



# TOBRUK HOUSE NEWS

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION



THE RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION  
NEUROSCIENCE FELLOWSHIP FUND

# RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC.

ABN 23 136 193 517

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[www.ratsoftobrukassociation.org.au](http://www.ratsoftobrukassociation.org.au)

PHONE No 0432 232 502

GENERAL MEETINGS START AT 10.30AM

(NO MEETINGS JANUARY, MAY, JULY, AUGUST, SEPTEMBER AND NOVEMBER)

THE DATES & EVENTS LISTED BELOW ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE. FOR MORE UP TO DATE INFORMATION  
CALL 0432 232 502

Month / Date	Event Description
October 2	Tobruk House Open Day
October 28	General Meeting
November 20	Tobruk House Open Day
December 4	General Meeting / Xmas Luncheon – See booking details on page 4
February 24	Annual General Meeting
March 31	General Meeting
April 16	Tobruk Sunday

**Patron: Bill Gibbins**

**Committee of Management:**

**President – Bruce Bingham**

**Secretary – Lachlan Gaylard**

**Treasurer – Graeme Clifford**

Other Committee Members –

Tony Smith, Ian Marr,  
Karolina Sevcikova, Tony Codd,  
Marlene Bingham, Kelly-Ann McKinnis,  
Ann Marr, Stuart Tolliday

TOBRUK HOUSE NEWS

Deadlines

Editorial and Advertising

NEXT ISSUE: DECEMBER 2022

DEADLINE: NOVEMBER 4

We welcome contributions from our community  
but cannot guarantee publication.

Email is preferred with documents in Word and  
pictures in jpeg format but not essential.

Articles or letters with no contact details  
will not be published.

Main writers: Glenda Garde, Mike Kiernan,  
Lachlan Gaylard

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this Association.



## VALE

THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD, AS WE THAT ARE LEFT GROW OLD;  
AGE SHALL NOT WEARY THEM, NOR THE YEARS CONDEMN.  
AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN AND IN THE MORNING,  
WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.  
**LEST WE FORGET**

The President and ROTA Inc. members wish to extend our condolences and deepest sympathy to the families and friends of our departed comrades.

**BURGESS, Richard Francis (Dick), NX17372, 2/17 Battalion, 13 August 2022, 102yrs**  
**DAVIS, Dennis Albert, NX59087, 9 Division AASC, 18 August 2022, 102yrs**

## RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC.

### President's Message – October 2022

Dear ROTA Members and friends,

A welcome is extended to our new committee member, Ann Marr. Ann has always been a hard-working volunteer at our various functions. Thank you, Ann, for accepting the nomination.

Your committee has been extremely busy over the past couple of months. On the weekend of Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> and Sunday the 28<sup>th</sup> August, we had two consecutive open days. It was estimated that over 200 hundred attended on Saturday, many from the local community as committee members Graeme and Ian had a letter box drop the previous week. In addition, we had three military vehicles outside the front door, 2 jeeps and a Mini-Moke and trailer. In the afternoon, the Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums entertained the attendees – very well received. Sunday was quieter, but over the weekend, we signed up 11 new members. Donations and sale of merchandise was excellent.

As I mentioned in the last Tobruk House News, we have written to the Council and our local member, the Hon. Martin Foley to ascertain if the rates and land taxes could be waived or reduced. Currently our Patron Bill Gibbons pays these fees. We are still awaiting a reply.

I would be remiss if I did not, on your behalf, extend our congratulations to Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums Drum Major, Kathleen Matthies, who has been invited to participate as a Drum Major at the recent Edinburgh Tattoo.

On Sunday, August 28, several members attended a Commemorative Service at the Shrine of Remembrance. See page 13 for pictures and the story. After the Service we adjourned to Tobruk House for a barbeque lunch. We must ensure better publicity next year for a greater attendance.

A fund-raising sub-committee has been formed to prepare a submission seeking funding for refurbishing areas of our hall. This special sub-committee consists of the President, Treasurer and committee member Kelly-Ann McKinnis.

On Friday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, I accepted the Victorian Flag from my local member, Cindy McLeish, MLA. This flag will form part of our Flag Party during our commemorative services and will be displayed in Tobruk House. See attached article on page 16 in this edition.

Don't miss out on our Christmas celebrations, if you are able to come to Tobruk House on December 4. You will need to book early for this popular luncheon – details on page 4. I look forward to seeing many of you there.

Thank you for supporting your committee  
Good health & regards to all.

Sincerely,

Bruce Bingham. President



## LOOKING FOR INFORMATION

1) It has come to our attention that the '2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Australian Railway Construction Company' was at Tobruk during the siege. This has been confirmed by Dr Karl James of the Australian War Memorial.



Evidently, they operated a small railway which transported ammunition and other supplies from the port to local storage. There does not appear to be a lot of information available regarding this company. It is not included in the Australian War Memorial's list of units which took part in the siege of Tobruk. If you have any stories or information about this company, we would love to hear from you. Please send an email to [ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com](mailto:ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com).

2) ROTA is looking for a new editor for the Tobruk House News.

The Tobruk House News is currently a bi-monthly publication and fills a very important role in the Rats of Tobruk Association as it is distributed to members all over Australia.

The committee would like to have a smooth changeover and so expressions of interest in the role are invited now. The current editor intends to finish his tenure with the December 2022 issue.

The new editor will ideally be someone with an understanding of the organisation and a strong grasp of language including grammar and spelling, and an eye for detail. That person also needs a reasonable level of competence with software. (The THN is currently created in Word, but the software will be the choice of the new editor.) It is not necessary to live in Melbourne.



If you are interested, or for more information please contact the Secretary on 0426 242 754



*You are invited to the*  
**TOBRUK HOUSE CHRISTMAS LUNCHEON**

*December 4 2022*

*\$25 Per Person*

**BOOKINGS ESSENTIAL**

**RSVP with payment by November 20**

PH Graeme Clifford on 0432 232 502  
OR EMAIL [ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com](mailto:ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com)



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

The clipping below is from the December 1949/January 1950 issue of the Tobruk Echo. It is sad to note that the final two lines proved to be so true. (This could be read in conjunction with Hugh Patterson's poem "This place They Call Tobruk" printed on page 14/15 of this issue.)

# It Had Plenty of Names But it was still . . .

ANOTHER epic, well worthy of reprinting. We still don't know who wrote some of the classics we've been publishing, and apparently we won't be finding out. It doesn't much matter. This one typified most expressively our feelings:—

Artillery and dive-bombing,  
That's just the start of it,  
The Bren guns and the M-MGs  
Must add their little bit;  
Plus booby-traps and hand grenades  
To keep our nerves atwit  
They call it "marked activity",  
We call it "SH...".



It's night. We crawl into our 'oles  
Midst hordes of fleas and wish  
That dreams of home be undis-  
turbed  
Till dawn. A drone, then swish!  
We duck our heads as all the world  
With noise and flame is lit  
They say "High level Bombing".  
It's not—it's SH...



