



Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc



2/4TH AUSTRALIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL

Rat's Tales Vol 2 Issue 3

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Dec 2024



In this edition:

2/4th AGH	1
Rupert GOODMAN	2
Rupert GOODMAN	3
Dr John RICE	4
Dr John RICE	5
2/43rd Christmas 1941	6
Dr Geoff de CRESPIGNY	7
Red Cross	8
Field Ambulance	9
2/5th Fd Ambulance	10
Remembering POW	11
Membership	12

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A little more about the 2/4th Australian General Hospital, from "A HOSPITAL AT WAR" Rupert Goodman. ISBN 13: 9780908175574

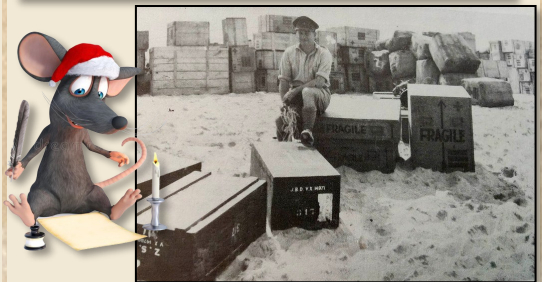
On 28 February 1941, 2/4 AGH were loaded on to a "nasty old tub" in Alexandria, called the "Knight of Malta", which had previously been a ferry between the island of Malta and various Italian Ports; destination Tobruk. This well-worn rust bucket was pressed into service in time of need and was equipped with 250 life jackets despite 352 persons being on board, four life boats and only three toilets. Under normal circumstances it was a 48 hour run to Tobruk. However, once out of port the weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed and swamped time and time again drenching everything. Dawn saw seas of immense proportions which did not abate all day and well into the night. Miraculously, the vessel remained afloat. The following day and night was more of the same. On the third day the storm abated and conditions were less threatening. Just before dawn, jarring and grinding sent a shudder through the ship - it had run aground. A rocket from a Very pistol revealed a barren, rocky coastline with a patch of sandy beach 250 metres away. With each wave the ship shifted aground further and re-floating was out of the question. Fears of the enemy listening in, meant radio silence was maintained



and in an incredible feat of coordination and necessity over fear, the men on board were evacuated to shore, a "motley collection of individuals", English, Australian, Greek, Polish, French, Maltese and Palestinians. Boxes of food stuffs and supplies were drifting to shore whilst all the valuable equipment remained on board. They were uncertain as to where exactly they were but somewhere between Bardia and Tobruk, so decided to march across the desert to reach Bardia Road and seek assistance from passing allied convoys. A small rear guard party was left on the beach to protect the goods. The main body trudged on, separated into small groups so they wouldn't attract attention from enemy aircraft. The road was some 14 miles away, when out of the blue, a donkey appeared and was seconded to carry some of the men's gear.

After many hours of struggling through the desert they reached the welcome sight of the bitumen of Bardia Road and waited until a truck came along. Once told of their story, the driver raced back to Bardia to tell the officers of the British General Hospital of his find and rescue was on its way. No casualties were recorded and expensive and difficult to replace hospital equipment was saved. So the 2/4 AGH lived on to become the hospital at Tobruk during the Siege and later served in many more theatres. But it almost wasn't to be!

At the end of the siege, and replaced by a British unit, 2/4th returned to Alexandria by destroyer and truck to Amiriya before boarding a train for an army camp at Beit Jirja in Palestine. Following leave they were tasked with opening a hospital in Jerusalem from 13 Nov 1941. All female staff were for the first time included within the hospital. While based in Jerusalem, staff also escorted patients by Ambulance Train to El Kantara, across the canal and on to Cairo. On 15 Jan 1942 the 2/4th AGH were told to transfer all patients to the 2/6th AGH and to pack for service in a tropical area. However, the 2/4th AGH was held up at Kilo 89 in Palestine during January and February until on 12 Mar 1942 its main body embarked on "SS Westernland" in Port Tewfik.





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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.*

PART THREE: Continued from Newsletter No 5

Dad also often volunteered to take part in a burial party where he was able to view the graves of unit personnel. Clearly this had a moving effect on him. As he said:
"The drifting sands may sweep across this cemetery and cover the graves as they have covered those of the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans of past centuries. But the sands neither of the desert or time will dim the valour of those who gave their lives for their country in this far off battle field."

Maintaining the Troop's morale in Tobruk was important. Throughout the Siege the sense of humour of the Australian troops shone through, whether it was the pianola shipped as xray equipment or in the Tobruk Truth published daily and distributed to the troops. An example of the humour from the Truth *"A bomb landed in the sergeants' quarters. Five donkeys were killed."*

Or the pamphlets dropped by the Germans which were subsequently used in the Latrines as toilet paper.

Life for the troops was made easier to bear by the work of the Padres, the Salvos and Red Cross and the work of the Royal Australian Navy in keeping the sea lanes open from Alexandria to Tobruk Harbour to evacuate the injured, maintain supplies and transport mail which undoubtedly helped maintain the morale of the troops. Cricket matches were organised against the British, there were concerts and a game of cards, especially poker, was a popular pastime.

Tobruk, Libya. August, 1941. Wounded soldiers arrive at the casualty ward of the 2/4 Australian General Hospital. (A.W.M. Photo No. 20323.)



