Not the average hometown doctor

by John Nash

Like many young men, Dr. William Melton Bristow looked to his father’s career when considering his own.

Dr. Walter Bristow was a 1915 graduate of the Medical University who, as a young military doctor, rode with General John Pershing as he pursued the Mexican revolutionary general Pancho Villa through the wilds of Mexico. He joined the reserves after World War I, but spent the rest of his professional life running a private medical practice in Columbia, S.C.

His son, known as Melton to his friends in South Carolina, was an athlete with a taste for adventure. He admired his father, but privately considered the day-to-day work of a private practice physician to be “rather dull.” So when it came time to choose his own career path, he thought about his dad as a young man, chasing Pancho Villa on horseback.

Like his father, Melton enrolled in MUSC’s College of Medicine, which he completed in 1956. While in school, he received a commission from the U.S. Navy, but did not intend to pursue a full career in the military.

“I wanted to be in medicine, but not like my father,” he says. “The Navy looked like a way to see the world, live in different places, experience other countries and still advance in the medical field.

As time went on, the military offered me various educational experiences in exchange for a few more years of service. As time does fly, I was going on 30 years before I knew it.”

By the time he retired from the Navy in 1979, Dr. Bristow had visited more than 100 countries, served with two underwater demolition teams, patrolled with SEAL teams on secret missions in the Mekong Delta, and toured with the U.S. Marine Corps in both Vietnam and Okinawa, Japan.

He also had earned a degree in epidemiology from UCLA and had become an expert in atomic, biological and chemical warfare defense, performing top-secret research worldwide and writing top-secret classified reports for the Navy. He had served as medical officer for the first Navy SEALs team and practiced nuclear/bio/chemical medicine on nuclear subs around the world. He was one of the few medical officers at the time to receive a combat action medal, and at one point was the youngest captain on active duty in the Navy.

He once received a letter of commendation from the king of Morocco for helping contain an outbreak of meningitis among NATO forces stationed there. One of his favorite memories is of finding an underwater graveyard of ancient Phoenixian shipwrecks while searching for downed aircraft off the coast of Malta.

“I was the guy whose bag was always packed,” he says. “If there was a mission, they knew they could call me. I was always ready to go.”

Today, at age 81, Dr. Bristow lives in San Diego and runs a private practice in nearby Pacific Beach. Looking back over his career, he says it has been the life of adventure he had hoped for as a young man, and more.

He credits the Medical University for opening the door to a “marvelous career” and providing him with a lifetime of rich memories and deep friendships, many of which he still maintains. Moved by his gratitude to MUSC, Dr. Bristow recently made a gift commitment that will establish an endowed chair and new scholarship in his name at the College of Medicine.

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The scholarship will be designated to support students wishing to practice medicine in underserved parts of the state. Currently, nearly 75 percent of South Carolina is designated as rural. All 46 counties include areas that are medically underserved or report a shortage of health care professionals.

Dr. Etta Pizarro, dean of the MUSC College of Medicine, says such scholarships can help to address the critical shortage of physicians in these communities.

“Many medical students graduate with so much debt, they feel they have no choice but to practice in higher-paying metropolitan areas,” she said. “By reducing their student debt, we can make it easier for them to practice where they want to, instead of where they have to.” Dr. Bristow hopes that his gift will help open the door to the kind of rewarding career that he enjoyed.

“Medicine is my life. It’s everything,” he says. “I always enjoyed the reward you get in healing. It is just a great feeling to make sick or injured people well, and I wanted to support young people to pursue the medical field so they could have similar life experiences and help others.”