



# Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## REMEMBERING TOBRUK'S MEDICAL CONNECTIONS

Rat's Tales Vol 2 Issue 1

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We have decided to dedicate this year's newsletter editions to a theme of "Medical", a vital part of Tobruk.

### 2/4TH AUSTRALIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL.

A hugely important part in the medical story of Tobruk has to be the 2/4th Australian General Hospital.

On 29 Dec 1940, the 2/4th AGH nursing staff embarked on SS *Mauretania* as part of convoy US 8. Other ships were the *Queen Mary*, the *Aquitania*, *Dominion Monarch* and the *Awatea*. After a short stay in Fremantle the convoy sailed to Ceylon and transferred to *Nevasa*, one of 15 smaller ships that transported troops to Egypt. On arrival in Egypt, nurses were detached to assist 2/2 AGH, treating patients from the Western Desert campaign against Italians.

The male members of the unit disembarked at Port Tewfik on 2 Feb 1941 and travelled by train to Abd El Kadr in the Amiriya district west of Alexandria.

They travelled to Alexandria to board the *Knight of Malta*, a ship described as a *miserable, little, evil smelling tub*.

Destined for Tobruk, she ran aground in very heavy seas between Bardia and Tobruk on 4 Mar 1941. All survived and were rescued but the recovery of 100 tons of medical supplies requiring the construction of a road to the wreck site, took some time and delayed the unit from setting up a hospital in Barce, in western Libya.

Some began to arrive in Barce between 11 and 14 March and after operating for 10 days they had to pack up and

return to Tobruk as the Germans were massing for a major attack.



On 26 Mar 1941, the 2/4th AGH began a withdrawal from Barce to Tobruk where it was to remain until 21 Oct 1941.

The hospital in Tobruk was originally a large school built by Mussolini, on a small hill, 1.2km from Tobruk, sixteen buildings in a quadrangle with long sides running east and west with twelve classrooms, six to a side.

On the east end was an administration building and at the west end was a storeroom and cookhouses.

The twelve classrooms were converted into wards and the administration building, into a large operating theatre.

Above, Apr 1941 Views of hospital  
The 2/4th AGH, 15 Mar 1941, Tobruk, sandbags protect the operating theatre but the building bears marks of shrapnel from bombing during a German Air Attack 10 Apr 1941



Right. Col N L Spiers  
on left. Cordite blast burns surgeons







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## GENERAL HEALTH IN THE DESERT



*"Fresh fruit and vegetables were supplied when possible with 8 tons of onions arriving on one occasion and in August, potatoes, marrows and citrus fruits gave welcome relief."*

### FACEBOOK

DOTROTA has a closed Facebook page. Thank you to everyone who has shared photos, diaries, information and memorabilia there. We are all learning so much about the Siege of Tobruk from the amazing information that is being shared by descendants. Just request to join, answer a couple of questions and start posting! We would love to see what memorabilia you may like to share.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/340823176648909/>

### GENERAL WELL BEING

The general well being, alertness, endurance and being able to achieve the tasks set for them was a way of judging the health of those in Tobruk. The Australian forces in the desert were healthy enough, rations were mainly good, but monotonous, with a lack of fresh food in the later months, with no fresh milk and little butter. Fresh meat and vegetables were sometimes available where sea transport was possible. There was refrigeration in the docks area and ice available in Tobruk.

The lack of fresh vegetables and fruit was countered by a daily issue of ascorbic acid tablets, the lack of vitamin B was met by issue of "Marmite", whole wheat flour was used in making bread.

Vitamin A was supplied by using English margarine when obtainable which contained the necessary supplement, unlike Australian margarine.

Fresh fruit and vegetables were supplied when possible with 8 tons of onions arriving on one occasion and in August potatoes, marrows and citrus fruits gave welcome relief.

Sea transport was hazardous and a number of supply ships were lost and although a ninety days' supply was built up in Tobruk, perishable food could not be kept long. Desire for sweets and chocolates was noted early in 1941.

The practical detail of washing and feeding all patients as soon as possible after arrival, and, if practicable, shaving them also, was found most important.

<https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1070417/document/5519701.PDF>

### MEDICAL DISEASES

Medical diseases most frequently encountered in the Western Desert and Tobruk were reduced in incidence by appropriate measures. Dysentery was the biggest danger as fly populations increased in warmer weather and potential carriers, and large populations of locals and many prisoners of war, were dealt with. But the dangers of large numbers of mixed races living in a restricted area were offset by the hard and persistent work of the hygiene services and no severe epidemic occurred.

Sound methods, constant supervision and by putting the responsibility of the units themselves, to reduce fly breeding, kept dysentery, diarrhoea and enteritis, within bounds. Experienced NCOs from the 2/4th Field Hygiene Section lived for periods with the troops in forward posts and the education and personal supervision of unit hygiene given out greatly helped.

The introduction and supplying of a latrine box to forward areas by Major Fryberg and his hygiene staff was of great value in preventing disease.

Water was not a source of dysentery in Tobruk, but it was due to drinking good water collected in dirty bottles.

Mild infections were transmitted by handling contaminated food and compulsory washing in antiseptic lotion before handling food was effective.

Sulphaguanidine was available in limited quantities in Tobruk and proved valuable in shortening disease.

Blood transfusion was carried out successfully owing to policy of Gen Burston that forward medical officers should be expert in this work, and to the influence and teaching of Major Ian Wood.

Blood was stored in an ice chest and although working under conditions of strain, the hospital was adequately equipped for most types of surgical work.