One factor which saved many lives during the constant bombing of the hospital was the policy of dispersal and decentralization. The number of patients in the town hospital was kept to a minimum and they were transferred to other medical sites. Fortunately, the following places were available — *The Docks Hospital* staffed by 2/2 CCS, a deep shelter near the docks. All cases for sea evacuation were sent there, with a capacity of around 100.

Sidi Mahmoud, where there were underground wards staffed by 2/2 CCS. *Port War Signal Station*, another deep shelter housing 75 patients mostly for the examination of anxiety state cases.

The Beach Hospital for medical cases 2/4th AGH and the *Town Hospital* for surgical cases 2/4 AGH.

The 2/4 AGH Hospital Statistics from the Unit's official war Diary for the 600-bed hospital from the end of March to the end of September 1941 showed the magnitude of the work carried out by the Unit:

Personnel examined -
 34,400 Admissions - 13, 497
 RAP (Regimental Aid Post)
 14,808
 Evacuations - 7904
 Deaths — 234
 Operations - 2650
 X-rays — 3135
 Pathology tests — 3378
 Ophthalmology - 1119
 Dental - 5102



Right: Cricket match at 2/4th Australian General Hospital

WE ARE ON THE WEB!

<https://www.ratsoftobruk.com.au>





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

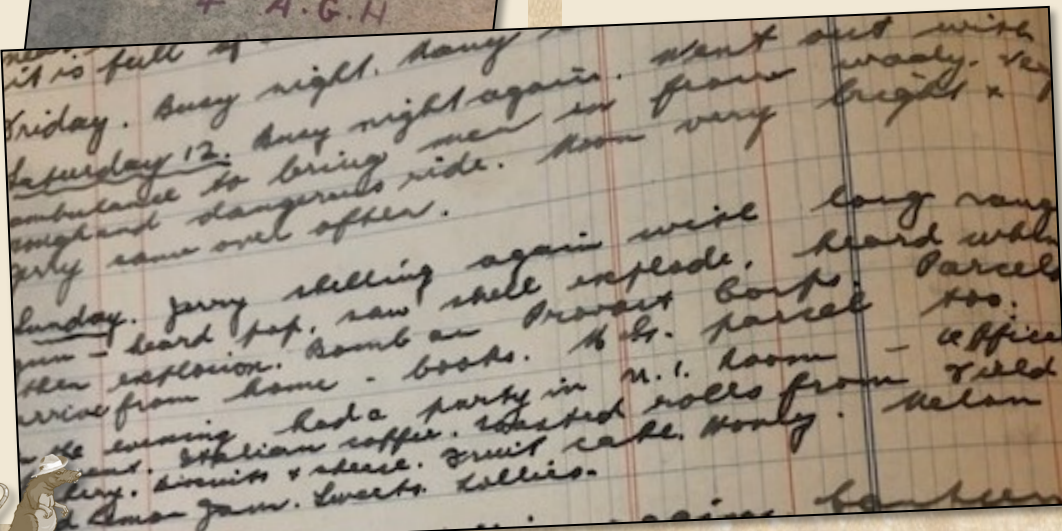
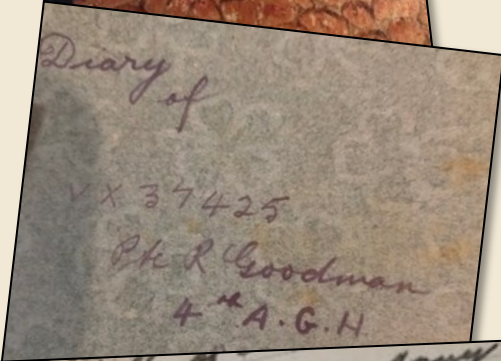
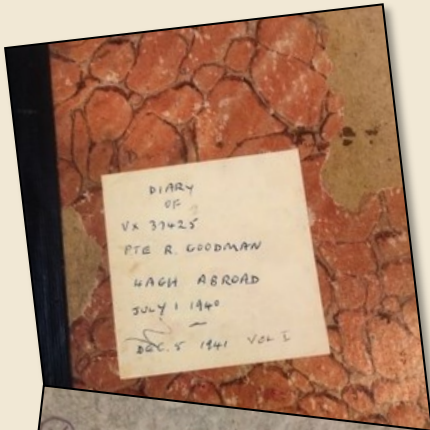
Clearly it is impossible to clarify everything that the 2/4 AGH went through in Tobruk. The mateship within the unit and their experiences was a lifelong experience which forged friendships for the remainder of their lives. The unit held regular reunions in Melbourne in the decades after the War. Dad went on to write the Unit's history with input from many of his colleagues. It was in his 80s before Dad was able to publish some of his diary. His experiences in Tobruk stayed with him for the rest of his life

"In dreams I recall those who fell in the Easter Battle and in the fight for the Salient.

In my dreams I still hear the screaming of bombs falling on the hospital, buildings and busy members collecting the casualties.

In dreams I recall the sad trip to the cemetery where the crude white crosses lay huddled together, some of them comrades and unit personnel, of Bluey, Mick and Curly.

Again and again, I return to the land of Bardin but tomorrow has come for many."



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DR JOHN DAVID RICE *Cont*

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.

