

**LENAH VALLEY RSL SUB-BRANCH
70TH ANNIVERSARY
REMARKS BY HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR
THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, TUESDAY 7 JUNE 2016**

Good morning and welcome to Government House. This is an auspicious occasion insofar as it forms part of the celebrations of this your 70th anniversary year.

I do know that it was on Wednesday 27th February 1946 that the RSL Charter was granted to the Lenah Valley RSL Sub-Branch.

Further, that it had been a slow process, involving mostly World War One veterans, and that there were only about 20 individuals who formed the membership, which however had grown to about 60 at the first committee meeting of the Lenah Valley Sub-Branch.

Today – thanks to the perseverance of those early members and those who followed them – your membership exceeds 400 and the Pat Murnane Memorial Hall, your home, is well established as the principal social hub of Lenah Valley.

So that is a very significant position for an RSL Club, given those founding principles of returned service personnel doing what they could, with few material assets, to assist one another in re-adjusting to civilian life.

I noted too that it was back in 1952 that you held your first Anzac Day service to begin the tradition of an annual event for Lenah Valley.

You will all know that Tasmanian Governors have a close relationship with Anzac Day and that it is the tradition for the Governor to attend the Dawn Service at the Hobart Cenotaph; to take the mid-morning Salute in Macquarie Street; and then to attend the Main Service, lay a wreath and deliver the Anzac Day Address.

It so happens that on Monday the 25th of April this year I attended the Hobart Dawn Service, and then delivered the Anzac Day Address in Evandale – having been formally invited to do so back in July 2015, by the Evandale History Society, which organises that town's annual Anzac Day services.

And in that Address I reflected upon the fact that 2016 is the 75th anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk. I did so not least because my father, Ken Friend, was a 'Rat of Tobruk' and so I had a personal reason to learn more about that particular episode.

As you all well know, 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 labelled 'desert rats' by Lord Haw Haw, the Nazi propoganda broadcaster, a term which the Australians adopted with pride.

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 my father. He had 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. 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.

How long Dad was there is unclear. Piecing together information from his army records suggests 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 Alexandria on 23rd

¹ Siege of Tobruk, Australian War Memorial,

August.² In July the Ambulance had taken over the docks evacuation hospital. On paper at least Dad was transferred to the 2/1st AGH on the 25th July. This hospital, the 2/1st, was based in Egypt and Palestine and later in Bougainville.

Interestingly from a Tasmanian perspective, I have discovered that the 2/5th Field Ambulance was attached to the 12th Battalion (the Launceston Regiment) in Tobruk. (The 12th is a child of today's 12th/40th Battalion – the Royal Tasmanian Regiment). So there were many Tasmanians who were Rats of Tobruk. The 12th Battalion's Peter Braithwaite, a young doctor from Hobart who was the RMO for the Battalion's Regimental Aid Post, became a life-time friend of my father.

Dad talked little about the war, although I do remember him mentioning Rommel with a degree of respect. An enduring legacy for Dad from his time in Tobruk, Egypt, Palestine and Bougainville was a dislike of the heat. Another legacy from Tobruk was Dad's friendship with Peter Braithwaite. Dad's 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 Sydney Hospital in 1946 and with the encouragement of Peter Braithwaite, to a decision to make their home in the cool climate of Tasmania.

So this year is, I suppose, an anniversary of sorts for me too!

It remains now for me to congratulate you all for your ongoing membership of this stalwart organisation, the Lenah Valley RSL Sub-Branch, and please enjoy the hospitality of Government House this morning.

Thank you.

² Second World War Official History, p 210.