Lieut Colonel EL Cooper investigated the disease, Amoebiasis, in Tobruk and Major GV Rudd carried out pathological work.

It is likely that, in spite of careful, skilful investigations, a diagnosis was not always possible.

"Desert sores" were not infrequent among the forces in Libya and Cyrenaica and they appeared in proportion to the lack of washing facilities after several months.

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## SIR ABRAHAM FRYBERG 2/4TH FIELD HYGIENE SECTION



Sir Abraham Fryberg was a public health physician, an army medical officer and medical administrator. He was born on 26 May 1901 in Bendigo, Victoria. In 1934, he lost the lower part of his right forearm in a motor vehicle accident. With great determination he gained diplomas in Public Health and Tropical Medicine and worked as Medical Officer in psychiatry along with numerous other medical appointments.

Abraham was appointed on 1 July 1940 to the Australian Imperial Force as Captain, Australian Army Medical Corps. Because he was a specialist in Public Health, he worked in military health hygiene, preventive medicine and tropical medicine attached to the 9th Division as Officer commanding the 2/4th Field Hygiene Section. Embarking for the Middle East in December, he served in Tobruk from April to October 1941. He demanded the highest standards of sanitation and cleanliness and his responsibilities had include hygiene care of 10,000 Italian and German POW.

Because of his specialist training and creativeness, he invented a moveable, flyproof latrine to be used by frontline troops. This contributed considerably to the health and ultimate survival of the troops. He also developed a fly proof Meat Safe. While at Tobruk, he was given name of "Flyberg of Flibya" by his comrades, a nickname that stuck for the rest of his life.

Major Fryberg also served in Egypt from July 1942, taking part in the battles of El Alamein. He was appointed MBE in 1942, for work in the North African campaigns and was Mentioned in Dispatches. After he returned to Australia February 1943, he held senior administrative positions in Brisbane as a Lieutenant Colonel before transferring to the Reserve of Officers in 1945. At Northern Command headquarters, he was a part-time assistant Director of Hygiene from 1946 to 1957, and honorary Colonel of the Royal Aust Army Medical Corps 1962 to 1967.

Possessing a strong personality, Fryberg showed intense loyalty to his peers, staff and profession. He was president from 1947 to 1967, of the Medical Board of Qld and was known for sheltering unfortunate victims of alcoholism, especially those who had seen active service, from people who didn't understand the effects of war trauma.

Sir Abraham was proud of his Jewish heritage and was valued by the Qld Jewish community.

He retired on 31 December 1967. Fryberg's devotion to work and dedication to duty were repaid by a knighthood in the 1968 New Year Honours list.

In July 1993, Abe contracted a liver disease and died on 13 Oct aged 92 at Windsor, Brisbane and was cremated. He was survived by his wife, Vivian Greensill nee Barnard and son, George.

*"Fryberg designed a moveable, flyproof latrine to be used by those at the frontline, contributing considerably to the health and ultimate survival of the troops."*

*Fryberg being invested with the ribbon of Member of the British Empire by Lieut General Sir Leslie Morshead General officer Commanding A.I.F*

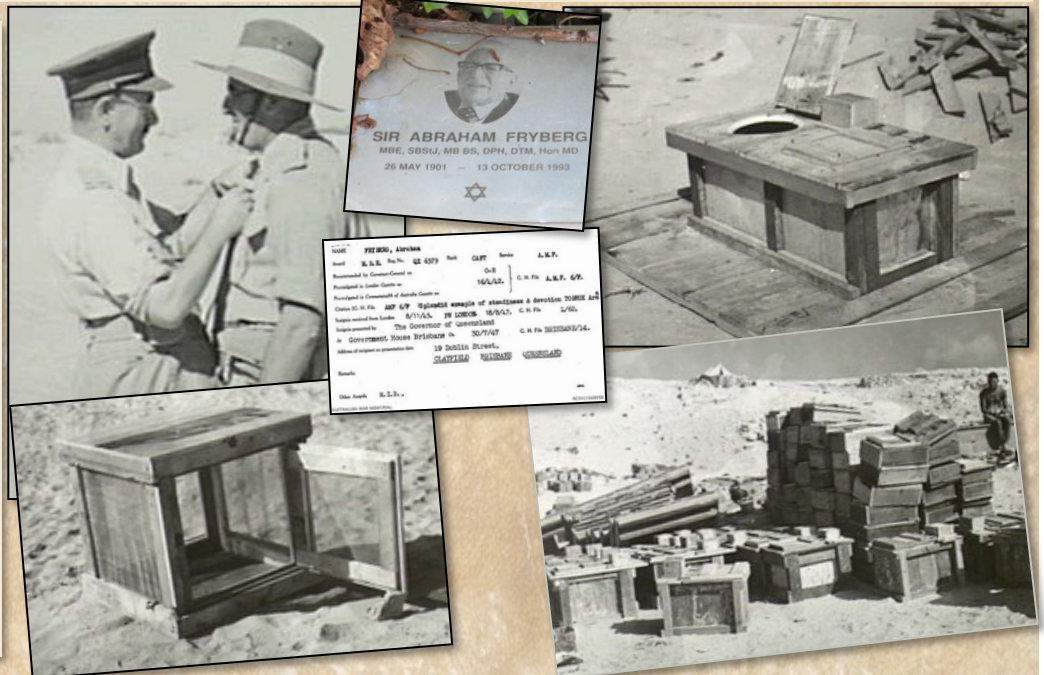
*Latrine especially designed by the Commanding Officer of the 2/4th Aust Field Hygiene Section, Major A Fryberg, for frontline use. Note how low they are to enable the "sitter" to keep his head down and himself out of trouble!*

*Photos taken in the Western Desert, Egypt Oct 1942. AWM*

*FOR MORE INFORMATION check out these links:*

[https://www.bellsite.id.au/gdbtree/HTMLFiles/HTMLFiles\\_114/P1764.html](https://www.bellsite.id.au/gdbtree/HTMLFiles/HTMLFiles_114/P1764.html)

<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fryberg-sir-abraham-18619>





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**RUPERT GOODMAN** kindly written and supplied by his daughter, Yvonne Hands.



