



# TOBRUK HOUSE NEWS

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION



THE RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION  
NEUROSCIENCE FELLOWSHIP FUND

# RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC.

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

Month / Date	Event Description
Sunday May 26	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am-3pm
Friday May 31	General Meeting 10.30am (Lunch and guest speaker)
Friday June 7	Annual Royal Children's Hospital morning tea (RSVP essential see page 15 for details)
Sunday June 30	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am-3pm
Sunday July 28	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am-3pm
Sunday August 25	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am-3pm
Friday August 30	General Meeting 10.30am (Lunch and guest speaker)
Sunday September 22	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am-3pm
Sunday October 27	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am-3pm
Sunday November 10	Open Day at Tobruk House 10am.3pm
Friday November 22	General meeting 10.30am (Lunch and guest speaker)
Sunday December 1	Christmas luncheon (Booking details TBA)

**Patron: Bill Gibbins**

**Committee of Management:**

**Vice President – Paul Dipnall**

**Secretary – Lachlan Gaylard**

**Committee Chair – Stuart Tolliday**

Other Committee Members –

Bruce Bingham, Marlene Bingham,  
Tony Codd, Glenda Garde, Tony Smith  
Karolina Sevcikova, Gayle Sherwell

TOBRUK HOUSE NEWS

NEXT ISSUE: AUGUST 2024

DEADLINE: JULY 6

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will not be published.

Editor Stuart Tolliday

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## 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

## RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC.

### Vice President's Message – June 2024

Dear Members and friends,

Welcome to this edition of Tobruk House News.

Since the last edition, ROTA has been particularly busy with two headline major events; namely Tobruk Sunday and Anzac Day. Both events in our calendar are the premier events in our year whereby we pay homage to all of our Rats Of Tobruk both fallen in battle and those who lived full and long lives.



Tobruk Sunday was a wonderful tribute in memory of these brave soldiers. The day turned out to be a perfect day with bright sunlight with no Melbourne wind. We were honoured this year to have Brig Doug Perry OAM RFD ED as our guest speaker. Brigadier Perry spoke eloquently in regard to the importance of artillery in the siege along with how critical it was for the defence of Tobruk. His speech was insightful, and we were left with a very clear impression that without well trained and well-disciplined artillery, the ground troops task in defending Tobruk probably would have been in vain. It was a very good account of the role the artillery played in winning the siege. Retired Padre Don Kaus presided over the ceremony as he has done for many years now. He gave a very heartfelt and respectful observance throughout the service.

It was especially pleasing to see many join us in the hall for afternoon tea at the conclusion of the ceremony. It is always pleasing to see so many relatives and friends of veterans and their families together enjoying this reflective moment.

Tobruk Sunday was a great success, due to all members of your committee along with the wonderful volunteers in the kitchen and associated members playing a pivotal role. Our kitchen volunteers never cease to amaze me with their efficiency. A big thanks to everyone who helped.

Anzac Day yet again was a wonderful day. The march went perfectly and was viewed by many in Tobruk House via the livestream on our big screen. The day culminated for many in a wonderful gathering of friends and relatives of veterans at the hall for luncheon, and our intrepid kitchen volunteers excelled themselves with their culinary delights.

The Rats Of Tobruk Pipe Band, as always, gave an excellent account of themselves. It would not be a proper Anzac Day without our magnificent pipe band.

All in all it was a very successful event to pay tribute to the fallen of The Rats of Tobruk.

It is a very great privilege and honour to be your vice president in these difficult times. I am always deeply impressed by the continued selfless contribution everyone makes to honour and pay tribute to the fallen on these special days of the year.

Let's continue to honour these great men and women well into the future, so future generations can understand the sacrifices made.

Kind regards

Paul F Dipnall

# FROM THE ARCHIVES



These images of the sheet music kindly supplied by the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria Library\*

Who's ready for a sing-along? Community, group, and family sing-alongs were commonplace in the first half of the twentieth century. Almost every home had a piano and someone who could "bash out a tune" on it. Many an evening finished with everyone gathered around the piano.

While television and later social media may have seemed to have killed this popular form of entertainment in the home, you only need to attend any concert to hear that people still love to sing together. And don't forget the increasingly popular ["Pub Choir"](#)


The Rats in their day were no exception and most social get togethers included a sing-along. A glance at the programs for Rats reunions shows huge lists of songs for this activity. Perhaps not surprisingly, many referred to sweethearts left behind.