John Rice wrote later that "At this stage the physical condition of the men was poor. The average loss of weight was ten to fourteen (pounds) and men became tired very easily and had no stamina. They were lean and brown and



Fig Tree RAP on left near large bend

looked fit but were actually in very poor physical condition." Even in the rear, the Battalion did not escape air attack. John Rice used this time out of the line to do a short attachment with 2/4 AGH, possibly as part of the on-going attempts to keep medical staff up to speed on clinical practices. The Battalion took up three more positions, including some time under the famous Fig Tree in two large caves. In the 26 days there, the physical condition of the men improved considerably due to cooler weather, better sleep, varied and better food, and improvement in morale and mental outlook.

The Allied fortunes in mid to late 1941 meant that their forces were isolated in the Tobruk perimeter. June's Operation Battleaxe had failed to relieve the forces, which caused General Blamey, senior Australian commander in the Middle East, to suspect that the Australian forces would remain apart for some time. The Aust Govt wanted its forces to operate as a consolidated force and with the 9th Division cut off in Tobruk, this wasn't possible. Blamey's request for withdrawal of the Division from Tobruk was not supported by the British and this only happened after Government-to-Government exchanges.

During 14, 15 and 16 Oct 1941 the 2/43rd, along with other units, was relieved and evacuated from Tobruk on 17 Oct 1941 without casualties.

The Battalion had spent 191 days in Tobruk, 124 in forward positions, 45 as Brigade Reserve and 22 as Divisional Reserve.

Casualties were 39 killed, 155 wounded, 25 injured and 367 sick, the highest casualties for units of the 24 Brigade. It won a sizeable number of awards and decorations. John Rice was Mentioned in Dispatches for his work.

The Official Historian noted generally that the RMOs in Tobruk had done "outstanding work".

Late October 1941 found 2/43 Battalion in Palestine for some much needed rest. November and December were filled with absorbing reinforcements, re-equipping and re-training. There were distractions though. In late November, a detachment of female volunteer aid workers, known as VADs, moved into the neighbouring encampment, which led to problems in separating the sexes. The War Diary noted circumspectly on 23 November that "in the afternoon, possibly due to their army training, some of the lads made contact with neighbouring or rather flanking units."

Leave into cities such as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem led to the usual activities. Early Dec, the troops were admonished for having "been seen riding on the top of buses."

John Rice's first Christmas Day away featured heavy rain and, to add insult to injury, a mini cyclone flattened the officers' mess, Salvation Army and Orderly Room Tents at midday. **(See next pages for more photos)**



The Mess looked like this until a tornado hit just before lunch.



However, Palestine was merely a passing phase for John Rice and the 2/43rd and on 8 January 1942 it was warned for relief of 2/27 Battalion AIF in "the Lebanon", as part of the overall plan for the 9th Division to relieve the Australian Seventh Division in Syria.

Syria and Lebanon had seen fighting between the Allied forces and the Vichy French forces early in the war, but after July 1941, the Allied forces there were effectively an occupation force, to guard against an advance by the Axis forces through Turkey. Added to the tension of war was the complicated nature of colonial possessions in the region, with the French holding the territory, but with high local aspirations for independence. Nevertheless, it was a good place to rest and recuperate, after the rigours of Tobruk.





Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc



DR JOHN DAVID RICE *cont*



“John Rice was ADMS HQ C Comd Keswick, Adelaide, from June 1955 to May 1957. He was promoted colonel and posted CO 104th General Hospital Adelaide, later 3rd General Hospital, from October 1959 to late 1960 and then posted as Honorary Colonel RAAMC, SA, from 1968 to 1974.”



However, 1942 was a time of change for John Rice. After detachment for “special duties” between 5 and 11 August, his time with 2/43 Battalion ended. After two years he was leaving to join the 2/8 Field Ambulance AIF. The reasons are not recorded in his personal correspondence. Rice returned to Adelaide with 2/8th Fd Amb in January 1943. Rice was posted anaesthetist 2/12th AGH on 31 May 1943 and then 2/11th AGH, in Warwick, QLD. Promoted to major in June 1943 he was sent to Buna, PNG, in July 1943. Rice became OC Med Div 2/11th AGH. The local environmental conditions were so bad because of poor siting and endemic disease, it required an intense engineering effort to establish the hospital. The hospital moved to Madang, in May 1944. He was given three months leave, June to September 1944. 2/11th AGH moved to Aitape on the northwest coast of PNG. Rice returned from leave to undertake anaesthesia, at 2/11th AGH. He left PNG in July 1945 and was discharged from 2/AIF on his return to Australia. Rice transferred to the CMF and was posted as RMO 29 Cadet Bn from April 1951. He was appointed, Jan 1952, as Surgeon 1 CCS and, in December 1952, promoted Lieutenant-colonel and appointed CO 1 CCS. He was ADMS HQ C Comd Keswick, Adelaide, June 1955 to May 1957. He was promoted Colonel and posted CO 104th General Hospital Adelaide, later 3rd General Hospital, from October 1959 to late 1960, and posted as Honorary Colonel RAAMC, SA, from 1968 to 1974.

After the war, Rice renewed his general practice at Mile End and, in 1948, in the Adelaide, CBD. He had a particular interest in anaesthesia and also in obstetrics. He delivered about 4,000 babies up to the late 1970s. He advised on the foundation of the Lyell McEwin Hospital in the newly developed town of Elizabeth. The main access road is John Rice Avenue. For his service to the Catholic Church, he was awarded a Papal Knighthood of the Order of St Gregory the Great in 1965.

John David Rice died after a short illness on 18 October 1981 in his beloved Calvary Hospital, North Adelaide. He left three sons; two were specialist physicians and one a lawyer.