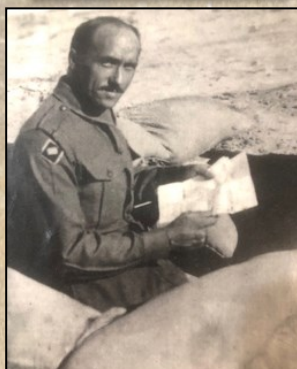
VX37425 Lieutenant  
Rupert Douglas  
GOODMAN  
2/4th Australian  
General Hospital  
Aust Army  
Medical Corps  
Born 25 Nov 1915  
KEW, VIC  
Enlisted 18 Jul 1940  
ROYAL PARK, VIC  
Deceased  
22 Nov 2007  
BRISBANE, QLD

\*\*\*\*\*

*Bibliography:*

*Rupert Goodman:*

- \* *A hospital at war: the story of the 2/4 Australian General Hospital 1940-1945*
- \* *I was a Rat: Tobruk 1941: the story of the personal experiences of 2/4 AGH during the Siege of Tobruk in 1941.*



Dad's dugout was 4' x 8', sandbags on all sides and a blanket at the front and half a sandbag was his pillow!

PART ONE: Thank you to Yvonne for her time and effort preparing this.

*In 1940, Dad (Rupert Goodman) was transferred to teach at Box Hill High having commenced teaching 3 years earlier. In 1940, however, the war started to take on a more serious turn and in July Dad decided to enlist, not realising that this would be his career for the next 6 years. After basic training at Royal Park his group were allocated as nursing orderlies to the 4th Australian General Hospital, later known as the 2/4 AGH. Life is a strange serendipity and it was joining this unit that was to have an effect on Dad both with the lifelong friends he made and on his later career, and that he ultimately met and married my mother who became a member of the 2/4 AGH after the Unit's move to Redbank. As a family we are lucky to have in our possession Dad's diary kept during his time of service. This provides a graphic insight into the conditions he and other members of the Unit endured during the siege in Tobruk. To attempt to detail the many ups and down of Dad's life in Tobruk would be impossible and this is really only a brief outline of his life as he describes it.*

The 2/4 AGH, when it was formed, had the advantage of being headed by Collins Street specialists, many who had experienced the trials of WW1. After basic training at Royal Park, the recruits were sent to Puckapunyal to commence their careers as nursing orderlies. The rest of the year was spent with training including basic hospital training by Unit's nurses and medical staff which was to prove invaluable later during the Siege when the nurses had been forced to leave Tobruk. As well as medical and nursing staff, the Unit consisted of various departments such as ENT, Xray, Theatre, Pathology and Dental to name a few.

At the end of 1940, the Unit sailed on *Mauritania* to Colombo where they changed to the old troop ship *Nevasa* to the Middle East.



VX37425 Lieutenant Rupert Douglas GOODMAN  
2/4th Australian General Hospital  
Aust Army Medical Corps

Ultimately in Alexandria they changed to the old ship *Knight of Malta* with barely enough room for the men and their gear and the hospital equipment. The ship ran aground during a storm ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS\\_Knight\\_of\\_Malta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Knight_of_Malta)) and the Unit was forced to abandon ship and travel across the desert before being rescued and taken to Bardia after rescuing valuable hospital equipment. After a stop in Barce, the Unit finally arrived in Tobruk in early April and from 9 April, they were part of one of the longest sieges in history against German and Italian troops.

Not long after the Unit arrived in Tobruk the CO warned his troops not to stay together at night and not to live in tents or buildings with others, and as Dad described it, *they had to dig themselves a dugout*. Dad's was about 4' x 8' with sandbags on all sides and a blanket at the front to prevent light getting out at night. He slept on a groundsheet with half a sandbag as a pillow and light was from a hurricane lamp. The dugout contained all dad's worldly goods. On the occasions that it rained, life in the dugout was not pleasant... *No wonder Lord Haw Haw called the troops "Rats."*

To be continued

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## 2/4TH AUSTRALIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL



*A story of devotion to duty by staff who without nurses, cared for the "Tobruk Rats" during the months of the Siege.*

The 2nd/4th Australian General Hospital was a huge part of the war effort during WWII. On 26 Mar 1941 the 2/4th AGH began to withdraw from Barce to Tobruk where it was to remain until 21 Oct 1941. The female staff arrived on 28 Mar 1941, but due to the uncertain military position, they were withdrawn around 7 Apr 1941 aboard the British Hospital Ship *Vita*. This loss of trained staff had a major effect on the operations of the hospital. Tobruk was under siege. On 10 Apr 1941, both the beach section of the hospital and the main part were bombed and strafed by German aircraft. Several key staff were killed along with many patients.

A first-hand account of the way in which the surgical team had to operate is explained in *"A Hospital at War"* by Rupert Goodman.

