AMCA 2004 MEMORIAL LECTURE

DONALD JAMES PLETSCH—SIX DECADES OF INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENT

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An enlightened scientist and articulate conversationalist, Donald Pletsch held prominence in the field of malaria vector control from 1955 to 1995. Starting as an educator in the mid-1930s and continuing as an ardent field worker and program advisor for almost 30 years after formal retirement, his impact spanned 6 eventful decades. During these times, an uncountable number of lives were saved as a result of his leadership and steadfastness to scientific principle.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Born on May 8, 1912, in Lake City, MN, son of William and Martha Pletsch, he attended grammar and secondary school in Lake City. He enjoyed competing and was a member of his high school and college wrestling teams. In 1932, in the middle of the Great Depression, he received a Bachelor of Science cum laude degree in English and Zoology from Hamline University (Minnesota).

During grammar school days, Pletsch had been fascinated by the art of stilt walking and had become highly proficient and innovative (Fig. 1). Capitalizing on this skill by working part-time as a professional stilt walker in local and campus events and in circuses provided income during high school, college, and graduate school. In his subsequent international endeavors, he retained this interest and sought out events that included stilt walking.

In 1936 and 1942, he was awarded the Master of Science and Doctor of Philosophy degrees, respectively, at the University of Minnesota, specializing in medical entomology and plant pathology. After completion of the M.S. degree program, Pletsch accepted an associate professor position in agricultural and medical entomology and also served as assistant extension entomologist at Montana State College while continuing his doctoral studies in Minnesota.

Upon graduation in 1942, the United States was at war. Pletsch left Montana State College, joined the U.S. Army, and embarked on a career-changing phase in which he would become a dedicated practitioner of control of arthropod vectors of disease. He was assigned to Camp Barkeley in Texas for officer's training. Another entomologist in officer training at that time, Gene Gerberg, relates that he encountered Pletsch during early-morning physical fitness exercises, which Pletsch was directing during this period. Specialized training included sessions in Florida, where leading medical entomologists of the time provided insight about arthropod-borne disease and control—Mark Boyd, John Mulrennan, and Jack Rogers. The trainees were taught jungle sanitation, source reduction, and vector/pest control. Concurrently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture research laboratory in Orlando, directed by Edward F. Knipling (AMCA 2001 Memorial Honoree), was working for the Department of Defense on new control technology that these trainees would put into action in the Pacific and European theaters of action. As a result of this research, Pletsch later received the newly available DDT while serving as the commanding officer of the 218th Malaria Survey Detachment and implemented highly effective vector-control operations in New Caledonia, Leyte, and the Philippines. After the Japanese surrender, the unit was deployed in Hokkaido to control outbreaks of louse-borne typhus. The 218th was one of several similar units that formed the nucleus for the subsequent establishment of the Medical Service Corps. Years later, at Pletsch's instigation, starting in 1972, the 10 survivors of the 218th held regular reunions.

At the end of the war, he returned to Montana State College and resumed his teaching career but soon was called to serve in a broader context. During the years from grammar school through university and the military, his communication skills, robust energy, and multiplicity of personal and professional interests set the stage and mirrored the self-confidence and intensity that he was to exhibit throughout his subsequent career.

MEETING THE LONG-TERM CHALLENGES

Postwar Japan, 1947–49

In 1947, Pletsch joined General Douglas MacArthur's reconstruction program as a biologist in the Scientific and Technical Division, Supreme Commander for Allied Forces in Japan. This activity involved providing scientific equipment, journals, literature, research, and other how-to-do