

Wells, Warner Lee ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1996

24 Dec. 1913–27 May 1991

Warner Lee Wells, surgeon and author, was born in [Durham](#) ^[2], the son of Warner Lee and Narvie Elisabeth Hobby Wells. He received his undergraduate degree (1934) and the M.D. degree (1938) from [Duke University](#) ^[3]. Remaining at Duke for a general surgical residency, he was an instructor and associate in surgery from 1943 to 1949. Between June 1944 and November 1946, however, he was an army medical officer in neurosurgery, attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel.



Image of Warner Lee Wells, from [Duke University, 1934, \[p. 100\]](#), published in 1934 by North Carolina Digital Collections. Presented on North Carolina Digital Collections. ^[4]

He returned to Europe in 1949 as a consultant to the surgeon general; he also edited colored movies on nerve and spinal cord injuries suffered in combat and wrote a section on nerve surgery for the surgeon general's history of medicine in [World War II](#) ^[5]. As a surgical consultant to the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima, Japan, from 1949 to 1952, he served with a team of professionals sent to the country in 1950 to learn whether there were any delayed effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. In the final year of his tour he was also an honorary professor of surgery at the Hiroshima Medical School. During the seventeen-day passage by ship from San Francisco to Japan, Wells made the acquaintance of Dr. Robert B. Hall, an authority on Japanese studies at the [University of Michigan](#) ^[6] and for twenty-five years cultural attaché to Emperor Hirohito. He also met a Dr. Kusama, dean of the medical school and head of public health at [Keio University](#) ^[7] in Japan. From these two men Warner Wells then and later acquired an unusual knowledge of Japan and its people and began to learn the Japanese language. He was able to serve informally as liaison between the medical profession of Japan and the commission.

The Casualty Commission sought information about Japanese culture before and after the bombs fell as well as their immediate and long-term effects. What the members saw produced a sense of guilt, Wells later remarked. "But we had to assume a philosophical pose and accept the bombing as something that was done that couldn't be undone and that the Japanese would have dropped it on us if they'd had it."

Wells was still in Tokyo when the [Korean War](#) ^[8] began, and he took time from the bomb damage investigation to help train American general surgeons in his speciality, neurosurgery. Beginning on Thanksgiving Day in 1950, he assisted in and supervised thirty-one brain operations that lasted thirty-six hours without a break.

Wells encountered Dr. Michihiko Hachiya, who had been director of a hospital in Hiroshima and kept a diary from the day of the bombing, 6 Aug. 1945, until 30 September, when he almost died. Hachiya turned over his diary to Wells, and with the help of young Dr. Neal Tsukifuji, born in Los Angeles and educated in America and Japan, Wells began a rough translation.

In 1952 Wells joined the surgical faculty of the new four-year medical school at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[9] and began a refined translation of Hachiya's diary. Published by the [University of North Carolina Press](#) ^[10] in 1955 as [Hiroshima Diary](#) ^[11], it was an immediate best-seller. Early versions of the work, including a full typescript of the diary, are in the North Carolina Collection at The University of North Carolina. The book was translated into more than nineteen languages and sold around the world. Drs. Wells and Hachiya set up an educational foundation through which royalties from the

book were used to provide care for orphan victims of the atomic bombs.

Wells served on the editorial board of the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*^[12] and contributed articles to such journals as *Surgery, Gynecology, and Obstetrics*^[13], the *North Carolina Medical Journal*^[14], the *Bulletin of the [University of North Carolina] School of Medicine, American Surgeon*^[15], and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*^[16]. In 1957 he received the Oliver Max Gardner Award from The University of North Carolina. On 16 Dec. 1959 in Chapel Hill he delivered the Humanities Lecture, entitled "Our Technological Dilemma; or, An Appraisal of Man as a Species Bent on Self-Destruction"^[17]."

In 1939 Wells married Rebecca Atzrodte of Clarksburg, W. Va., a graduate of the *Duke School of Nursing*^[18]. They had four daughters, Rebecca Agnew, Mary Hobby, Sara Allan, and Elisabeth Fumi (born in Japan), and a son, Warner Lee, III, born after they returned to North Carolina. Dr. Wells was in poor health for a number of years before his death in Chapel Hill.

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