"Although we were a General Hospital, we received wounded often direct from the "front line" with their shell dressing the only attempt at treatment of any sort. This meant that we functioned as a combined Field Ambulance, Casualty Clearing Station and General Hospital. The main ward was furnished with eight sets of trestles built to take a stretcher at a convenient height for operating and to each two sets there was a small anaesthetic table and stool and a wheeled trolley for instruments. This is the system we used when a big convoy came in: the patient was examined and then brought down to this theatre. He was placed on the trestle on the stretcher and an orderly 'prepped' him as the anaesthetist did his job, while another orderly wheeled the trolley to the sterile tables and selected a "knife and fork set", ties and dressings and brought them to the Medical Officer, who had by this time scrubbed up. The orderly who prepped the patient had in the meantime scrubbed up and the MO, assisted by him, went on with the operation. The orderly who set the tray would then commence the "prep" for the next case who had been brought in and placed on the next trestle, and so, when the MO finished one case, it was only a matter of scrubbing up and moving straight on to the next. By using this method and having a team of bearers to bring in the patients and remove them, we did 108 cases in 8 hours."

In June the news came through that Germany and USSR were at war. Thereafter German attacks on Tobruk noticeably declined as resources were diverted to the Russian front.

*Canberra Times 27 Aug 1942 Wednesday.*

A story of devotion to duty by staff who cared for "Tobruk Rats" without



nurses, during the months of the siege, tells of exhausted surgeons working in a stifling operating theatre, heavily blanketed to ensure black-out, performing continuous operations during air raids, the shattering roar of exploding bombs and anti-aircraft fire and the heroism of hastily instructed attendants. Some staff paid the supreme sacrifice, killed when the hospital was hit by enemy bombs. Operating gowns became so saturated with perspiration that they were dispensed with for prolonged operations, except for the most severe wounds. The usual costume became shorts, waterproof apron and rubber gloves. One surgeon who lost so much weight his shorts would not stay up stepped out of them and continued working in minimum garb.

The hospital consisted of two parts, the town section, which was situated in old Italian barracks near anti-aircraft posts and the beach section which attended to casualties whose injuries did not need operations. Underground shelters near the town section proved of untold value. Once a patient was ready for evacuation, he was transferred to await the arrival of naval ferries. Ferry



destroyers, berthing by a small torch light, alongside a flimsy jetty, carried the wounded away night after night.

*to be continued*



Top: X Ray Room

Middle: Several Surgeons carrying out operations at the same time.

Bottom: A ward in 2/4th Australian General Hospital.



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**DR GEOFF DE CRESPIGNY** kindly supplied by Anne Young



*"31 Jan. I went this morning to the compound where the POW are kept. It was a depressing sight. There were about 15,000 of the poor devils in a state of complete dirt and destitution. The hygiene situation must have been truly awful..."*



*"Went to dinner with the REs (Royal Engineers) and had the usual cheerful evening, also collecting a valued memento, an aluminium matchbox cover tastefully engraved and derived from Luftwaffe."*

Thanks to Anne Young, grand daughter of SX1464 Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Geoffrey Champion De Crespigny for sharing the diary of her grandfather so we could get further insight into their lives at Tobruk.

My grandfather Richard Geoffrey Champion de Crespigny (1907-1966), known as Geoff de Crespigny, was a doctor who enlisted in 1939 with the medical corps of the second AIF. He initially held the rank of Captain and was promoted to temporary Major 30 June 1942. For the early part of the war Geoff kept a diary. It covers the period of his training in Victoria, with some visits home to Adelaide and a time in Sydney, followed by his departure for the Middle East in April 1940, various posts in Palestine and Egypt and his experiences in Tobruk in 1941. Geoff was at Tobruk from January to October 1941. His initial role at Tobruk was Deputy Assistant Director of Hygiene (DADH).

His diary describes his arrival in Tobruk.

**"29 Jan.** We arose before dawn and left at 7. Road pretty rough and burnt out lorries and material everywhere, but what we saw previously was nothing to the debris in the marshes between Buq Buq and Salum. Here considerable fighting had taken place and there were tanks, guns, lorries, tents, clothing and litter in immense quantities. We passed lorry-loads of prisoners on their way to Alex, some driving! Salum loomed up ahead, an attractive spot where the escarpment marched from inland to meet the sea and form a fine western rampart to the little bay. A ship or so was in and the port was busy. We climbed the precipitous road up Halfaya Pass and were shortly in sight of Fort Capuzzo, severely battered. From there the road was very trying, but in 15 miles or so we came to the Bardia perimeter, wire, tank traps and pill-boxes, and one wondered how such defences could be taken. Inside were war materials in stacks, a mound of rifles like a coal dump in one place. Mercifully the road was now bitumen. We saw Bardia a mile or so away, sitting by the sea, while we passed by along the Tobruk road. We reached Tobruk at 3.30.

Again we passed through intricate defence lines, guns on every side and big ones too. In a large compound we saw the prisoners, nearly 20,000 of them. It looked awful.

We went on over a plain, littered with lorries, then found ourselves overlooking the harbour,

with the town on its far side. A pleasant little place on a bare low headland, which surrounded a fine harbour. We could count about a dozen sunken or grounded ships, the San Georgio across the mouth of the harbour. We found our quarters in the late HQ of the Commander, 1 Libyan Division, in Plaza Benito Mussolini!