It's dawn. We're cold and hungry  
In OP Trig 209,  
We're waiting for the dawn  
attack—  
It must be nearly time.  
Three points of light, three distant  
'bongs'  
Three craters, near our pit,  
They call it "counter battery work"  
What rot! It's SH...



We're swimming in the briny sea,  
Ain't it a lovely war!  
Nude gods with bodies "all  
browned off",  
We stop. Was that the roar

Of planes? They dive and zoom  
Behind us as we flit  
Report says, "troops machine  
gunned",  
One shot"—with SH...



"Come and get it". Breakfast call  
The same for dinner too.  
You bet your bottom dollar  
It's bully beef or stew.  
Though not the sort of tucker  
To keep a feller fit,  
Called "army rations". Either cold  
Or hot — It's "SH...".



Then, of course, there's billy tea  
To add the zest to that,  
A glorious drink if you can break  
The surface skin of fat.  
Just hold your nose and take a  
gulp  
And drink, till you chew grit  
My Gawd! What's this? Just  
soot and sand  
Or what? JUST SH...



And so we grizzle all the day  
And half the night as well  
But remembering how we're paid  
We feel content — like Hell,  
We're fighting for democracy  
We're heroes, done our bit,  
To fight the war that ends all wars,  
Oh Yeah? BULLSH...!



## VALE DENNIS DAVIS



Dennis Albert Davis was born in Ealing in London on the 14th of June 1920. He was the third of four children to Charles and Emelie Davis. The family emigrated to Australia in 1938. Dennis found it difficult to find employment on his arrival as his English education certificates weren't recognised at the time. He finally found a job at the Sydney taxation office as a clerk. It was here that he met Margaret McNally from Yass - Dennis described it as love at first sight.

When war was declared Dennis figured if he were still in England he would've been conscripted and he felt it his duty to enlist here in Australia. Initially attempting to join the RAAF as air crew, he was rejected when it was discovered he was colour blind. Following the fall of Dunkirk, Dennis went down to Martin Place on his lunch break and enlisted in the AIF.

By early August Dennis was trucked out to a camp in Liverpool and taught the basics of army life. Initially attached to the 8th division, he was transferred into the Army service corps. With the prospect of going overseas nearing, Dennis and Margaret became engaged. (They married during a brief period of home leave in 1943.) He then volunteered for the 9th division. Dennis adopted a habit which would serve him throughout the war of keeping a picture of Margaret in his left breast pocket and a prayer book in his right.

He left Australia on the Aquitania, and while passing through the Red Sea he experienced his first air raid. He recalled it was quite the "noisy affair". Soon after, he arrived in Egypt and from there went by train to Palestine. Dennis drove trucks full of supplies, ammunition and troops in the major battle sites, including of course, Tobruk. After Tobruk he joined the peacekeeping force in Syria, and then drove to get supplies to the first battle of El Alamein. It was hard work and often involved creeping along at night in the dust with no windscreen and no lights.

By September 1943 Dennis was in New Guinea. It wasn't any easier and the smaller 4-wheel drive Jeeps were the only way to transport supplies, munitions, and people to the frontline. It was nerve-wracking. More leave followed in March 1944, but some of this Dennis spent in hospital grappling with an attack of malaria. His next posting was in Borneo in early 1945 where he was part of the 9th Division that took Labuan Island, off the coast of Borneo. It was here Dennis heard the news they'd all been waiting for; the Japanese had surrendered. Less exciting was the reality of ongoing attacks from Japanese troops cut off from all communications. Dennis was discharged on 12th November 1945, and he returned to his old job at the tax office where he remained for 42 years, finally retiring in 1980. Dennis and Margaret were extremely active and travelled extensively. In 2004 Margaret passed away; this Dennis would recount was one of his hardest moments.

Dennis passed away on August 19 aged 102. He is survived by his 2 daughters, 7 grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren.

## VALE DICK BURGESS



Born Richard Francis Burgess, he was the 4th of 7 children, having 3 brothers and 3 sisters. He lived on a small rural property in Pambula. Dick attended Pambula Primary School but was limited in his formal education by the distance of the closest high school and, at the age of 12, started working on the family farm, looking after the pigs. He described himself as "chief cook and bottle washer, drover, breeder of the pigs and slaughter man". In 1939, at aged 19 he attempted to enlist in the army after the outbreak of the war. Strict limits were placed on height and weight, and he was rejected. He had not reached the 5'6" requirement. When the enlistment height limit was dropped to 5'4", he was accepted, and by May 1940 he was on his way to the Middle East, serving throughout the siege with the 2/17<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

His war ended at El Alamein when shrapnel penetrated his steel helmet and skull leaving him unconscious with his brain exposed. Men fighting alongside him thought he was dead but fortunately he was picked up by stretcher bearers and transported to the 15<sup>th</sup> Scottish general hospital before being moved to the Australian general hospital on Christmas eve 1942. He was eventually repatriated to Australia to recuperate. Due to his war injuries, he was discharged as "medically unfit" and deemed suitable for clerical work. He was appointed to the PMG as a postal officer in 1943. There he met Dorothy who was working at Campsie Post Office as a relieving postwoman. They were engaged 3 months later and married in September 1944.

In 1944 Dick was appointed Postmaster at a Non-Official post office in Belfield, Sydney. In 1949 he joined the permanent staff of the PMG. In the years from 1949 to 1980, Dick's responsibilities at the PMG grew. He moved into administration and then into inspection of post offices. He was appointed to co-ordinate all post code implementation activities across the 2900 post offices and agencies across NSW.

Dick had played cricket, tennis, and rugby, representing his Pambula district in all 3 sports as a teenager. He was involved in golf, bowls, and snooker as a retiree. His war injuries made active sport impossible however, he made up for this by an avid interest in cricket. Dick joined the NSW Cricket Umpires and Scorers Association in 1953 and had a distinguished umpiring career.. Dick was the on-field umpire in 1960-61 as New South Wales hosted the West Indies. He also officiated with the touring English side ahead of the 1965-66 Ashes series and in the 1968-69 summer he umpired the Third Test of the Women's Ashes series.

Dick was a proud member of the RSL Castle Hill sub-Branch, of his 2/17<sup>th</sup> Battalion organisation and the Rats of Tobruk association. He regularly marched in Anzac Day marches until late into his 80s. Dick Burgess passed away peacefully aged 102 on August 13. He is survived by his two daughters, four grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

## 'ANOTHER BLACK RAT' - FREDERICK FLETCHER FENN SX1089, 2<sup>ND</sup>/10<sup>TH</sup> BATTALION

Many of our 'First Nations' people who enlisted at the start of WW2, served at Tobruk during the siege. Affectionately known as the 'Black Rats', their exact number is unknown. After the war, they returned home to a segregated county. At that time, they were not recognised as Australian Citizens, they were not counted in the census, and they could not vote. This is the story of one of those courageous men.

Frederick (Fred) Fletcher Fenn was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1916 at a cattle station north of Oodnadatta, South Australia. His father a white man, was the manager of the station and his mother was an Aboriginal woman. He knew his father who he saw on occasions, however he did not know his mother. It was his understanding that she must have been employed at the station. At the age of five, Fred was placed in an orphanage in Adelaide and brought up there until he left at age 13, to work as a farm hand.