Source: *Blood, Sweat and Fears III: Medical Practitioners South Australia, who Served in World War 2.*

CHRISTMAS LUNCH 1941.

As we research, one of the things we do is look in ANCESTRY to see if we can find possible Descendants of our Rats. A long story short, sees me sending a message to England, something I rarely do, I generally just send to Aust names and to my delight, I stumbled on the daughter and son in law, Geoff and Fran Ledger, of Lieutenant Francis Alfred DAVIES, SX8671, 2/43rd Battalion, and his large collection of WW2 photos.

Frank had quite a few photos of Christmas lunch 1941 at Khassa in Palestine!! It appears that there was a big storm in the time before the actual day with the result that the mess tent and various other structures were blown away or destroyed. It appears the officers commandeered a broken down hut in which their Christmas lunch was cooked and served. The poor blokes, as if being thousands of miles from home and having just fought at Tobruk weren't enough, the weather conspired to wreck their best laid plans for a decent Christmas... (Sue)



Tents flattened by tornado



Outside of Christmas venue before destroyed by tornado...

And AFTER...



More photos next page



Rat's Tales



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2/43RD CHRISTMAS IN KHASA 1941



"Inside of the Mess as originally set out."

Huge thank you to Geoff and Fran Ledger, daughter and son in law of Lieutenant Francis Alfred DAVIES, SX8671, 2/43rd Bn, for permission to share photos from Frank's large collection of 2/43rd WW2 photos.

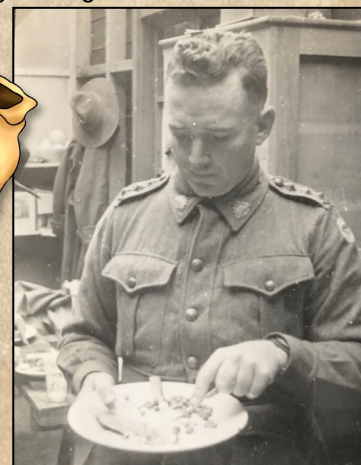


"The Officers commandeered a broken down hut in which their Christmas lunch was cooked and served. Gordon, (in middle, holding the turkey) is Capt Gordon Desmond Combe SX6977 2/43rd. At the time, he was a Second Lieutenant and I/C 18 platoon, D Coy. The other six soldiers in the photo are unnamed but hopefully somebody might recognise them."



Left: "This is Darky, carving the turkey." Does anyone know who Darky is? Some research shows it may be Laurice Jack McMAHON SX5660, (a cook) see insert.

Below: No names for these men in those two photos. Please let us know if you recognise anyone, all from 2/43rd Bn. Perhaps Darky, far right, below.



We believe this is Captain Donovan TAYLOR, SX8980, 2/43rd. If so, he was the Battalion Quartermaster.



Middle of photo, face obscured is SX9364 Lieutenant-Colonel Mervyn Roderick JEANES. Right is Captain Arthur Ivan Hare SX8897, 2/43rd, KIA El Alamein 1/11/42. He was B Coy Commander, while Merv was D Coy Commander.



Right: "Don Reid and I stayed in bed on Sunday morning" Enjoying a lie-in is Frank, left, and Lt Donald Reid, SX6493, commander of 9 Pn A Coy.



Left and right: "Lt Col W J Wain who poured out the beer and handed the biggest one to CO, Lt-Col William Crellin VX14029, 2/43rd"





Rat's Tales



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DR GEOFF DE CRESPIGNY cont kindly supplied by Anne Young

Geoff was at Tobruk for nine months through the siege which commenced in April. He was there for one of the longest periods and apparently earned the nickname of "The Old Man of Tobruk". He was later mentioned in dispatches. Not long before he left, he received a souvenir of his time which we still have.



The entry for 13 October 1941 reads:

Woken early by the tent nearly blowing down. Arose and tightened everything and found a really bad Khamsin in action. Activity during the day was impossible and I even had to postpone my bathe till the evening when it was calmer. Wrote letters most of the day, having received eleven which was one very bright spot.

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. Hell of a drive back in the dark with several stops and one or two near misses but made it all right.

20 Oct. Started shortly after 9 and visited Division, seeing new and old ADMS [Assistant Directors Medical Services], CRE office and said goodbye to Purser, but unfortunately missed the others. Then we viewed No 6 Jetty etc, and called on the NOIC – Captain Smith has returned and it was delightful to see him again – his "Do come to anchor" when proffering a chair was superb as usual.

Looked at the Docks Hospital and called on 33 Fd Hyg Sect on the way home. Went to AOW and AOD in the afternoon, then to [Fort] Pilastrino on a wild goose chase, across country to [Fort] Solaro, El Gubbi, visiting the War Cemetery and to Sidi Mahmoud. Stuka raid over the perimeter when we were there. Back home for a noggin. Evacuation on Kingston as a sort of demonstration and everything went very well. I officially handed over the Verbi at 2359 hrs [one minute before midnight], and went to bed a free man!

21 Oct. Up in good order and had the usual bathe. There were a few more details to settle in the office, some ringing up to do and the packing to be organized. I visited the Hospital, no-one was in but they are to use my ship. Farewell to the wadi at 6.30. Shortly after reaching HQ a raid occurred for an hour, plus shelling. We crouched a bit, no use getting laid out at this stage! Went down to the docks at 8.30ish after a small party with O'Shaughnessy and others. Called in on the NOIC for a final noggin. Lieutenant-Colonel Martin of the REs came in whom I was glad to see, also Harry Furnell. We boarded the "Napierin" due course and in good order – self, Little, Fitzpatrick and my luggage. Found Allan Campbell on board in lieu of Murphy.