**30 Jan** There were various things to do, firstly take stock of the town. It was in a hell of a mess, many houses blasted by bombs and shells and all well sacked by the AIF who showed the ability of experts. The hygiene situation was horrible. I did various necessary jobs with the 2/2 CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) and made plans with Carruthers, from hygiene section.

**31 Jan.** I went this morning to the compound where the POW are kept. It was a depressing sight. There were about 15,000 of the poor devils in a state of complete dirt and destitution. The hygiene situation must have been truly awful, but Carruthers' men were doing their best. I saw some of the Italian medical officers who were quite pleasant. In the afternoon there was little doing, but in the evening three aeroplanes flew over and dropped a couple of bombs and fired a machine gun. I neither saw nor heard them and felt a bit done out of it.

**1 Feb 41.** I am getting the picture of the town a bit better. It must have been a pleasant little place, with large barracks and many cafés. Some houses and flats are quite pleasant and relatively new, all are full of rubbish and broken furniture and things now. It seems that what the AIF cannot use, it breaks. I went to the POW cage again this morning, routine visit. Work otherwise goes on, mostly a matter of looking round for things and getting Carruthers after it with his merry men.

**5 Apr.** The threat of attack by German and Iti forces has been growing the last few days and today we felt the effects as people started to return from forward area with various stories. Hundreds of sick are to be sent to 4 AGH. Luckily a hospital ship is expected soon.

**6 Apr.** The "flap" is on. The hospital took in about 400 patients in the last 24 hrs and units and base personnel are streaming in. The air is full of rumours and German patrols have been playing old Harry with our L of C (Lines of Communication), people leaving all at news of them and making for Tobruk."

To be continued



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## DR JOHN DAVID RICE 2/43RD SX10147 part 1



*"John Rice and his comrades arrived after significant air, sea and land battles had already occurred in the Middle East. In March, 2/43rd and its sister 9 Division units received orders to move west. The Battalion sent an advance party first to Mersa Matruh and not long after, the entire Battalion was transported to Tobruk, arriving on 26 March 1941."*

*A huge thank you to Andrew Rice, grandson of Dr John Rice, who shared what he has researched and written about his grandfather from his grandfather's documents and further extensive research undertaken. We have added further information to this.*

History shows that war came as a surprise to few people. Plans were drawn up in the late 1930s to equip forces with skills and material to enable them to fight in a future war. As part of that, the Australian Army sent out a questionnaire in September 1938 to medical personnel, especially doctors, to test readiness to serve in part-time forces and for service during a war "within Australia". Outbreak of war in Sept 1939 started a steady influx of recruits. As things went badly for the Allies in 1940, greater numbers of men volunteered. In July 1940, John David Rice enlisted in the AIF.

John Rice's medical skills ensured that he was immediately commissioned as an officer with rank of Captain. He marched into the forces on 17 July 1940, at Keswick Barracks, Adelaide, enlistment paperwork noting that he had served in the Cadets for four years as a private soldier.

He was given the regimental number of SX10147 and posted to 2/43rd Battalion, a South Australian infantry unit, as the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO), the Commanding Officer's (CO) adviser on medical issues. He commanded the Medical Platoon, managed its resources, medical assistants and stretcher bearers, cared for the sick and wounded of the Battalion and operated the Regimental Aid Post, RAP, the Battalion's medical centre.

The Medical Platoon was responsible for the initial Battalion care, dealing with routine ailments and stabilising sick and wounded before moving on to Field Ambulances for more specialised care before evacuation by the Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS) to Australian General Hospitals. 2/43rd Bn's history said John Rice "earnt sincere respect of all ranks by his conscientious concern for welfare of the Battalion."

The 2/43rd formed at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills in 1940, part of 24 Brigade which came under 9 Division. The Battalion marched through Adelaide 5 December in preparation for departure and John Rice accompanied the CO and other officers to Parliament House for lunch with Premier Playford. On 28 December the Battalion boarded trains for Melbourne. It would be over two years before John Rice returned.

24 Brigade sailed from Melbourne to the Middle East on 30 Dec 1940, with 2/43rd Battalion aboard *RMS Mauretania*. The ship's spaces were confined but food was good. Since 2/4th Australian General Hospital was embarked with its nurses, there was some mixed entertainment, only for the officers. For the troops, the daily fare involved work parties, training, drills against enemy action and the interminable army physical training. The convoy reached Colombo, Ceylon, on 13 Jan 1941. On 16 Jan, they left Ceylon and arrived at Suez City, Egypt, on 29 Jan. The Battalion, on the *Nevasa* travelled onto Palestine by train.

AIF and other Commonwealth forces were concentrating in a number of camps in Palestine, prior to being committed to the battle in the Western Desert. Khassa (*photo on left*) near Gaza, would be the home of the 2/43rd for over a month to allow further training. John Rice wrote a scathing report on sanitation in Khassa camp, criticising the lack of fly-proofing on kitchens and the inadequate ablutions, saying that he feared for a consequential outbreak of "bowel disease". ROs carried constant warnings on the need to follow hygiene practices.

*to be continued*



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## 2/43RD TRUCE

**2/43rd.** Where to start when wanting to write about Medical stories regarding Rats of Tobruk! Having information to hand and a story about the only truce between Australians and Germans in WW2, here is a very short version.