When Fred enlisted on 20 November 1939, he was 23 years of age. After initial training he was attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Battalion and served as a driver. He disembarked in the Middle East on 31 December 1940.

Whilst at Tobruk, Fred risked his life to save two of his mates, who had been seriously wounded by a nearby shell burst, during a fierce artillery barrage. One of his mates had one leg blown off and the other was badly fractured. He was in danger of bleeding to death. Despite being under heavy attack, Fred ran almost 200 metres to a truck, drove it back and picked up the two wounded men.

Unfortunately, when driving towards shelter, he ran into a barbed-wire entanglement. Still under heavy shelling, he single-handedly cleared the truck and finally made it to safety and medical help. He later described the incident as 'one of the most terrifying experiences in his whole life'.

Both of his mates survived and were evacuated back to Australia. Surprisingly, it does not appear that Fred was given any formal recognition for this heroic act.

After the Middle East, Fred went on to serve in the Pacific where he was wounded in action. He was discharged from the Army on 2 October 1945, shortly after returning to Australia for the last time. After almost six years in the Army, he found living as a civilian again difficult. He just wanted to get married and live out his life in peace and harmony. He didn't talk much about the war.



Being a person with Aboriginal blood, he found some aspects of Australian society rather strange. He could not enter a hotel and have a drink with his mates.

**The only way he could get around this was to apply for an 'exemption certificate' from the provisions of the Aborigines Act. To do this he had to get three 'learned gentlemen' to certify that in their opinion Fred was able to conduct himself in a proper manner. Often referred to as a 'dog licence', this made him an honorary 'white'. Whilst this gave him access to hotels, it also meant that legally he was not allowed to mix with aboriginal people.**

Fred joined the South Australian branch of the Rats of Tobruk Association and was eventually made a Life Member. He died on 17 August 1990, at the age of 74.

Fred's experience in Tobruk is described in 'Purple and Blue: The History of the 2/10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, AIF' by Frank Allchin. His bravery in saving his mates' lives, was also widely reported in local newspapers at the time. The two mates were Sidney Amey (SX766) and Murray Suridge (SX697).

Acknowledgement: This account draws on an article by Clair Hunter titled: "Frederick Fletcher Fenn: 'One of the most terrifying experiences in my whole life' ", which has been published on the Australian War Memorial website ([www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/frederick-fletcher-fenn](http://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/frederick-fletcher-fenn)).



## ACK-WILLY AND THE OMG

AWL ....in case you don't know what this acronym denotes, it's 'Absent Without Leave', and interestingly, many WW2 servicemen have a listing of this in their NAA records. Ack-Willy comes from the military signaling code in which Ack represented 'A' and Willy represented 'W'. 'OMG' in this story is the Old Melbourne Gaol.

For some, being AWL was just a few days of 'unofficial' leave, culminating in some form of minor punishment such as a docking of pay. For others, depending on the number of days a soldier 'took off', it was the precursor to far more serious consequences....perhaps eventually leading to a charge of desertion. When perusing the records of many Rats, an 'AWL' listing often pops up and behind each one there is undoubtedly a story.

Abw held Dick of L. area on 27-1-44  
change. (1) Deserting His Majesty's Service  
in that he was A.W.L. from 28-6-42 to  
1730 hrs on 18-1-44  
Finding: Guilty  
Sentence: to undergo detention for 18 months A.F.L. W.L.  
to confinement: boarded by Col. Christison  
General list no 2 of L. area 29-1-44  
Date of promulgation 10-2-44  
Auto forfeiture 570 days pay. Total  
Days in confinement awaiting trial 8 days  
Total net forfeiture 1125 days pay.

Our local Rat Tommy Pritchard recounts the time when he was late back to his barracks in Albert Park, after being granted a short stint of leave which he had spent at home with his family in Box Hill. His WW1 veteran father was driving him back to camp when unfortunately, their car had a flat tyre. After a quick repair and upon arriving back 10 minutes late, Tom tried to explain what had happened, but his commanding officer was having none of it and as a result Tom ended up being confined to barracks for a week. That taught him a valuable lesson. In Tom's own words, "Never tell the truth.... it will only get you into trouble!"

A later AWL episode when he travelled to Melbourne from Tenterfield in NSW with some mates, (instead of waiting his turn for official leave) resulted in Tom spending 2 weeks in detention 'splitting rocks', as he describes it, after he had returned to camp. However, he recalls that their guards were WW1 veterans who actually treated those in detention quite well (perhaps because these men fully understood the need to catch up with family, having been through it themselves).

My father, Neil Barrie, a mate of Tom's in the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, also has a couple of AWLs listed in his records. One of these occurred because he had taken 'an extra 10 days' after returning from Milne Bay to marry my mother in April 1943. He spent it honeymooning in Sorrento on the Mornington Peninsula. After surrendering voluntarily to Caulfield Army Camp, he ended up in Old Melbourne Gaol (with some actual deserters and German POWs) where he spent two very uncomfortable nights. The gaol was being used as a military guardhouse at the time for soldiers who were AWL or got drunk in town, and conditions were similar to those experienced by prisoners who had been locked up in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

*"If you were caught talking in the cells, the provos would make you piggyback someone in the courtyard for 15 mins. You slept on bare boards with just one blanket and at daybreak you had to mop out your cell before breakfast."*

He recounted that, when appearing before the commanding officer of the Old Melbourne Gaol, he felt like Breaker Morant, with the possibility of being shot at dawn. (OMG!) Fortunately, he was merely fined £4 and forfeited 10 days' pay.

## 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF ROTA'S WEBSITE ([www.ratsoftobrukassociation.org.au](http://www.ratsoftobrukassociation.org.au))

It is now 10 years since our website was first launched. During this time, it has increased awareness of the Siege of Tobruk and this association. It has been a significant driver of growth in membership.

This is evidenced by the many visitors to the site and emails received regarding content on the site. The Honour Roll in particular generates a lot of interest and this has resulted in the details of many siege veterans being added or corrected. This article reflects on the history of the site.

It was in 2011, when former ROTA member Owen Carton approached the Committee, seeking funding for the development of an association website. The Committee approved the project and provided the necessary funds. It must be noted that the Committee at that time consisted mainly of siege veterans, who, in the main, would not have had a good appreciation of this modern technology. Therefore, the decision to support the project, was a huge 'leap of faith' for them.

Owen enlisted the assistance of Belmark Consulting and THC Designs to bring the site into existence. The original site was launched in 2012 and ROTA leapt into the digital world.