Was given beer. We sailed at Midnight – and so Farewell Tobruk!



AUGUST 1941. OFFICERS OF THE 4TH AUSTRALIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL.

From left to right: Back row: SX9180 Captain (Capt) Richard Harper Formby; VX14654 Capt Lorimer Grant Morton; VX8315 Capt Kenneth Fitzpatrick Russell; Major (Maj) C Mortlett; WX3324 Maj Eric Walter Kyle; VX29579 Chaplain Owen Thomas Cosgriff; SX2912 Maj Alan Harding Lendon; Capt W.N. Collier. Middle row: VX25804 Lieutenant (Lt) Ernest Wharton Braithwaite; VX8231 Maj Thomas Langton Tyrer; Lieutenant Colonel G. W. B. Littlejohn; Colonel N. L. Spiers (Commanding Officer); VX13622 Maj Alexander Dougald Matheson; VX28600 Maj Arthur Barton Pilgrim Amies; Capt F. C. Barnett. Front row: Captain T. V. S. Brown; TX6008 Chaplain James Clemens Salter; WX3416 Capt Gerald Carew Moss; VX27403 Chaplain Maxwell Auton Radford; VX8347 Capt Thomas Steel; VX8236 Maj Leonard Walter Johnston; VX23711 Maj George Vincent Rudd; VX20307 Maj Frank D Stephens.





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RED CROSS



Longreach Leader (Qld 1923 - 1954) Sat 13 Dec 1941
THE RED CROSS AT TOBRUK.

The Hospital with the Australian forces in North Africa was scarcely established when the British forces began their retreat from Benghazi to Derna and so on to Tobruk, where the Hospital again began the process of establishing itself with only half its personnel and an insufficiency of equipment, supplies and stores. The story of the retreat of the Hospital is the story of the retreat of the Red Cross. The Society's representative stayed with the hospital always, travelling with the staff and giving assistance whenever and wherever possible. In the first difficult days in Tobruk the Red Cross Society worked side by side with the Medical Officers. This extract from one of the Red Cross representative's reports of the period, give some indication of the stress of work. "I have not kept a daily record of my work here as things have been so disturbed that it has been impossible to do more than just carry on".

As far as possible, patients have been regularly serviced but of course we have been short of many lines. "We were fortunate in receiving supplies from the British Red Cross who helped us for some days. We are all well but suffering from lack of rest." Three weeks later, although still working under difficulties, the Tobruk unit, judging from the reports, was more or less established and Red Cross service was beginning to be a matter of regular routine. One main difficulty was that Red Cross Headquarters was unable to deliver supplies to Tobruk because the port was receiving more than its fair share of the attention of German bombing planes. Red Cross, however, managed to carry on its services and issues to patients and supplied hot drinks and cigarettes to the men being evacuated from the town.

An indication of the supplies forwarded to Tobruk is given in one report which tells that 17 cases were sent, comprising 30 different items, which included 40 hot water bag covers; 66 yards mosquito netting; 12 bottles brandy; 160 pairs bedsocks; 10 fly sprays; 126 tins talcum powder and 1,000 sheets writing paper. An item of news from Tobruk of interest to Red Cross in Australia is that the Medical staff has used a quantity of serum that was collected in Australia from Red Cross volunteer blood donors, this serum has proved of great value and more is being sent from Egypt.



Getting Red Cross Goods To Tobruk
In several ways, the question of what the Red Cross did with all the goods it received, was dealt with at the Red Cross annual conference held in Melbourne recently, and the Shepparton secretary (Mrs. Parley Smith) gave details in her report to the local meeting on Monday.
The first consignment of Red Cross goods sent to Tobruk was wrecked, 23 cases—seven were destroyed by enemy action when trying to get them into Tobruk, and it took nearly three days to get the remaining 16.
The Red Cross stores are, at all times, subject to war-time losses and the Society—far from having surpluses—is fully extended trying to provide for those that come under their care.

Distribution of Red Cross goods to both the Tobruk Beach Hospital and the Convalescent Hospital has been on a large scale and included such items as smoking materials, shaving brushes, razors, soaps and blades, tooth brushes and powder, toilet soap, writing paper and envelopes and chewing gum.
Tobruk casualties are constantly arriving at the hospitals in Palestine and Egypt. They require, as a general rule, a full issue of Red Cross comforts, which consist of soap and face washers, tooth paste and brush, hair brush and comb, razor, blades, shaving soap and brush. They are all extravagantly grateful to the Society for its care and attention.
Wireless Sets—The Red Cross is providing wireless sets, where required, in all hospitals in which there are Australian patients. Thirty sets have recently been installed in one hospital in Egypt. The sets are marked in two places with the Red Cross. A set is also supplied for the sisters' recreation room.
Tobacco Issues—Tobacco and cigarettes are among the most popular issue made by the Red Cross. Recently one woman visitor issued tobacco or cigarettes to 1135 patients in one week, while in another unit 1175 issues were made during one morning.