### 3 Aug 1941

It was decided to use the 2/43rd Battalion to attack from the south against Posts R7, while the 2/28th struck at Post R7 on the northern flank. The RMO reported eight stretcher bearers were to move with the attacking coy and wait 500 yards from Post R7. 12 reserve stretcher bearers were held 500 yds south of Australian post, R9 and 900 yards from R7. Held there were three trucks marked with Red Crosses. Zero hour was 0330. The attack was unsuccessful with many wounded and killed in action. Lt Pollok remembered "Somehow I found B Company Commander McCarter beside the blown wire of the enemy defences and told him the right flank was unsuitable, the enemy's fire had increased and was pelting down like lethal hail storms. McCarter informed me that we'd have to pull out as there was practically nobody unwounded left to fight. Suddenly I felt like I had been hit on the leg by a cricket ball at full force from 10 yards away. I fell to the ground and wiggled my toes. Two of the sappers who I had been speaking to, helped me up, and in turn dropped like stones and I fell to the ground again, with a sharp pain in my shoulder. As if by a miracle, two stretcher bearers found me, placed me on a stretcher and began our one hour journey back. I was extremely humbled and grateful to them. Wounded men were struggling and helping more seriously wounded mates back. Limping personnel were following one another in the darkness. To those people responsible for guiding the wounded back I silently offered my sincerest gratitude."

The stretcher bearers under Sgt Tuit and Cpl Creed worked magnificently carrying wounded men without stopping for shell or mortar fire. By 0530 there were over 60 men back at RAP, a tribute to their work. At dawn all wounded were not cleared and one truck under Sgt Tuit and Padre Gard moved slowly out through the gap in the perimeter and stopped 300 yards from R7. In May 1951 "News" printed in Adelaide a letter from H T Dodd pointed out "that Sgt Tuit and one of his stretcher bearers, Pte K Pope, were the instigators of this truce and Padre Gard joined them from the truck when truce was made." Dodd was the fourth person present at the time, he being the driver of the truck. The party debussed and moved up under cover of the Red Cross Flag to 200 yards from R7. At this point a Red Cross Flag from the German lines and a German officer appeared. Stretcher bearers were allowed to pick up wounded and were helped by German sappers devitalising part of a minefield. Germans, including a doctor, with drinks, walked to the truck and talked to our men.

They helped bring dead and wounded from the minefield. Sgt Tuit remained at this point until 1700 hours.

The final count of 137 attacking troops, 106 were casualties, 29 dead, 73 wounded and 4 missing. The highly successful evacuation could not have been possible except for the courage and steadiness of all, stretcher bearers, RAP staff and drivers.

*Dowie painting. Tuit holding flag*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL ART 26

John Dowie writes of the extraordinary armistice after the battle on 3 August 1941. "The truce was as if two armoured combatants had paused and raised their visors and for a moment one had glimpsed the human faces behind the steel." As a result of this courageous expedition by Sergeant Tuit and Chaplain Gard, 28 bodies were recovered and five wounded men (four were treated and dressed by the enemy medical orderlies) and the fifth one, Sgt Roy MICHELL, SX6877, was lying on a mine and was thought to be dead. The Germans cleared a track through the minefield to enable him to be picked up and finding he was still alive, wounds were dressed by a German medical orderly who passed the casualty over to Sgt Tuit. For this act of Christian charity on the part of the enemy garrison of R7 and of this officer in particular, the 2/43rd was forever grateful. Sadly, Roy died of his wounds in an Adelaide hospital in 1943.

SX6877 Private Roy Coombe MICHELL  
2/43rd Infantry Battalion





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Merv Denton Chimp Kloeden Owen Yendall

Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## UNDERGROUND HOSPITAL AT TOBRUK *part 1*

Sydney Arthur TREWARTHA, known as Art, SX11220, 2/43<sup>rd</sup>, B Company, 12 Platoon. Art was Wounded In Action on 3 Aug 1941, (Art was part of the battle described on page 8), died aged 92 in 2009. He went to the Middle East with five mates who lived near him on farms west of Ceduna, SA. Three of his mates were KIA in front of him that day, a day he remembered all of his life. It was a sad time for the 2/43<sup>rd</sup>, with many soldiers KIA or WIA. When sitting at his kitchen table talking to him in **2006**, as I was doing family history, Art was very emotional. He sat with me for two hours and talked, weeping the whole time, wiping his eyes, almost as if he was back in Tobruk and after said to me, "Sue I haven't talked to anyone about the war, as much as I have talked to you tonight."

He told me about Porky and Bulla, two of six YENDALL brothers who served, four in 2/43<sup>rd</sup> and one, Slip, who was KIA that day. Art was a close mate of Porky all his life.

From Art's story, the attack at Post R7. *"I remember the shrapnel, the overwhelming noise and the bullets and then I fell to the ground. There was no pain. I tried to stand up three times and each time just collapsed back to the ground. I kept trying to stand up but I just couldn't, I just couldn't." Bulla and Porky came back to me and told me to get up and run, but I told them I couldn't, my leg was broken, and they should p\*# off so they didn't get hit. Porky told me that he would get him out and I just said how can you? I ended up being carried over Porky's shoulders to safety. Once we got to the ambulances, it was comparatively safe as ambulances weren't generally fired upon. Bulla ended up in Tobruk with me as he was wounded in the shoulder. We were taken three quarters of an hour to the port of Tobruk where we entered an underground cave like tunnel, an underground hospital like a holding station for a hospital, with men, no women nurses, near the docks."*

It took me some time to find out about these "underground caves" that Art mentioned. Slowly I found bits and pieces of information, but not enough that I was happy to say there was an underground hospital or where it was. Yes there was the 2/4 Australian General Hospital but not much about underground caves. Then, on the AWM website, a few lines describing soldier, Bryant, in hospital at Tobruk, who on Saturday 28 June 1941, told how they were *"removed from the hospital in the afternoon to underground caves ready to be evacuated from Tobruk."* So there it is, underground caves ready to be evacuated. Exactly what Art said, underground caves.