17.  
**IT HAD TO BE YOU**  
It had to be you - it had to be you  
I wandered around and finally found  
the somebody who  
Could make me be true, could make me be blue  
And even be glad, just to be sad,  
Thinking of you  
Some others I've seen - Might never be mean  
Might never be cross or try to be boss,  
but they wouldn't do  
For nobody else - gave me a thrill  
With all your faults I love you still  
It had to be you, wonderful you.  
It had to be you.

1.  
**I WONDER WHO'S KISSING HER NOW**  
I wonder who's kissing her now  
I wonder who's teaching her how  
I wonder who's looking into her eyes  
Breathing sighs, telling lies  
I wonder who's buying the wine  
For the lips that I used to call mine  
I wonder if she ever tells him of me  
I wonder who's kissing her now.

47.  
**DAISY**  
Daisy, Daisy,  
Give me your answer, do.  
I'm half crazy,  
All for the love of you.  
It won't be a stylish marriage,  
I can't afford a carriage,  
But you'll look sweet,  
Upon the seat of a bicycle built for two.  
Harry, Harry, there is my answer true,  
I'm half crazy,  
All for the love of you.  
I don't want a stylish marriage,  
And I don't need a carriage,  
But I'll be damned,  
If I'll be crammed,  
On a bicycle built for two.

  
**Sing Along**  
*with the Rats of Tobruk*  
 The 1991 World Reunion  
 to commemorate  
 The 50th Anniversary  
 of the Siege  
 SYDNEY, APRIL, 1991

22.  
**FOR ME AND MY GAL**  
The bells are ringing for me and my gal  
The birds are singing for me and my gal  
Everybody's been knowing to a wedding  
their going  
And for weeks they've been sewing  
Every Susie and Sal  
They're congregating for me and my gal  
The parson's waiting for me and my gal  
And someday we'll build a little home for two  
Or three or four or more  
In loveland for me and my gal.

24.  
**BY THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON**  
By the light, of the silvery moon  
I want to spoon, to my honey I'll croon love's tune  
Honey moon, keep a shining in June  
Your silvery beams will bring love dreams  
We'll be cuddling soon  
By the silvery moon.

13.  
**LILLI MARLENE**  
Underneath the lantern by the barrack gate,  
Darling I remember the way you used to wait,  
Twas there that you whispered tenderly  
That you loved me,  
You'd always be my Lilli of the lamplight  
My own Lilli Marlene.  
Time would come for roll call,  
Time for us to part  
Darling I'd caress you and  
press you to my heart  
And there 'neath that far off lantern light  
I'd hold you tight  
We'd kiss "good-night"  
My Lilli of the lamplight,  
My own Lilli Marlene.

\*For more information on the amazing resource of the RUSIV library check online or [click here](#).

## TOBRUK SUNDAY

The traditional Tobruk Sunday service was held under a sunny blue sky on 7<sup>th</sup> April in the grounds of Albert Park Primary School.



The flag party with Alice Ridley, Peter Waters and Maurice Bennet plus representatives of the Polish Carpathian Brigade flanks the official speakers.



Many people arrived early to ensure a seat under cover, but the weather was kind and we were treated with blue skies.



The Last Post was played by William Foster from the Royal Australian Navy



ROTA committee member Gayle Sherwell and RSL president Dr Robert Webster laid wreaths along with representatives of the military and many other organisations



Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums book-ended the proceedings, and a lone piper played the lament during the wreath laying.



Myf Coghill sang the National Anthem

Thankfully, the usual inclement weather did not eventuate at this year's commemorative service on Sunday April 7, for the 83<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Siege of Tobruk in April 1941. The 100-plus people in attendance were able to sit comfortably as welcome sunshine bathed the grounds of Albert Park Primary School.

Of course, no Tobruk service is complete without the appearance of our Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums, with the flag bearers, who kicked off proceedings and never fail to impress.



*The 83<sup>rd</sup> siege anniversary cake was cut by Brigadier Perry and Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy Mar Fan.*



*Members of the Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums entertained the crowd during afternoon tea back at Tobruk House after the service.*

Former ROTA President, Bruce Bingham, was our MC for the afternoon and current Vice President, Paul Dipnall gave the welcoming address, which was followed by a speech by Brigadier Doug Perry OAM RFD ED, who spoke of the role of the artillery in the siege. (Bob Semple, our last veteran to serve as president, would certainly have approved of the topic!) He explained that they relied on captured Italian guns and ammunition which was all made to unfamiliar metric specifications. Despite this challenge the artillery provided an essential service to protect the infantry and defend against the constant attacks from the enemy.