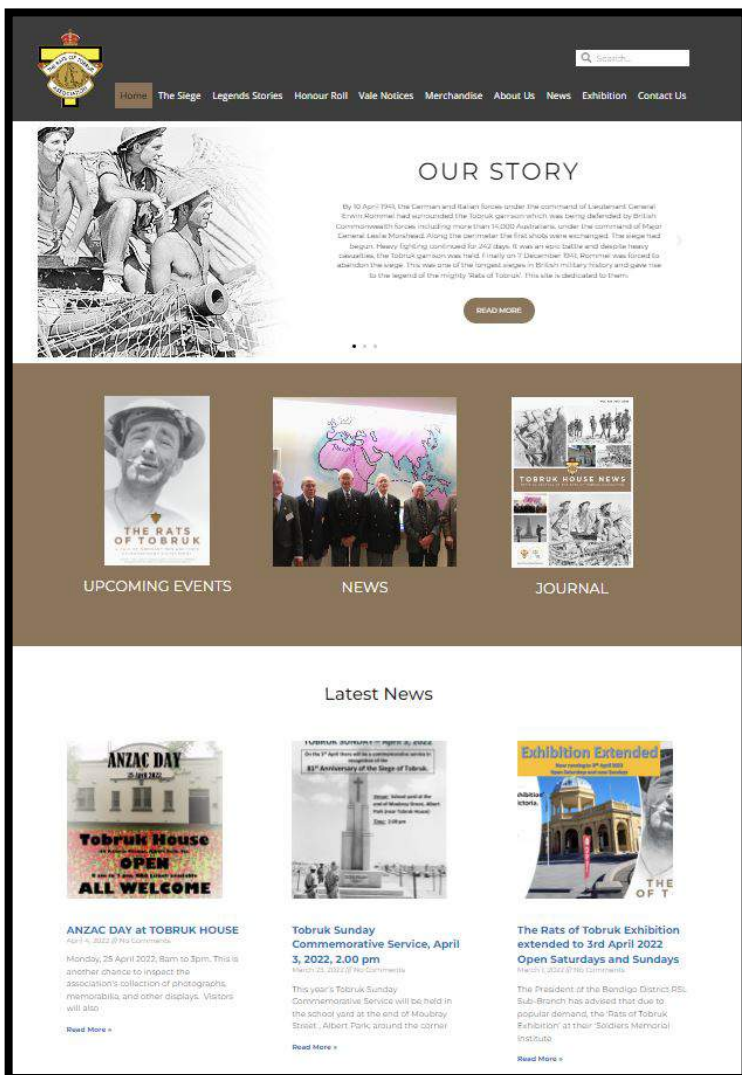
*Original 'Home Page' of Website*

During 2013, after a serious health scare, Owen made the difficult decision to hand over responsibility for the website to someone new. Following a comprehensive interview process Mike Kiernan was nominated by Owen. He put forward this recommendation to the Committee, which was agreed to. Mike has maintained the website ever since.





'Home Page' of redeveloped Website



Current 'Home Page' of Website

Of course technology keeps moving on, as do the expectations of users. In 2018, the website was completely redeveloped with the assistance of ROTA member Bob Gannaway.

For the first time visitors could learn about the strategic importance of Tobruk, Ming the Merciless, The Desert Fox and Lord Haw-Haw. Legends Stories, the Honour Roll and a Merchandise page, were other important inclusions.

As we commemorated the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 'Siege of Tobruk' 2021, the Committee decided to give the website a new look. So, with the help of graphic designer Lisa Cammarano, the project was launched.

Lisa was responsible for the appearance and layout of our very successful 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition, and the committee felt it would be good to update the website to be in keeping with this new image. This resulted in the website you see today.

(Lisa also updated the cover page of the Tobruk House News to bring it into line with the website.)

The website is today the first touchpoint for most people looking for information about the Rats and our organisation, and as such its ongoing success is dependent on it remaining relevant and up to date. We appreciate any feedback from members regarding it, including suggestions for improvement.

Why not write the story of your father, grandfather or uncle, for inclusion on the 'Legends Stories' page. [ROTA Legends](#) Please include some photographs.

We are also interested in hearing from members who can assist with running the site. Please send an email to [ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com](mailto:ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com) for more information



## OPEN WEEKEND AT TOBRUK HOUSE

The late August open weekend at Tobruk House was another great success with over two hundred visitors across the weekend, many for the first time. The focus of this event was the personal stories of some of our Rats, illustrated with photographs and letters home, and letters from home.



Visitors were greeted on arrival at the hall by a selection of military vehicles including a Jeep from the WW2 era, supplied by members of the Military Vehicle Association, (who are also long-term users of Tobruk House).

In addition to the letters, photographs and panels telling the story of the siege, there was a large display of original surgical instruments such as were used in the hospital at the time, (rather grisly!) and a display of German army artifacts, kindly supplied by members of the Military Vehicle Association.



Always popular, the Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums sent a delegation to entertain visitors in the afternoon, playing a selection of popular bagpipe tunes.

The merchandise offerings sold well as did new memberships.

A table at the front of the hall displayed the photos of our known remaining Rats (four at that time), which was cause for pause and quiet contemplation.





## SERVICE AT THE SHRINE



*ROTA president Bruce Bingham reads the opening address*



*Committee member Stuart Tolliday reads the poem*



*Bogdan lays the wreath for the Carpathian Brigade*



*Committee member Karolina Sevcikova lays the wreath for the Australian Rats of Tobruk*

The annual service at the Shrine of Remembrance to commemorate the Polish Carpathian Brigade's 81<sup>st</sup> anniversary relieving the 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Australian 7<sup>th</sup> Division during the Siege of Tobruk took place on Sunday August 28.

The president of ROTA gave the opening address which was followed by the reading of the poem "This was Tobruk" written by Hugh Patterson (Banjo Patterson's son). Wreaths were then laid in memory of the Australian Rats and the Carpathian Brigade. Members and friends are always most welcome to attend this very moving short ceremony.

### Address at the Shrine of Remembrance by Major Bruce Bingham (retd.)

This year marks the 81<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the siege of Tobruk- the longest siege in British military history lasting 241 days. The Allies, including the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian division, had defeated the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army between 9<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1940 – 9 Feb 1941, including the capture of Tobruk. Allies, including the new 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division then relieved the 6<sup>th</sup> Division and other allied forces. They were short of equipment and supplies.

The newly arrived German army under the command of Lieutenant General Rommel and the new Italian army forced the allied army to retreat to the Egyptian border, leaving the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division, some British artillery Regiments, armored regiments and a battalion of Indians to defend the town of Tobruk.

The allied forces were under the command of the Australian, Major General Leslie Morshead. The Australian 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade from the 7<sup>th</sup> Division had arrived in Tobruk on April 10, whilst the 9<sup>th</sup> had arrived on April 12. This date was the start of the Siege.

Rommel immediately attacked but was halted by the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division. In doing so, he lost a number of tanks and suffered many casualties. This was the first-time during WW2 that the German offensive had been halted.

Tobruk was important to Rommel as he required a supply port so he could continue to attack Egypt and the Suez Canal. During the ensuing months Rommel made many attempts to attack Tobruk but was repulsed by the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division and the allied forces. The Tobruk garrison was to hold Tobruk for two months when they would be relieved. Despite a number of attempts, to break through the German defenses, they failed.