Later I found a comment in the book "A Medical Emergency. Major General "Ginger" Burston and the "Army Medical Service in World War II", saying "Wherever possible, medical units were moved underground into bunkers and caves around Tobruk. The 2/2 CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) established itself in a cave near the Tobruk wharves which was known as the Docks Hospital." The 2/2 CCS were 9th Division and were involved in the treatment of Art and others after the battle on 3 August.

In the book, "The Longest Siege," by Robert Lyman, he said *"Devine was working in a large tunnel under the half destroyed Admiralty House on the north shore of Tobruk harbour."*



A large concrete building, its west wing long demolished with a huge bomb crater marring its entrance, its subterranean



Art at Gaza Hospital, Suez Canal, August 1941. Art to right of Sister.

tunnels offered a degree of safety unavailable elsewhere. A treatment centre was opened in an underground concrete shelter where there was safety, but the ward reverberated with shellfire and bomb explosions. The heat was terrific."

So actually knowing what to google... "Admiralty House" allowed me to find some photos and more information which explains it all so well, confirming to me the existence and location of this underground hospital Art talked about. Weary Dunlop, Colonel Sir Ernest Edward "Weary" Dunlop AC, CMG, OBE was an Australian surgeon renowned for his leadership while prisoner of the Japanese during World War II. The following is from a book about him, called "Weary. King of the River" by Sue Ebury.

*"Above the docks at Tobruk rose the still unfinished Admiralty House, below which, housed in a cave, was the light section of the 2/2nd CCS, connected to a Queensland unit. The heavy section of the 2/2 CCS used mainly as a semi convalescent hospital, was situated around 7 km away in underground caves as well. (This was known as the Beach Hospital, different to the 2/4th AGH). Weary Dunlop arrived in Tobruk, part of 2/2 CCS, 13 June 1941 and was senior surgeon, second in command, living and working there, dive bombed and shelled night and day."*

*To be continued*



Weary Dunlop was senior surgeon with 2/2 CCS, they worked in a deep shelter under Admiralty House, near the docks.





# Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## REMEMBERING PRISONERS OF WAR



*"The Pen" researched and put together by Christine Kelly, Descendant of POW*

NX17078

Private William Robert James

"Bill" LAMBOURN

2/17th Infantry Battalion

Born 15 Dec 1913

Enlisted 24 May 1940

Taken Prisoner

14 Apr 1941-1945

P.G. 66 Capua Italy

P.G. 57 Gruppignano Italy

Stalag XVIII-A Germany

Deceased 08 Jun 2002



*A Quiet Chat with the Governor General*

### "THE PEN" - EDITION 4

CHRIS KELLY

#### "FLOWERS LAST A WEEK, BOOKS LAST FOREVER"

Last Saturday 10 February 2024, Carol and Barry Smith and Steve and myself set off for Ballarat in anticipation of the chance to remember our beloved ancestors the next morning. The outdoor Ex-Prisoner of War Memorial – part of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens, opposite beautiful Lake Wendouree – set the scene for the 20th Anniversary of its opening. An emotional but special day for those in attendance began. Bruce Roberts – our MC for the day – showed the utmost respect for our prisoners, who deserve no less, I think he knew all 36,400 souls were sitting quietly in the wings.

His Excellency General The Honourable David Hurley (Governor General of Australia) captured our attention with his delivery address, speaking of his POW, Uncle Tub. Des Hudson, Mayor of Ballarat followed, giving the 800 plus of us a hearty welcome. In reply, The Honourable Anthony Albanese MP, Prime Minister of Australia, delivered a warm speech, drawing from his long association with Tom Uren, POW and close friend, and reminding us, being a POW means you are "waiting in silence", how true this is.

The Wreath Laying Ceremony begun first with the dignitaries.

Carol and I lined up in nervous anticipation for our turn, we were humbled – and proud – to lay a wreath together remembering Carol's two uncles – Charlie Mills and Ron McIntyre – my father and uncle – Bill and Jim Lambourn – and all who passed through Campo 57 in northern Italy.

Having attended a funeral, a days drive each way, earlier in the week, I had no time to order a wreath, I improvised and made one. Sadly the weather beat my No Surrender Rose bushes and I resorted to olive and lemon branches with small fruits from my garden, it was definitely not the most attractive wreath there but was made with love. I was fascinated to hear there was the choice of donating a book on the subject at hand, in lieu of a wreath and all books donated will be given out to schools in and around the Ballarat area – that's impressive!

And speaking of books, the guest speaker was up next, Professor Peter Monteath – who has written at least 2 books – talked of two men's very different POW experiences. In reply Commodore Greg Yorke, Senior Naval Officer of Victoria representing General Angus Campbell (Chief of Defence Force) and Vice Admiral Mark Hammond (Chief of Navy) spoke next.

We sang – accompanied by the very talented Australian Army Band from Melbourne – *Abide With Me*, after which young Dee Woods of Phoenix College – also a Legacy Junior Public Speaking Competitor – read "*I Do Not Know You*" a poem written by the McNab Clan in 2023. I hope she won because many of us, myself included, were still in tears when Chaplain Margaret Benoit delivered a prayer of thanks, a prayer for all Prisoners of War and The Lord's Prayer. I've included the poem at the end of this write up.

