

**ANZAC DAY 2016 SERVICE
SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR
THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
EVANDALE, MONDAY 25 APRIL 2016**

Good morning everyone. Can I begin by acknowledging and paying respects to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community as the traditional and original owners and continuing custodians of this land.

Thank you to the Committee of the Evandale History Society for inviting Dick and me to the Evandale Anzac Day Service. I know from your Chairperson that Evandale has a very proud military history and can claim to be the home of Colonel Cyril St. Clair Cameron, who led the first contingent of Tasmanians in the Boer War, and the highly decorated Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray who received amongst other medals, the Distinguished Conduct Medal at Gallipoli and the Victoria Cross for his actions in commanding a company which captured Stormy Trench in the Somme, during which he often led bayonet and bombing charges himself. But you all know the stories of these two men. This year is the 75th anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk, and so that in itself is a good reason to focus on it today. A second reason is that my father, Ken Friend, was a 'Rat of Tobruk' and so I have had a personal reason to learn more about that particular episode.

After my mother died in February last year, we found in the box with Dad's medals some bits and pieces relating to Dad's military service in the Second World War. After looking at these on Anzac Day last year, our daughter Meg wrote a blog, which I have used in writing this speech. Meg was just four when her grandfather died at the age of 66. Thank you Meg for inspiring me to do some further research on Tobruk.

So where is Tobruk? It is a fortress town on the Mediterranean coast in North Africa, west of Egypt in what was Cyrenaica and is now Libya. It is in arid, treeless country supporting only a few camels, goats and gazelles. Through the town was a single bitumen road that crossed Cyrenaica. The Italians built a string of strong posts around Tobruk

spanning some 45 kilometres with a labyrinth of concrete-sided trenches. The town was an Italian military post from 1911 until it was captured by British, Indian and Australian troops (mainly the 6th Division) on 22nd January 1941. Tobruk was important for the Allies' defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal for it meant that Allied supplies could enter North Africa easily while the Axis forces had to bring their supplies in from the port of Tripoli to the west, across 1,500km of desert.¹

However, following the capture of Tobruk, the Italians called upon their German allies and the German army, led by Erwin Rommel, drove the British back into Egypt. Cut off from their main forces, the AIF fell back to Tobruk and retired behind its strongly fortified perimeter. They were surrounded by Axis forces on land in the east, south and west, not quite totally surrounded because the Allied navy could still bring in supplies by sea and take out wounded soldiers and prisoners. They were labelled 'desert rats' by Lord Haw Haw, the Nazi propaganda broadcaster, a term which the Australians adopted with pride.

Initially the Allied defenders of Tobruk consisted of the Australian 9th Division, the 18th Brigade of the Australian 7th Division, four regiments of British artillery and some Indian troops. The siege lasted 241 days, from April to November 1941. During this time the 9th Division and the rest of the garrison repeatedly repelled Axis forces' air and artillery attempts to capture the port. Of the attacks, survivors report that the dive-bombing 'Stuka' attacks from the air were the worst part of the siege. Meg recounts 95 year-old Ron Williamson saying, 'They'd come out of the sun. They'd scream down, and not only the natural scream from the aircraft – they had sirens on them as well'.

It was terribly hot and dusty the dugouts were infested with fleas. They survived on one bottle of water a day and meals were bully beef, rice and prunes (Really? Prunes? Is that that a good idea? Meg asked.)

British attempts to relieve the fortress failed in May and June 1941 and the 9th Division battled on. At first the Australian garrison focused on defence but as the troops proved their ability to repel thrust upon thrust by German and Italians, defence gave way to aggression as patrol

¹ Siege of Tobruk, Australian War Memorial,

fighters went into action each night. The description of the fighter patrols is chilling:²

Its members would creep upon an enemy post, surround it and then, at a given signal, rush in with the bayonet and kill soundlessly. A few brief minutes of bloody, sinew raising work and the foray would be over, with not a shot fired.

When the Allies sent in more troops under Operation Crusader, the Australian troops were evacuated. Later, in 1942, the replacement British and South African garrisons were once again attacked by Axis forces, and this time defeated. Tobruk was taken and remained in Axis hands until their final retreat from Libya in November 1942.

How many casualties? There were 14,000 Rats of Tobruk; 832 were killed, 2,177 wounded and 941 taken prisoner. The fact that there were so many casualties meant that it would have been a busy time for Dad. He enlisted in the army in May 1940 at the age of 25 years. At that time he was a newly qualified doctor working at the Children's Hospital in Camperdown, Sydney whilst studying to be a surgeon, studies which he had almost completed. We know little about his time in Tobruk. His army records show that he arrived in Palestine on 11th November 1940 and that he was appointed to the 2/5th Field Ambulance on 4th April 1941. History records that the 2/5th resumed work in Tobruk on 8th April.³ So Dad had his 26th birthday there on 13th April, in the early days of the siege and during what was called the "Easter Battle".

Half of the Australian garrison was relieved in August, more in September and October and the remainder when the siege ended in November. How long Dad was there is unclear. Piecing together information from his army records suggest that he was there from April to August. Over these months of the siege he worked with the 2/5th Field Ambulance and at times with the 2/4th AGH, the Australian General Hospital. This was the main hospital in the town of Tobruk. It's not clear whether he left with the 2/5th Field Ambulance when it embarked for

² *The Siege of Tobruk April 1941 December 1941*, Digger History, <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-battles/ww2/tobruk.htm> accessed 2 April 2016.

³ Second World War Official History, p 192.