The Tobruk garrison was subject to daily bombings by the German and Italian Air forces and regular shelling and rifle fire. The climate in Tobruk was severe, extremely hot days and bitterly cold nights. It was infested with rats, flies and fleas and severe sandstorms that made life unbearable. Food was short and they lived on bully beef and biscuits and canned meat and vegetables. Needless to say, their health declined. During the siege, all supplies including food and ammunition had to be brought in by sea and the wounded and prisoners also were evacuated by sea.

Between the 19-29 August, 4000 men of the Polish Carpathian Independent Rifle Brigade and the Czech 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion were landed by sea. At the same time, 5000 men of the Australian 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the Indian 18<sup>th</sup> King Edward's Own Cavalry were evacuated. Between September 19 - 27, elements of the British 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade arrived and between October 12 and 25, the rest of the British 70<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division arrived and most of the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division were evacuated, leaving the 2/13<sup>th</sup> and the 2/15<sup>th</sup> Battalions behind in Tobruk. During the latter part of the siege, the Polish Brigade served on the western frontier and were highly regarded by the Australians.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> November, Operation Crusader began with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, including the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division attacking the Tobruk perimeter. The Polish Carpathian Brigade fought alongside the British 70<sup>th</sup> Division and were responsible for the success of the break-out. On December 9, they seized the important Madauar Hill and the town of Acroma, breaking through to meet up with the Eighth Army. So highly regarded were the Polish Brigade they were awarded the prestigious title of the Rats of Tobruk by their Australian comrades in arms. During the siege the Polish Brigades lost 127 K.I.A., 467 wounded and 15 missing.

On December 7 Rommel was forced to lift the siege owing to the lack of support and supplies. The Polish Brigade remained in Tobruk until March 17, 1942, when they were withdrawn to Palestine.

After the War, 1500 Polish Rats came to Australia and made their homes in Victoria and Tasmania.

We thank the Polish contingent here today for continuing the legacy of the Rats of Tobruk.

THN editor Stuart Tolliday then read Hugh Patterson's poem, prefacing it by saying that based on his father's recollections of the conditions in Tobruk, the poem was something of an understatement. (The poem in 'From the Archives' on page 5 might be closer to reality.)

This Place They Call Tobruk by Hugh Patterson

There's places that I've been in  
I didn't like too well,  
Now England's far too blooming cold  
And Winton's hot as hell;  
The Walgett beer is always warm  
In each there's something crook,  
But each and all are perfect to  
This place they call TOBRUK.



We reckoned El Agheila  
Was none too flash a place,  
El Abiar and Beda Fomm  
Weren't in the bloody race,  
At the towns this side Bengasi  
We hadn't time to look,  
But I'll take my oath they're better than  
This place they call TOBRUK.

I've seen some dust storms back at home  
That made the housewives work.  
Here there's enough inside our shirts  
To smother all of Bourke.  
Two diggers cleaned their dug out  
And their blankets out they shook -  
Two Colonels perished in the dust  
In this place they call TOBRUK.

There's militant teetotallers  
Who abhor all kinds of drink.  
There's wives who break good bottles  
And pour them down the sink,  
This place would suit them to the ground -  
We've searched in every nook,  
But booze is rare as hen's teeth in  
This place they call TOBRUK.

There's centipedes like pythons  
And there's countless hordes of flees,  
As big as poodle dogs they come  
A snapping round your knees,  
And scorpions large as A.F.V's  
Come out to have a look,  
There's surely lots of livestock in  
This place they call TOBRUK.

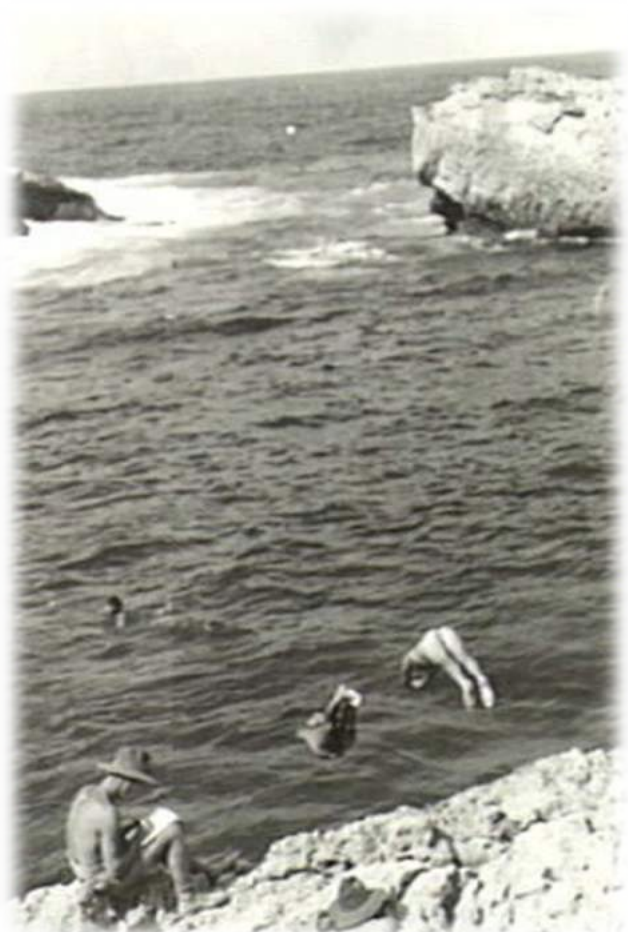
The shelling's nice and frequent  
And they whistle overhead.  
You go into your dugout  
And find shrapnel in your bed.  
And when the Stukas dive on us  
We never pause to look -  
We're down our holes like rabbits in  
This place they call TOBRUK.

Sometimes we go in swimming  
And float about at ease.  
The water clear as crystal  
And a nice clean salty breeze,  
When down comes blasted Hermann  
And we have to sling our hook -  
We dive clean to the bottom in  
This place they call TOBRUK.

I really do not think this place  
Was meant for me and you.  
Let's return it to the Arab  
And he knows what he can do.  
We'll leave the God-forbidden place  
Without one backward look.  
We've called it lots of other names  
This place they call TOBRUK.



*Anti aircraft shells explode during a Stuka bombing at Tobruk  
Photo from the Australian War Memorial*



*Members of the 2/32<sup>nd</sup> swimming during a quiet time at Tobruk  
Photo from the Australian War Memorial*



*FLAG TO FLY: At the presentation of the Victorian State Flag to the Rats of Tobruk Association on Friday were Member for Eildon, Cindy McLeish (left) and President of the Rats of Tobruk Association, Major Bruce Bingham (Retired). PHOTO: Pam Zierk-Mahoney Id:30345*

Member for Eildon, Cindy McLeish, MLA, presented the Victorian flag to Major Bruce Bingham (Retired) current President of the Rats of Tobruk Association, in Mansfield last Friday. (Sept 16)

"The Association has many flags representing the countries that participated in the Siege of Tobruk during World War 2, but did not have the Victorian flag that is required for commemorative services such as 'Tobruk Sunday'", Major Bingham said.

