



Obituary

Dr Albert F.A.L. Jones, OBE FRAS (1920–2013)

The world lost the greatest visual variable star observer it has ever known when Albert Francis Arthur Lofley Jones passed away peacefully at his home, on 2013 September 11 at the age of 93.

Albert Jones was a New Zealand amateur astronomer who was best known for his phenomenal skill as a variable star observer. He also made a large number of consistent estimates of comet magnitudes and was the discoverer of two comets.

His observing career commenced in 1943 and spanned some 68 years until 2011. During this time he accumulated over 500,000 visual variable star estimates, a total which is unlikely ever to be surpassed.

Albert was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 1920 August 9 and educated at Timaru Boys High School. In adult life he had a number of jobs including working in a mill, a grocery shop and a car assembly factory. He felt that if he took on a more responsible job it may interfere with his observing!

In 1939, in answer to a request in the newspaper for reports of aurorae, he made detailed notes of the next one and sent it in and was thrilled with the reply stating it was the best report they'd received. So two years later, he timidly asked if there was an astronomy club or society that might accept him as a member. Soon after, he became a member of the New Zealand Astronomical Society that was later to become the Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand (RASNZ).

Albert first constructed his own small telescopes in the late 1930s from lenses and cardboard tubes and although very crude they did afford him views of such objects as the Orion Nebula and Saturn's rings. He soon purchased a 'proper' telescope, a 5-inch [125mm] f/15 Calver reflector, then a 5" refractor, followed by an 8" reflector (built by J. T. Ward). In 1948 he con-

structed a 12.5" reflector, which he named Lesbet for Leslie and Betty Comrie, after they had kindly sourced the primary mirror and arranged transportation from the UK. With this telescope (seen in the photo right) Albert went on to make a large proportion of his observations. It is now housed in the archives of the Nelson Provincial Museum.

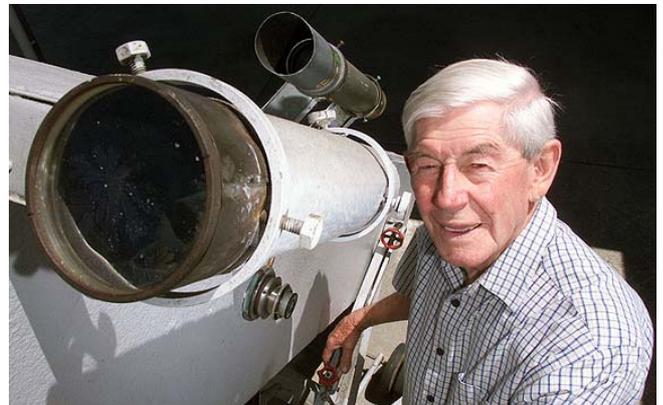
Although he had enlisted in the 2nd Battalion Canterbury Regiment at the commencement of World War II he was classified as unfit for overseas service in 1942. This proved to be blessing as far as astronomy was concerned for nova Puppis appeared that year, sparking Albert's long lasting love of variable star observing.

His list of achievements soon mounted up and in 1957 he became only the second observer to exceed 100,000 visual estimates (the first was Charles F. Butterworth in 1939). Thereafter Albert's totals passed all the landmarks up to 500,000 observations and in many years he exceeded 10,000 observations per year, a figure only rarely achieved by others and never on a regular basis.

Sadly, in 2008 Albert suffered a stroke, but he managed to continue observing, although at a much reduced rate, until just three months short of his 90th birthday, when he had a fall during an observing session which resulted in a fractured hip. He was only able to observe thereafter in a very limited way, with the aid of a customised walking frame.

Albert made a number of discoveries while observing, some of which are still awaiting official confirmation. He also co-discovered SN1987A in the LMC, the brightest supernova and only naked eye SN since 1604, and two comets, C/1946 P1 and C/2000 W1. His second discovery made him not only the oldest person to discover a comet (80), but also it was the longest interval between consecutive discoveries by any observer (54 years).

Albert was elected a Fellow of the RAS in 1947 and received their Jackson-Gwilt Medal and Gift in 1960 (jointly with F. M. Bateson, OBE, FRAS, FRASNZ) for work on southern hemisphere variables. During the course of his career Albert also received many other awards, including being made OBE on 1987 June 13 for services to astronomy. The following year minor planet 3152 Jones was named after him.



Other awards were received from the American Association of Variable Star Observers, the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, the British Astronomical Association (the Merlin Medal & Gift in 1968), the RASNZ, the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and several universities, including an Honorary Doctorate of Science from Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand.

His funeral took place on 2013 September 15 at 11 a.m. NZST (or midnight BST). Observers worldwide were asked to mark the occasion by making an observation of the new nova in Delphinus, V339 Del, around that time, in honour of the passing of the greatest ever visual observer of variable stars. Although many UK observers were clouded out some did manage to make an observation.

Albert did not consider the number of observations he made or the milestones he achieved to be significant, and was always keen to stress that serious work can be undertaken with quite basic equipment. It's also interesting to note that he did not make lightcurves himself, as in that way 'he could go to the telescope with an open mind, trying to forget what it was the last time, and not expecting the star to be brighter or fainter.' He also stressed the importance of having fun with his observing.

I first corresponded with Albert in 2002 when he emailed me with the opening remark 'If I remember correctly I joined the BAA away back in 1944...!' He went on to ask if the BAAVSS would like some of his observations that he didn't send elsewhere? You bet!

Albert Jones' work and dedication has been recognised throughout the astronomical world by amateurs and professionals alike, and he will be remembered for his humble, humorous and most friendly demeanour. He is survived by Carolyn, his wife of 29 years.

I am grateful for help in preparing this obituary from John Toone, who will soon submit to the *Journal* a much more detailed article about the life and work of Albert Jones.

Roger Pickard, Director, BAAVSS



Albert with his wife Carolyn in 2004. Photo courtesy John Toone.