We watched with interest the military protocol woven throughout the service, between the recital of *The Odes to Remembrance* and *The Last Post*, played on the old wartorn bugle found in Turkey in 1921, and sent back to Australia. Battered, riddled with dents and a bullet hole or two but just like our Australian soldiers, it did not give up. As you can imagine, the emotion by this time was mounting and as the service drew toward its close, we reflected with One Minutes Silence, Rouse, The Blessing – also read by Chaplain Margaret Benoit – The National Anthem and the Dismounts of the Catafalque Party to end the formalities.

As we walked toward the granite wall to lay poppies for our respective ancestors, Carol and I had the great privilege to meet and enjoy a quick chat with the Governor General – a lovely man, genuinely interested in our reasons for attending.

We laid our poppies, reflected one last time and departed.

My heart warmed, having noted very early in the day, a common theme, "We must never forget the importance of those taken prisoner in war."

*We will remember them.*

*Chris Kelly*







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## REMEMBERING PRISONERS OF WAR

**"THE PEN" - EDITION 4**

**CHRIS KELLY**



*"The Pen" researched  
and put together by  
Christine Kelly,  
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NX17078

Private William Robert James

"Bill" LAMBOURN

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Born 15 Dec 1913

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P.G. 57 Gruppignano Italy

Stalag XVIII-A Germany

Deceased 08 Jun 2002



*Paying Our Respects*

### **"I DO NOT KNOW YOU"**

We arrived by rail and marched out from the station, paraded through the city's steamy asphalt streets, cheered as heroes.

At the docks, all gleaming in new khaki, leather and brass, my proud mother farewelled me through her tears and choked.  
"Son, I do not know you."

Of the deck of the Queen Mary sun-tanned and wind rippling my hair..."a grand way to go to war"

they said, as we steamed-out through the heads...  
"Boys, you will not know yourselves"

Sweating with tropical heat and building barricades in the Singaporean sun, as the Poms loafed about.

A mate joked he'd never seen me work so hard and laughed aloud...

"Frankly, I do not know you"

As the bullets flew and the shells fell and Japs appeared from every side, I caught my fearful reflection in a window pane near the Causeway and thought...

"Boy, I do not know you"

What followed was hell...from Chang's frozen floors to that God forsaken railway.

Men slipped away daily from our grasp and at every turn.

Disease, violence and hunger were many a mates' cruel ends.

On the jungle floor one early morning, I stumbled across another broken comrade.

Underneath our hidden red ensign, we buried him where he lay.

Me nerves affray, my compassion wilted, all I could say, was

"Sorry, I did not know you."

On the Japs surrender...we bivouacked in their quarters.

In a grimy half broken mirror, a hallowed-eyed man stared back at me.

His chowat loin cloth tightened till there was no more material to knot...

"I did not know him."

The grand Grey Ghost did not sail us home. From there, it was all corridors, wards and whispered conversations. Camphor, iodine and powdered eggs became my scents.

Doctors, nurses and government chaps half-smiled and talked with hooded eyes, keen to look away, as if they did not want to know us.

At the showgrounds we mustered in fresh but rough khaki, as families arrived, as shy as first night brides.

A man came to my side and said "Mate, I see by your shoulder patch you must have served with my son. He's a big bullocking lad called Franky McNab, about your height and hails from the Lachlan.

I said "Dad, it's me."

My father stumbled back a pace...and took in my frame, some six stone lighter than my last harvest, my wrinkled face no longer a teen's, my eyes no longer twinkling, keen to steal a sip of his Sunday beer  
...and wept.

He embraced me in his farmers' arms and shook.

"Sorry son, I did not know you."





# Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

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## HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT THIS ASSOCIATION?



### Support the work we do!

If you or your company would like make a donation to remember the mighty Rats please contact us or donate here.

Donation Account DOTROTA

Bsb: 124-001

Acct: 22 920 419

*We appreciate your support.*

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Victoria Point West

Qld 4165 Australia

Email:

dotrota41@gmail.com

Welcome to our next newsletter with a theme of Medical. What an important part of the Siege of Tobruk!

As founder of this Association, I am pleased to see the interest in the newsletter and are looking forward to reading more about our Medical Services during WW2. This newsletter is giving us the opportunity to share our Rats stories and events to all of our "Rat's Families."

### HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT THIS ASSOCIATION?

If you have something you would like to submit to be considered for publication, please contact us via email.

This is a non profit Association and we rely on those on our Facebook page and others who are interested, to become financial members to cover costs. Its easy to do this on the website!

The Association is collecting anything that people want to leave in trust for future generations. The Association is pleased to receive any donation, no matter what it is, please talk to us about this, it is all precious and will be looked after.

Have you seen the merchandise we have for sale? Go look at the website, put in an order, some great Rats items in there. Link to website above.

### DOTROTA MEMBERSHIP

We invite and encourage you to join the "Descendants of The Rats of Tobruk Australia Association" (DOTROTA) as a financial member. You will receive an Association metal badge, stickers and certificate of membership as well as discount on merchandise you order from the website.

Cost of membership is \$20 annually. Costs of running the Association are many, membership fees are important if you wish this group to continue with these valuable projects. Easiest way to join is by going to the website and click on **MEMBERSHIP**.

As the veterans' numbers decline it is up to us to come together as one family and keep their memories alive for future generations. Think how proud your Rat would be to see you are a financial member of an Association to keep his name alive.

*Betty Murphy*