Red Cross Resourcefulness
Life beyond Tobruk would have been a different story if it had not been for the wonderful resourcefulness of the Red Cross according to letters received in Australia from men of the fighting forces. Many letters of appreciation from the Middle East have been received telling of the odds that had to be fought by nursing staffs in caring for the men in the fighting front.
One states, "Life beyond Tobruk would have been a very different story—in fact life in any hospital in the Middle East. The water was salt and almost undrinkable, but for the patients there was lime juice and marmite, etc. which were supplied by the Red Cross, so put into it."
"Our 600 bed hospital was more than full at one stage and fresh cases were arriving at all hours of the day and night, not having had a meal for two or three days."
"But could that cook house staff take it? It was simply marvellous, but without Red Cross soup essences, oatmeal and marmite, jellies and other things it could not possibly have fed them all. It didn't stop at the foodstuffs though, truck loads of pyjamas, clothing, dressings, soap and razors were sent by the Red Cross."
"This was a typical letter from the Diggers and the Red Cross appeals to all who can to help in any way."

Above: Cairns Post
QLD 13 Nov 1941

Left: Daily Mercury



There are three Red Cross men in Tobruk where a handful of Australians—many of them South Australians—are barring the way to Egypt to an army of Germans and Italians. Their aid has been a Godsend to the sick and wounded, for life in Tobruk is grim. They assist at the military hospital and also pay their own calls. Through them the Red Cross has supplied the men's recreation room at the hospital with playing cards and an assortment of games which are greatly appreciated. Frequent visits are made to the wards, where tobacco and cigarettes are distributed and reading matter taken and exchanged. Casualty clearing stations are visited regularly and smokes given to all patients.
Incensant German bombing and shelling have failed to stop Red Cross rendering maximum service. Whenever a draft of wounded or sick men are to be evacuated, Red Cross issues coffee and biscuits as they board the hospital ship. At the minimal port another Red Cross outfit waits with hot drinks, food

Latest reports show that Red Cross cases containing more than 50 different varieties of stores, foods, etc., have been taken into Tobruk despite enemy attempts to sink shipping and to destroy the wharf. In the list are such things as tobacco, cigarettes, matches, cocoa, custard, vegetable extract, tinned fruit, sweets, chocolate, milk powder, towels, insecticide, ale, cards and sets of games.
Appreciation of Red Cross services is expressed in hundreds of letters written home by men of the A.I.F. One of the latest is from Private T. A. Carr, 2/8th Field Ambulance, formerly of Cheltenham. He says, "Red Cross have done a wonderful job giving the boys tobacco, cigarettes, razor blades, tins of boiled sweets, matches, etc., and keeping them in wonderful high spirits. They even carry a gramophone round with them to cheer up the sick and wounded. They visit the boys in the front lines and do everything in their power to cheer and brighten them up."

"Victor Harbour Times" SA, 12 Sept 1941





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FIELD AMBULANCE

There were 3 or 4 field ambulances per division in Australia. They were normally attached as one Fd Amb to a Brigade with one for Divisional Troops but could be allocated as circumstances required (eg 2 or more supporting Brigade that was in action with one supporting resting units). They could be allocated between divisions. This was common in New Guinea when a "division" was in reality a HQ used to administer and command a series of units involved in a single action, with the possibility that none had an "affiliation" with that unit.

Their role was to act as the first medical unit for the treatment of casualties from battalion Regimental Aid Posts (RAP). Fd Amb had transport to collect casualties from the RAP. Stretcher bearers from the Fd Amb could be used to supplement those from the Battalion to collect and treat casualties.

They were divided into a Bed Section, a Bearer Section and an Admin Section/HQ.

They had limited surgical and bed facilities. Their role was further stabilisation and assessment of casualties with more serious cases going back to Casualty Clearing Stations or General Hospitals. They could be taken to CCS first then onto a General Hospital or direct to hospital. Transport was by AASC Ambulance Companies.

If the casualty was minor they could be returned to their own unit after a short stay and treatment at Field Ambulance.



R.A.C.V. AMBULANCE ABROAD

Country members of the R.A.C.V. who contributed to the R.A.C.V. Patriotic Fund Ambulance Appeal will be pleased to learn that the Club has received letters from the drivers of some of the ambulances supplied through this fund. Driver Allan Haig is in charge of one of them, and he writes to say that he has already covered 5,975 miles in Palestine and Libya (including Tobruk), and that the ambulance is "giving first class service in the sands of the desert, and to the best of my ability is being well maintained. The ambulance has done its share of work during the air raids, and we have also carried in quite a number of casualties from the field, so its shows your kind donation is really a necessity." Driver Roy E. Fricker writes in a similar strain, but adds facetiously: "She is still in good condition, but I have been counting the shrapnel holes in the side — there are six in one side and two in the other. I can't make this out, for the enemy don't attack the Red Cross."

Above clipping from Violet Town Sentinel, Vic 26 Aug 1941.

Live Wire, Yallourn, Vic. 11 Sept 1940. With a total of £29,000 to its credit, the RACV Appeal for purchase of Ambulances for the fighting forces is closing. With a price of £500 for ambulances, this means a fleet of 58 vehicles; splendid donations from country and city members and firms.



“Live Wire, Yallourn, Vic. 11 Sept 1940. With a total of £29,000 to its credit, the RACV Appeal for purchase of Ambulances for the fighting forces is closing. With a price of £500 for ambulances, this means a fleet of 58 vehicles”



AN WAR MEMORIAL

024714

Western Desert, Egypt. 30 Jul 1942. Regimental Aid Post (RAP) of 2/43rd Bn.