Dignitaries attending this year included Andrej Soszynski (Polish Consul), Nina Taylor (State MP for Albert Park), Dr Robert Webster (State President RSL) Councilor Heather Cunsolo (Mayor of City of Port Phillip) and Councilor Marcus Pearl, also from the City of Port Phillip.

Poems were read by descendant members, Gayle Sherwell and Helen Robinson, and our great friend, Padre Don Kaus, led the prayers, as he has done for many years. A lone piper from the band played the lament as wreaths were laid in what is always a moving part of the service, as was the recitation of the Ode, by Lt Col Jeramy Mar Fan. Our Last Post bugler was William Foster from the Royal Australian Navy who did a superb job, as did Myf Coghill, who again finished off proceedings with her wonderful rendition of both verses of the National Anthem.

Following the service, it was just a short stroll to Tobruk House, where a sumptuous traditional afternoon tea awaited those who had attended. No one ever leaves the hall hungry! A special "birthday" cake was provided by Sergeants Bakery and the honour of cutting the cake was shared by Brigadier Perry and Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy Mar Fan. The Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums gave another performance in the hall to conclude the afternoon.



We thank all who attended this year, and special thanks must go to those who took part in the service and to those who organized the service, which takes months of planning. If you missed out this year, please consider coming along next time. You won't be disappointed.

## A VISITOR'S STORY

Hello, my name is Julie Fair and I live in Albury. My friend Peter Tilbrook who also lives in Albury was visiting Melbourne and stumbled across Tobruk House.

Tobruk House was open, so Peter ventured inside and was warmly welcomed. His father, William Noel Tilbrook 2/17, served in Tobruk. He was told of the upcoming service being held for the 83<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk. We decided to travel down from Albury to attend the service.



*Julie and Robert Fair and friend Peter Tilbrook travelled from Albury for the Tobruk Sunday service*



*My uncle, Alan Laurence Hempel 2/24 served and was killed in Tobruk 4<sup>th</sup> July 1941 Aged 19.*

My Uncle, Alan Hempel, was taken prisoner and sent back behind the German lines to work with a lot of others on a big aerodrome. After 31 days he decided to escape with his cobber Dick McLeish.

They walked along the sea and only travelled at night. They would sneak up to the German trucks at night, rat their boxes and drain the water out of their trucks. After nine days and nights they had walked 130 miles into their lines, footsore but

free. Corporal Hempel received well-deserved promotion on getting back into the Australian lines. Less than a month later Alan died from wounds.



*Alan Hempel and Dick McLeish outside of British HQ immediately after their return.*

The Albury Monument had a revamp of the World War Memorial about a year ago and all plaques were removed and replaced with a new wall. They offered the old plaques to families, so I have Alan's plaque in our garden at home.

My friend Peter and I have now joined as members of your Association and hope to attend more of your services to keep our soldier's memories alive.

Following is the letter written by Alan Hempel to his sister, following his imprisonment and subsequent escape. (taken from "Prisoners of War" Patsy Adam Smith)

23-6-41

Corporal A.L. Hempel VX2399  
2/24 Battalion  
Australian Imperial Force Abroad

*My Dearest Darling Sister Pearl and All at Home,*

*I bet by this time you have been wondering what on earth has happened seeing you did not hear from me, but I am still in the land of the living and feeling fine. Well Pearl, I guess that you were let know that I was missing.*

*I had been up to the front for over three months. We were all 'standing to' behind our guns one morning, just at dawn, and hoping for a bit of action. Well, we got it. Aeroplanes diving down, bombing, and machine-gunning us all day long and being shelled by the Germans' long-range guns, tanks running over the top of our trenches, and using flame throwers on us... The noise was deafening, I thought my ear drums were going to burst wide out.*

*After two days and nights of this we had to give up as there were too many for us. It is not a nice sight-seeing men shot and getting blown to pieces, but when it means either you get him or he gets you, it is a different matter. So, on May the 1st I was captured by the Germans, along with a lot of my own cobbbers and sent back behind their lines to work on a big aerodrome.*

