie was an exceptionally talented, compassionate and amiable person and is sadly missed by his colleagues, patients, friends and above all by his son Lawrie in Canada, his daughter Reneé in London, his daughter Jenny in Cape Town and his seven grandchildren.

*A life that moves to gracious end,  
He gave the people of his best.* (Tennyson)

LESLIE WEINBERG