Left to right: - Sgt BS MacFARLANE, Pte J MOUDIE, Capt JD RICE, MO, Sgt W TUIT, and Rev T GARD, Chaplain 4th Class, RC Padre.





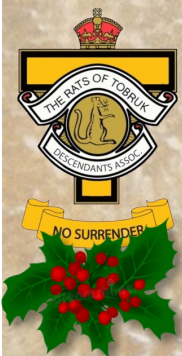
Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc



2/5TH FIELD AMBULANCE UNIT LEAVES TOBRUK



From Lloyd Tann's book "2/5th Fd Ambulance". Of course we do not have room to publish all of it, but anyone who would like to read this great piece of history here is the link.

https://www.ratsoftobruktribute.com/images/BOOKS/The_2nd_5th_Aust_Field_Amb_History_by_Lloyd_Tann.pdf
Patients for evacuation to Alexandria would be moved during the day from 2/4th AGH and prepared for evacuation by destroyer. Each night when there was no moon, a destroyer would enter the harbour at midnight, loaded with supplies, ammunition and reinforcements. We would load patients onto barges, and rendezvous with the destroyer at a different part of the harbour each night. As supplies were unloaded from the destroyer, the patients would be loaded on at 0200 hrs and the destroyer would head back for Alexandria. This timetable was necessary so the destroyer could clear enemy held coastal bases before daylight. The Germans knew what was going on and bombed the harbour almost every night, searching for the destroyer.

The evacuation procedure was a great example of cooperation by all concerned.

22 August 1941 was the big day for the evacuation from Tobruk of our unit and 9 Officers and 141 ORs were to be evacuated that night. We are thinking of "Bardia Bill". We are thinking of the Luftwaffe. They must be about due again, and this spot is no garden of roses. Surely they won't let us slide out as easily as all this. A light winks out at sea. We stir expectantly and stare fixedly in that direction in an effort to pierce the wall of darkness. A ship is signalling. It shouldn't be long now. It's longer than we expect, however, and we are just about to give it away as a bad job when, just about midnight, our ship arrives. Like a ghost, she emerges from the darkness, and glides gently, yet confidently to her berth alongside the "Serenitas". No sound of given orders, no hint of pulsing engines; not even a bump as she berths. We are deeply impressed. Sailors appear as though by magic. Orders are given quietly. Polish troops and stores come off from one end and we proceed to embark from the other. Everything seems to be working smoothly to a pre-arranged plan. We've heard a great deal about the efficiency of the British Navy, now we've seen it. From this day onward, the Boys of the Bulldog Breed will have no stauncher champions than the "Rats" of Tobruk.

Our ship is British destroyer "Jervis", a flotilla leader. We file along the deck, scramble down the companionway, ushered down below into the crew's quarters. Wherever there is space, there we are bedded down; the whole operation is completed in one hour.

As we get closer to Alexandria harbour we see the many ships riding at anchor. An officer informs us that we are now to "Dress Ship". Not being sailors, we are a bit vague as to what this "Dress Ship" business is; but we are soon put wise. We line up at the ship's rail, then, extending the line right around the ship, we stand to attention. This is a new one on us and we can see no future in it.

We soon do however and we are thrilled to the back teeth, and I guess, just a little embarrassed.

As we approach the harbour, our convoy strings out into one long line and we find that we have to pass down a sort of channel between the anchored ships. Each ship is gaily bedecked with flags.

We see the colours of all the allied navies, British, Australian, Free French and Indian; they are all represented. We see something else too!

On each of these ships, we see the sailors, dressed in their tropic whites, and they are standing rigidly to attention as they "Dress Ship". We are now drawing level with the first ship, a Britisher. Clearly across the water we hear an order rapped out. The ship's siren blasts out a heart-warming welcome and the sailors take off their white caps and give us three hearty, resounding cheers.

This occurs right along the line as we pass each ship. In other parts of the harbour, cargo vessels, tankers and shabby tramp steamers join in the welcome and the sky resounds to the tumultuous welcome. Never before have the troops been paid such an overwhelming tribute.

The "Rats" stand there and take it.

It is the proudest moment of my life. I look along the line of my fellow "Rats" in their battle worn uniforms. They are as shabby a collection of men as you could wish to meet, particularly in comparison with the spotless whites of the welcoming sailors, but I could hug every mother's son of them, I am so proud!

This is one day in my life that will live for ever!

For us, however, the long weary months of the siege are over. We don't know what the future may have in store for us, but together with the officers and men of the British and Australian Navies, who, by their gallantry and courage along the hazardous stretches of the notorious "Spud Run", made the withstanding of the siege possible, we can look back to our sojourn in Tobruk with quiet satisfaction, secure in the knowledge of a job well done."

"It is the proudest moment of my life. I look along the line of my fellow "Rats" in their battle worn uniforms. They are as shabby a collection of men as you could wish to meet."





Rat's Tales



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REMEMBERING PRISONERS OF WAR

"THE PEN"

CHRISTMAS ABROAD



*"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

CHRISTMAS DAY.

A day where loved ones come together, eat, drink, exchange gifts, laugh and sometimes argue, but regardless, are together around a dinner table laden with their festive favourites. A luxury lost for the soldier, replaced with a gut wrenching time of inner loneliness and a reminder of how things once were, how they should be and god willing, will be again.