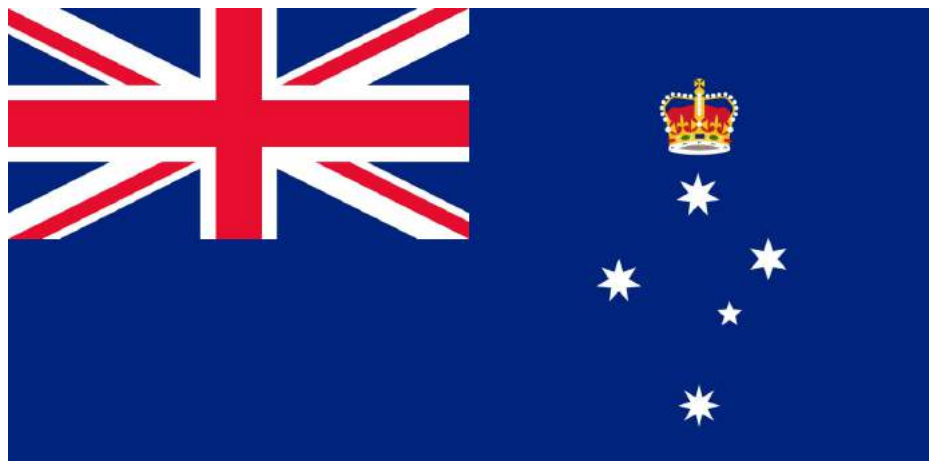
The Tobruk Sunday service is held at Tobruk House on the nearest Sunday to April 12, the anniversary of the date that the siege commenced.

Major Bingham said the Association expresses its thanks to Ms McLeish for the presentation of the flag and her ongoing support.

The flag of Victoria, symbolising the Australian state, is a British Blue Ensign defaced by the state badge in the fly. The badge is the Southern Cross topped by an imperial crown, which is currently the St Edward's crown. The stars of the Southern Cross are white and range from five to eight points, with each star having a point pointing to the top of the flag.

*(The number of points on each star is related to the relative brightness of each of the stars. St Edward's crown is the crown made for Charles II in 1661 and used for all coronations since then.- Ed)*

The flag dates from 1870 with minor variations, the last of which was in 1953.





## ROTA MEMORIAL SEATS AT THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

On a recent visit to the AWM in Canberra, the son of ROTA past president Graham Gibson spotted a small plaque carved into the two seats in the Hall of Memory. A request for more information of the providence of these seats resulted in this response from the AWM.

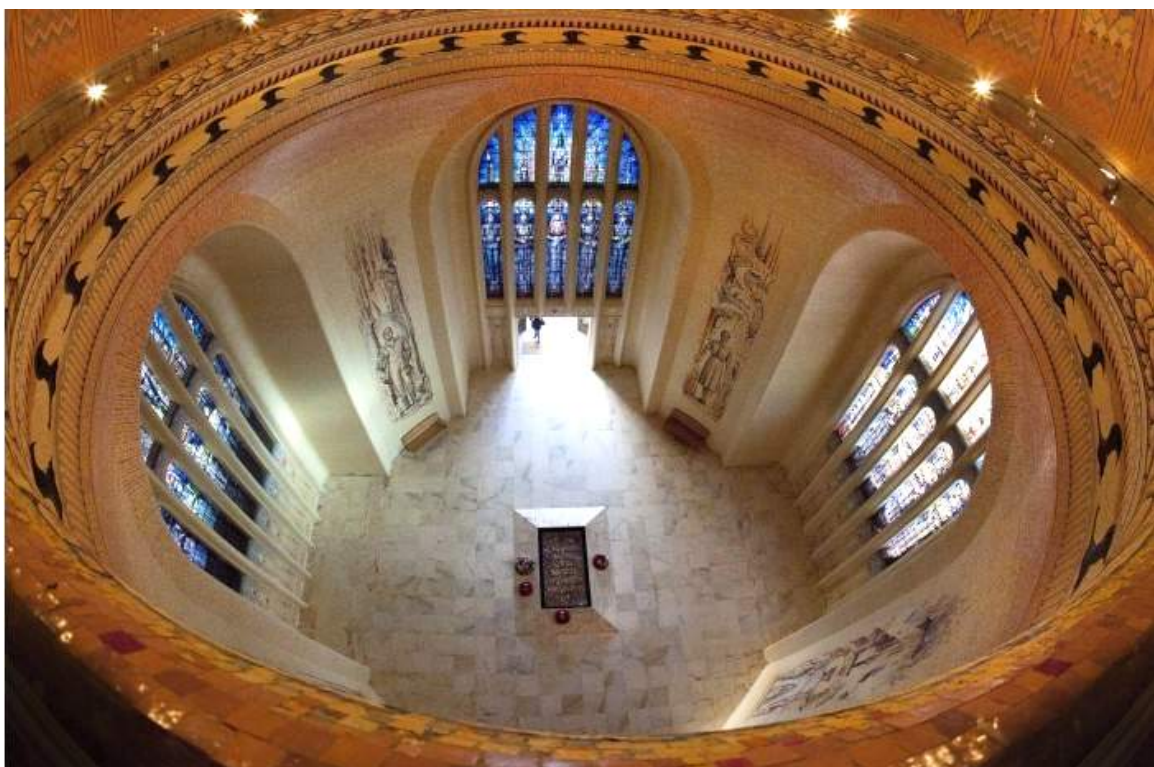
In early 1994 the Memorial was approached by the Rats of Tobruk Association to commission a commemorative work of art for the Hall of Memory.

It was proposed that the Rats of Tobruk Association sponsor the design and creation of some timber bench seats for the Hall of Memory. The Memorial then conducted a design competition in which three local artists were invited to submit drawings for the seats, according to a brief prepared by the Australian War Memorial, in collaboration with Bligh Voller Architects and the Rats of Tobruk Association.

Entries were assessed by the Art Section and Senior Management of the Memorial, in consultation with Bligh Voller Architects and the Rats of Tobruk Association.

It was decided to commission two Victorian Ash benches from Bob Fenderson of Design Craft, Queanbeyan. The design was selected for its incorporation of some simple design features of the building while not detracting from the surrounding decorations of the Hall of Memory.

On 25 January 1995 a ceremony was held in the commemorative courtyard for the presentation of the seats.





## AFFILIATE MEMBERSHIP – 10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY CONGRATULATIONS

The decision by the veteran members of the Rats of Tobruk Association to open membership to their descendants and other interested members of the community has proved to be a wise one. It has ensured that as the number of living veterans dwindled, the organisation has grown, and hence the importance of the unique deeds of this special group will not be forgotten.

We congratulate the following ROTA members who have achieved 10 years of membership. Their continued support of the association in this way is greatly appreciated.