Alexandria on 23rd August.⁴ In July the Ambulance had taken over the docks evacuation hospital. Dad was transferred to the 2/4th AGH on the 17th July and appointed to the 2/1st AGH on the 25th July. This hospital, the 2/1st, was based in Egypt and Palestine and later in Bougainville.

He talked little about the war. I remember him mentioning Rommel with a degree of respect. And I remember him recounting a story of a bomb or shell landing in his trench, which proved to be a dud and to have been sabotaged by a Czech working in a munitions factory. It contained the message, 'Greetings from Czechoslovakia'. Apparently there were Czech saboteurs in World War Two, but whether this really happened to Dad I cannot be sure and if so whether it was at Tobruk; I can't be sure of that either. Rupert Goodman — who was a nursing and ward orderly at the 2/4th General Hospital and who wrote the book *I was a Rat – Tobruk 1941* — talks of dud bombs landing on the hospital.⁵ In fact the hospital was bombed many times. In the six months the hospital worked in Tobruk, 47 bombs were dropped on the hospital area, starting with a disastrous attack on the 10th April when 35 staff and patients were killed, including two doctors.⁶

The other story that I recall relates to a small piece of paper Dad kept in his wallet for his entire life. It was a note written from another Medical Officer, a surgeon friend of Dad's, Peter Braithwaite. The note, which Dad found pinned to the uniform of a wounded soldier, said 'Ain't war grand Ken, Love Pete'. I am fairly sure that this happened in Tobruk.

Soon after its arrival in Tobruk, the 2/5th Field Ambulance moved to the Wadi Auda, not without difficulty as their convoy was subject to dive-bombing during the move. Mobile sections were organised with three battalions. During May the ambulance was very busy collecting and attending to casualties and the carries for the stretcher bearers were often long and hazardous and some routes were impassable at night.⁷ The work of the hospital is graphically described by Rupert Goodman, and his book gives me a much greater understanding of what life was like for the doctors and medical orderlies who were Rats of Tobruk.⁸

⁴ Second World War Official History, p 210.

⁵ Goodman, p 50.

⁶ Second World War Official History, pp, 193, 214.

⁷ Second World War Official History, p 213

⁸ Rupert Goodman, *I was a Rat – Tobruk 1941*, CopyRight Publishing Company, 2004.

There were no nurses. They had been evacuated together with 323 patients by ship on 8th April, the day Dad arrived.⁹ Rupert Goodman explains that the nurses were sorely missed.¹⁰ He also refers to the 2/5 Field Ambulance as a unit which worked closely with 2/4 General Hospital:¹¹

When it moved from the El Adem corner to Wadi Auda its mobile sections were arranged under Capt, McGregor to the 2/9Btn; Capt Macdonald to the 2/10th Btn and Capt Friend to the 2/12th Btn, names which became familiar to us at the hospital through the RMOs. They also used their transport sections to collect the wounded especially at night but clouds of dust made their tracks back to the hospital very difficult. An ingenious method of lighting the way was devised. Kerosene tins were upended over a hurricane lamp, with a hole cut in one side, so small light faced towards Tobruk. This was invisible to the enemy but guided the ambulances back to the hospital.

The Second World War Official History devotes some attention to the problem of neuroses and self-inflicted wounds — both were significant during the siege.¹² A special ward, Z Ward, was set up in an underground shelter for housing men with fear and anxiety states. This had the capacity to hold fifty patients. Its existence conveys how frightening the siege must have been. Goodman explains that the continuous bombing of the hospital, as well as the bombing of units under fire, had its effect on many soldiers who broke down under the strain. For a time diagnosis and treatment of them was not possible until Z Ward was created at the

⁹ Second World War Official History, p 192.

¹⁰ Goodman, n 7, p 29.

¹¹ Goodman, n 7, p 36.

¹² Second World War Official History, pp 199, 200, 203-4. This also gives a good account of how the medical services worked in Tobruk. There seemed to be three or four stages to the medical response to casualties. The first contact was with the RMO at a Regimental Aid Post. The RMOs at Tobruk did all types of work, from first aid to the running of miniature hospitals in caves or dug-outs. They worked closely with sections of the Field Ambulance, the second stage of the medical response, the third being the 2/4th Australian General Hospital. This had arrived in Tobruk in March and occupied the Italian barracks site which was suitable for surgical work and also opened a beach section for medical patients (p 192). There was also the 2/2nd Casualty Clearing Station, but this lost much of its equipment and was not able to fulfil its true function, so the 2/4th AGH also acted as a clearing station (p 208).

end of May. He says that few were malingerers. A decision had to be made to transfer them out of the line of fire or evacuate them for possible discharge as unsuitable for battle conditions.¹³

An enduring legacy for Dad from his time in Tobruk, Egypt, Palestine and Bougainville was a dislike of the heat. His wartime medical experiences also led to his decision after the war to forsake surgery for the new specialty of radiology. This led to him meeting a young radiographer, my mother, in a Sydney hospital and a decision to make their home in the cool climate of Tasmania. My mother describes symptoms that sound very like post-traumatic stress disorder. After the war he also suffered bouts of depression and was diagnosed with manic depression in his early forties, something he struggled with on and off for the next twenty years until he died at the age of 65.

As Meg wrote, after recounting the number of dead and wounded at Tobruk, "Countless more no doubt, like my Pa carried the less visible, less immediate scars of war. Today, when I stood listening to the bugle and sniffing my sprig of rosemary (and trying to get a wriggly 4 year old to understand remembrance) I thought of you Pa. I miss not knowing you."

Lest we forget.

¹³ Goodman, n 7, p 62.