

Burgers, Awards and Medals, and Posterity

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For a year and some months, I was the Director of the Institute of Physical Science and Technology (IPST) at the University of Maryland. IPST is the heir to the Institute for Fluid Dynamics and Applied Mathematics in which J.M. Burgers (1895-1981) worked for some 25 years. Burgers was a leading fluid dynamicist of the twentieth century and his name is alive in the scientific community because of Burgers Equation, Burgers Vector, Burgers Vortex — to name but a few. Burgers was directly involved in the creation of the International Union of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics and served as its first secretary-general.

One day out of curiosity I was wading through the junk that was relegated to a back room in the Computer Science Building (where IPST has some offices, including that of its Director). I was jolted when I came upon in a dusty corner the various medals and awards that Burgers had received, along with a few photographs and letters. I was jolted in two respects. Firstly, the idea that these memorabilia would somehow be consigned to junk for some 20 years after Burgers had died made no sense. The greater impact came from the second thought: “Is this how all the honors of a lifetime, perhaps cherished by the recipient, will end up eventually — unknown to anyone, uncared for by posterity?” Note that, during my term as Director of IPST, there was nothing at the University that would especially remind one of Burgers!

I knew that something had to be done quickly, especially because people like Jan Sengers, Bob Dorfman and Jim Wallace who knew Burgers well had already retired, or would soon retire: If we didn't do anything in a short span of time, Burgers would be lost to the University forever. I started talking to the fluid dynamicists of the University and the IPST faculty about setting up a Fund for supporting intellectual activities in Burgers' name. I myself contributed some money but it was the generous reception to the idea by all concerned that ultimately led to the formation of the Burgers Program at the University. Jim Wallace and Jan Sengers have given me credit for initiating the effort, but they were the ones who created something concrete out of a vague, if enthusiastic, beginning. A few of the memorabilia that I retrieved are now displayed in the IPST building, thanks to Jan. I also provided copies of letters and photographs to the Burgers archives in the Netherlands.

This episode shows me that a good idea may survive among people who have an institutional sense; in this instance, the idea gained momentum in large part because of the distinction of Burgers himself. The outcome raised my hope that the posterity will somehow find a way to remember the extraordinary people of the scientific community. Perhaps Burgers himself might have liked this thought.