Irene Coote, Angus Macdonald, Margaret Jacobs, Dennis Storer, Graeme Robertson, Dorothy Clark, June Hagar, Diana Bates, Donald Downie, Trevor Gent, David Bell, Trevor Burman, Michael Potter, Denis Potter, Christina Stefurak, Michael Pugh, Graham Gibson, Heather Macfarlane, Michael Stepanavicius, Tony Sedawie, Bernard Maguire, Susan Mansfield, Craig Cunningham, Robert Gannaway, Mary Nurthen, Frances Henwood, Jack Little, Janice Lees, Dianne Dartnell, Brett Dartnell, Lance Dartnell, Trevor Underwood, Elizabeth Hood, Robert Kiernan, Ronda Brien, Evan Dower, Luke Dower, Mitchell Dower, Nicholas Simpson, Judith Wynd, Patricia Fraser, Darryn Morrison, Alison Caruana-Smith, Valerie Bell, Louise Marcroft, Daryl Radnell, Karolina Sevcikova, Sandra Strack

## NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members to ROTA:

**Leanne George Graeme Warfe Neil Campbell Julie Reynolds Robin Spry  
Jennifer Littlechild Brendan Mahoney Lew Potter Kathleen Kiernan Vivien Ellard  
Martin Bull Ken Fraser Chrissa Keramidas Andrew Balcerzak Catherine Falcke**



Your membership helps to ensure the legacy of the Rats of Tobruk

## RATS OF TOBRUK NEUROSCIENCE FELLOWSHIP FUND

The Rats of Tobruk Association's (ROTA) commitment to the care of future generations of Australian children, through the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Neuroscience Fellowship, enables vitally important research and care for neurology patients and their families.



In 2010, The Rats of Tobruk presented a cheque for \$1.5 million to the RCH, generously donated from the sale of their Albert Park meeting hall in 2007. With this gift began the RCH Department of Neuroscience's Rats of Tobruk Neuroscience Fellowship, providing a unique training for up-and-coming neurologists, and changing children's health both in Australia and around the world. The ROTA Neuroscience Fellowship has an inspirational track record of success and achievement and is incredibly valued in the RCH community.

If you would like to make a donation, you can send a cheque or money order made out to the 'ROTA Neuroscience Fellowship Fund', to the RCH Foundation, Level 2, 48 Flemington Road, Parkville, Victoria, 3052. Please include your name and address so that a tax receipt can be sent to you.

To learn more about how you can contribute to this most worthy cause by adding a gift in your will, or most importantly, to let the Foundation know of your intention, please contact

Ally Pekin, Planned Giving, RCH Foundation  
(03 9345 6389 or email: [ally.pekin@rch.org.au](mailto:ally.pekin@rch.org.au))

## THE SCRAP IRON FLOTILLA BY MIKE CARLTON - REVIEW: AMONG HEROES OF THE WWII SHIPS PAST THEIR BEST

*This review by Michael McKernan appeared in the Bega District News August 13 2022*



*Troops bunked down on the top deck of the destroyer HMAS Vendetta on one of its 39 voyages to Tobruk. Picture: Australian War Memorial*

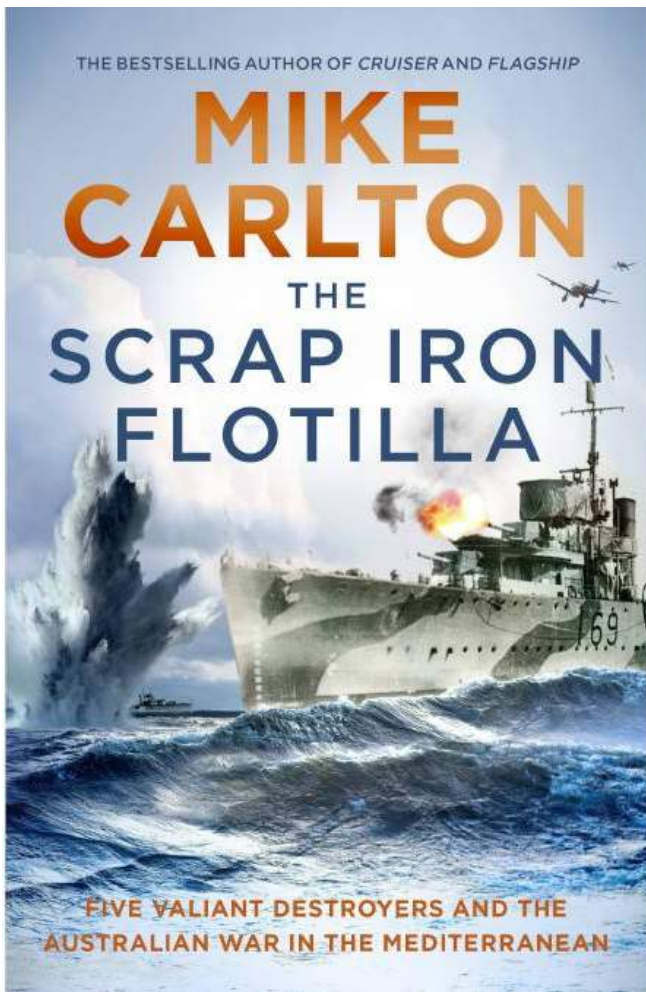
Mike Carlton loves the Royal Australian Navy. And that is not too strong a way of putting it. His love is revealed on almost every page. Some might call it a passion, some an absorbing interest, some a lifelong enthusiasm, but it is love. Carlton writes with wondrous knowledge of the ships, which he knows intimately, the men, likewise, and the traditions of which he knows more, I suspect, than many navy men.

This is Carlton's fourth book of naval history, written over more than a decade. His is a committed love. Pleasingly to readers of Australian military history, Carlton writes in the Bean tradition. This is not top-down history. A stoker can claim Carlton's attention just as much as a commander-in-chief. We meet men, from all parts of a fighting ship, whom we come to know. We celebrate their achievements, rejoice in their survival, mourn their loss. In other words, this is engrossing history.

There were five ships in the "scrap iron flotilla", an insult tossed off by Lord Haw-Haw, the Nazi propagandist, and embraced by the sailors as a true badge of honour. Not unlike Haw-Haw's sneer at the "rats" of Tobruk which became the quickly embraced moniker of the Australian soldiers there.

The flotilla consisted of Stuart, Vampire, Vendetta, Voyager and Waterhen. They were well past their best when pressed into service in the Mediterranean. Boilers blew up, steam pipes buckled and broke, turbines ground to a halt on all the ships not once but all the time. Readers will thank Carlton for taking them deep into the bowels of the ships for there were real heroes down there.

Among heroes of the Australian WWII ships past their best Stuart, the leader of the pack, receives most of the attention in the early part of the narrative. Its captain, Hector Macdonald Laws ('Hec') Waller is the central character of this book, and rightly so. He is almost the perfect Australian naval commander: skilled, humane, firm, approachable, cheery and inspired.



*The Scrap Iron Flotilla by Mike Carlton.  
William Heinemann. 448pp. \$34.99.*

That Stuart survived unscathed is a tribute to Waller's immense ability as a captain and a sailor. Waller attracts the attention and admiration of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, for whom Carlton also has an immense affection and admiration.

From time-to-time Carlton raises his gaze from the sea to look at the land war and the development of strategy in London. He is no fan of Winston Churchill whose strategic errors, allied with his supreme self-confidence, caused disastrous losses in Greece and on Crete and immense danger to the flotilla.

That Wavell, and probably Churchill, lied to Robert Menzies and Thomas Blamey about the use of Australian troops in those theatres is well known in the story of Australia at war, but Carlton brings a special vehemence to his account.