Soldiers of today miss their families but technological advancement has ensured contact is no longer a letter lost for months, years, or perhaps never finding it's way at all. Phone, FaceTime and email, vessels of modern day correspondence between he and his family were not an option for our men and women of World War Two.

It is important to acknowledge our Rats did not encounter a Christmas as they fought on through the siege. They had already experienced a northern hemisphere Christmas soon after arriving and the lucky ones did again post-siege, but where depended on each one's circumstances. For many, it would be as a 'guest' of a hostile nation. So be it.

Fluctuations in morale...ever present emotions they fought with harder during the 'festive season' where they put on the bravest of faces. For some, blessed with a commandant with a sense of humanity, decency, Christmas would prove to be 'not so bad'. The catering staff did the best they could, in some camps the captors brought out a little wine, and if the promised Red Cross Christmas parcels materialised, or perhaps a Comfort parcel, the men were grateful.

Those with the misfortune of a stern, cruel overlord did not fair so well. The promise of a pudding, some chocolate and sweets evaporated. It broke their hearts but they rarely spoke of it, each man – and their were thousands – tried so hard, mostly for the sake of their mates, to ensure that brave face didn't crack, because if it did, well who knows...

They drank tea, pretending it was the best cuppa they'd ever had and dunked their saved stale biscuits into it, for fear otherwise they would break their rotting teeth.

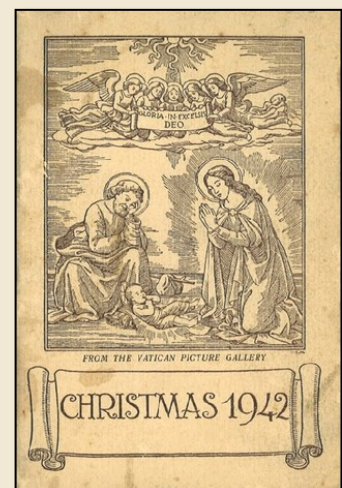
Simultaneously, the lucky ones ate fruitcake with a cup of tea made from fresh leaves, of course those who drew the shorter straw didn't know this until much later.

Parades and counts were endured just like every other day, and I mean ENDURED, because this was the coldest season of the year. Perhaps there was a church service to attend, and if so, they prayed they would not retire to their infested palls hungry. As their heads hit non-existent pillows, they all had the same dream, that of food, food they would have enjoyed had they been home, gosh that turkey would have been nice!

Finally a short but deep slumber before waking to another day, thankful to have made it, Christmas was over. Then a thought, by the grace of God, please, may I be home, sitting among my family next year, not forced to endure another Christmas abroad.

Lest We Forget.

Chris Kelly



Christmas 1942, photo in diary given to some of the POW's by Pope Pius XII's delegation.



Rat's Tales

Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc



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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**.

Sadly, with no known Rats of Tobruk alive, it is up to us to come together as one family and keep their memories alive for future generations. *Please support this Association.*

THINK HOW PROUD YOUR RAT WOULD BE TO SEE YOU ARE A FINANCIAL MEMBER OF AN ASSOCIATION TO KEEP HIS NAME ALIVE.



WE ARE ON THE WEB! <https://www.ratsoftobruk.com.au>

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT THIS ASSOCIATION?

Welcome to our sixth newsletter. We've heard that Santa Claus is coming to town! As founders of this Association, Sarah and I, along with committee and researchers, would like to extend warmest wishes for a wonderful, memorable Christmas season for everyone. As the year comes to a close, enjoy some special time with your friends and loved ones, cherish those moments, find joy in the little things this Christmas and remember to be good to yourself. We wish you health, peace and happiness in the coming year. Remember, "*Kindness is Free, Sprinkle that Stuff Everywhere.*" For those unable to get home or be with family for some reason, our kindest thoughts are with you.

Seasons greetings from DOTROTAs committee and researchers:

President: Roger Murphy son of Peter Murphy 2/9th
Vice President: Debra Goodwin great niece of Isaac Southall 2/13th
Secretary: Sarah Maas granddaughter Joseph Oakley 2/13th RAE
Treasurer: Betty Murphy daughter of Joseph Oakley 2/13th RAE
Sue Trewartha Daug in Law of Sydney Trewartha 2/43rd
Christine Kelly daughter of William Lambourn 2/17th
Craig Proctor son of Harold Proctor 2/24th
Ray Windlow 2/24th nephew of Leslie Windlow 2/24th
Martin Forsyth son of David Forsyth 2/43rd
Denise Dobinson daughter of John Mitchell 2/15th
Matt McHugh son of Brian McHugh AASC

Just a reminder to start saving up for the 85th Anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk. It will be held on 10, 11, 12 April 2026 at Five Dock RSL, Sydney. *We are already planning... its going to be a great event, we would LOVE to see you there.*

As we are non profit, we rely on those who are interested, to become financial members to cover Association costs. Its easy to do this on the website! Thank you everyone for your continued support, please contact us if you have something to offer to help in some way.

If you are researching information about your Rat and his unit, let us know, we are happy to help out. We encourage you to write up your relative's service records and information for your descendants.

So please, can you not only dig around in your cupboards, drawers and those tin boxes, to find and share your precious photos, diaries, memorabilia and letters, but write up and record what you have about your Rat, to ensure our future generations know something of what the Rats of Tobruk endured during their war service. Imagine how many stories would be preserved if we all did this! Please encourage other descendants you know to join with this group, it is a great way to make sure our Rats are never forgotten

Betty Murphy & Sarah Maas



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.
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