And then there was Tobruk. With the Australian defenders clinging to a small parcel of land, gallantly holding up the German advance, only the navy could supply them with the guns, ammunition and supplies an army will need. The scrap iron flotilla played a crucial role in the Tobruk "spud run" shepherding the fuel tankers and supply ships into Tobruk harbour from Alexandria and Mersa Matruh.

Carlton has described in worrying detail the size and structure of these little destroyers where the comfort of the crew played no part in the design. Privacy non-existent, bathrooms not provided. Deeply unpleasant. When action starts the structure of the ships is a large part of the problem.

By now, the Nazi air force had near total dominance of the skies and hammered every convoy, most of them very small, seeking to resupply the Australians at Tobruk. Perhaps Carlton's accounts of the fearful bombing of the ships may become repetitious for some readers. But it is the certainty of trouble that begins to awe the reader. To suffer such horror once would be awful, but voyage after voyage after voyage. The courage of every sailor and officer on the spud run is simply stupendous.

To round off his account of these ships Carlton takes each of them to the end of their story. A couple are destroyed in warfare, others survive to be sold off as scrap. This was the fate of Stuart and a cruel fate it was. To have survived so much and to end so ignominiously shows for how long Australia had needed a maritime museum.

The last chapter of this truly magnificent book is a surprise. Carlton imagines Hec Waller being entertained on the current HMAS Stuart Mark III. So much would have been familiar to him, but so much is also beyond his imagining.

In this short piece of writing, the final appendix, Mike Carlton shows how well he understands the continuity of the Royal Australian Navy across the generations. And the extraordinary changes in personnel and technology.

It is the latest of his love-letters to a navy that has served Australia so well.





# ROTA MERCHANDISE

See Order Form on page 23 for postage costs and other details.



LADIES SUMMER POPPY SCARF  
Light Blue, Dark Blue, White,  
Grey, Black  
**\$15**



**NEW**

SIEGE OF TOBRUK BAR MAT  
**\$40**



SIEGE OF TOBRUK 'ROLL-UP'  
STUBBIE COOLER  
**\$10**



ROTA 'BASEBALL' CAP  
One size fits all  
**\$20**



**NEW**

ROTA POLO SHIRT  
Sizes S, M, L, XL, XXL  
XXXL, XXXXL, XXXXXL  
**\$50**



ROTA RUGBY TOP  
Sizes S, M, L, XL, XXL  
XXXL, XXXXL, XXXXXL  
**\$60**



ROTA BADGE CAR  
WINDOW STICKER  
7cm x 8.5cm approx  
Sticks to inside of window  
**\$10**



TWO-UP SET  
Includes kip and two 1941 pennies  
**\$17**

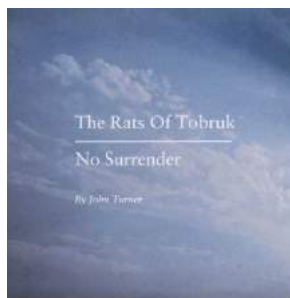


**NEW**

ROTA FACEMASK  
Small or large  
Special offer **\$7**



80<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SIEGE  
MEDAL  
(Limited Stock remaining)  
**\$50**



'RATS OF TOBRUK' CD  
INCLUDES 'NO SURRENDER'  
Written and sung by  
John Turner  
**\$15**



RATS OF TOBRUK 1941  
LAPEL BADGE  
**\$15**







## RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC MERCHANDISE ORDER FORM

Item	Cost per Item	Quantity	Size (Refer page 17)	Postage Yes/No	Postage (Ordinary Mail)	Total	Comments
Rats of Tobruk, 1941, Lapel Badge – butterfly /clutch fitting	\$15				Inc postage		
Rats of Tobruk, 1941, Lapel Badge – stick pin fitting	\$15				Inc postage		
80 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Medal	\$50				\$6		Postage for up to 2 medals to same address.
ROTA Rugby Top	\$50				\$12		
ROTA Polo Shirt (New look navy blue with yellow stripes)	\$45				\$12		
Two-Up Set	\$17				Inc postage		
ROTA “baseball” style cap	\$20				\$12		
ROTA Bar Mat (New design)	\$40				\$12		
ROTA ‘roll-up’ Stubbie cooler	\$10				\$6		
Badge Car Window Sticker <small>(Sticks to inside of window)</small>	\$10				Inc postage		20% discount for more than one sticker.
ROTA Face Mask	\$7				nil		\$6 Postage for 2 – 5 masks
‘THE RATS OF TOBRUK’ CD	\$15				\$4		
			Colour				
Ladies Poppy Scarf (light weight)	\$15				\$6		
<b>\$12 postage for orders of multiple items to the same address</b>			Total amount to be paid:			\$	

Payment is required before the items are sent. Delivery time can vary depending on stock availability and could be up to 6 weeks. Payment by electronic funds transfer (EFT) is our preferred method of payment. Payment can also be made by card, cheque, or money order.

**EFT Payment:** If you are paying by EFT, it is important that you include a unique reference so that the payment can be matched to the members register. A suggested reference is the abbreviation ‘MERCH’ followed by your surname.

**Bank Account Name: Rats of Tobruk Association BSB: 013 223 Account No: 2102 51748**

**Payment can also be made by Credit or Debit Card.**

To arrange this please ring our Merchandising Officer, Graeme Clifford: 0418 882 323

**Purchaser’s Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Contact Phone No:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please Print)

**Email Address:** \_\_\_\_\_ @ \_\_\_\_\_

**Delivery Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Suburb:** \_\_\_\_\_ **State:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Postcode:** \_\_\_\_\_

Please forward completed form to:

**‘Merchandise Officer, ROTA, 44 Victoria Av, Albert Park, Vic, 3206.’**

If you pay by EFT or card, you can scan this form and email to: **ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com**

**All enquiries to the Merchandise Officer (Graeme Clifford)**

**email:** ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com **Phone:** 0418 882 323

# What's on at The Shrine



## FOR KIN AND COUNTRY



This special exhibition explores the extraordinary history of First Peoples' service in the Australian Defence Force. First Peoples service personnel felt a strong sense of continuing ancient traditions of protecting Country, and hoped their example of service would help improve conditions for their families and communities. Veterans, however, returned to the same discrimination they had previously known.

## LUST LOVE LOSS



The complex issues surrounding matters of love and sex profoundly affect people everywhere, every day. Wartime is no exception. Indeed, the disruptive nature of war and the extraordinary situations it brings about magnifies human experience in these areas.

## CHANGED FOREVER Images of Conflict



Stories of migrants who have resettled in Australia from war-torn countries are presented beside those of recent veterans of overseas service in the Australian Defence Force. All have been redefined by the emotional and physical dislocation of war and seek to reconcile this with their new lives. This moving exhibition explores the impacts of global and civil conflict in changing lives and shaping contemporary Australia.

LAST POST – Every Sunday at 4.45PM



The Last Post Service is another reason to make a family visit to the Shrine on Sunday afternoons. This new moving ceremony features a piper, bugler and Shrine Guard in historic uniform.