*On June the 2nd after being a prisoner for thirty-one days, Dick McLeish and I broke out of prison camp, got past the guards and set off to walk 110 miles to our own lines where the Australians were. We travelled at night and rested during the day. We had to go very careful, because we knew if we were caught, we would have been shot dead on the spot, because anyone who escapes from a German prison camp here is classed as a spy. Water is very scarce as it is nearly all desert country. So, we waited till they were all in bed and sneaked up and drained the water out of their truck radiators and find what tucker, if any at all.*

*I will not bother to tell you how many times we were nearly caught, but after nine days and nine nights of sneaking through their camps and missing being caught by inches, we clambered through their barbed wire entanglements out into no man's land and headed across the desert towards our own lines.*

*At last, we reached them and there was the sight we thought we would never ever see again, the Australians there in their trenches just having breakfast and we had not had anything to eat for two days, but even then, we did not eat too much, as we were too excited to know we were safe again. All the boys gathered around my cobber Dick McLeish and I and congratulated us on our great effort as we are the only two that had escaped from the hands of the Germans up to date.*

*Any way you can be proud of your old brother, I have done something that no one has done and brought back a lot of valuable information about Germans. The Brigadier and the General gave us great praise and told us it was something to be proud of.*

*But a few days spell and I am back with my battalion again in the front line. It is very quiet here today, except for a few Jerry planes flying overhead, and a few shells landing around. [Next sentence censored.] Up to the front are little white crosses with tin hats on them. It kind of gets you down when you pass by one of them and know that it is one of your own mates lying there.*

*Well Pearl my dear, I suppose you are still lairing up with the boys around the place. If I'm not home save me a bit of your wedding cake. Remember me to everyone at home. I have not had a letter for over three months, and it is now three months since I have had any leave. So, think of your dear old brother sometimes and I hope to be home soon.*

*I am your ever-loving brother Alan.*

Alan died less than two weeks after writing this letter, and before his sister received it



## 'BLACK RATS' OF TOBRUK FINALLY COME OUT OF THE SHADOWS

*(This article appeared in The Age newspaper April 10, 2024)*

On the deadly battlefields of Tobruk during World War II, the colour of Archibald "Arch" Driscoll's skin counted for little when it came to the bonds he forged with some of Australia's 14,000 "rats" who – through blood and sheer grit – earned their place in our history books.

But coming home, things were vastly different for First Nations men like Driscoll, one of at least 59 confirmed "Black Rats of Tobruk", a term proudly coined by Indigenous veterans seen as a badge of honour within the wider Rats of Tobruk Association.



Black Rat of Tobruk Archibald Driscoll's daughter-in-law Colleen Hurley and granddaughter Angelina Hurley with the movie poster he features in. CREDIT: JAMILA TODERAS

Yet, despite their service, they returned to a deeply segregated Australia. They were not entitled to vote, let alone walk into a pub with their white brothers-in-arms and share a beer.

Australian War Memorial Indigenous liaison officer Michael Bell said descendants of servicemen such as Driscoll see the "Black Rat" moniker as a source of considerable pride. Poet Iris Clayton, whose father counted himself among the Black Rats, wrote a poem in their honour in 1988. It says: "He fought for this land so that he could be free. Yet he could not vote after his desert melee."

Driscoll's daughter-in-law Colleen Hurley said talking about being Aboriginal wasn't really something Driscoll's generation did a lot of, but he was "incredibly proud" of his heritage.

"Nor did he really discuss his time in the war, only that he was dead against future generations going to war. He was a very polite gentleman, and humble too," she said, sitting in front of a framed movie poster in her living room in Brisbane featuring a dashing Driscoll in his Australian Army uniform.

## No Discrimination In The Trenches Of Tobruk, But Back Home It Hit Hard

Sydney Morning Herald Editorial - April 10, 2024

Wednesday marks the 83rd anniversary of the siege of the Libyan town of Tobruk and the birth of the "Rats" legend, when Australian troops led the Allied defence of the strategic post for 231 days against the might of a much larger German-Italian army commanded by General Erwin Rommel.



Archibald Driscoll, centre, was one of the "Black Rats" of Tobruk who returned to a deeply segregated Australia.

Nearly 800 Australian soldiers died during the siege, their legacy firmly etched into the national psyche. However, it is only now that the stories of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men like Driscoll are coming into view. And in Driscoll's case it is not without some irony.

The term "Rats of Tobruk" was an ironic reference the troops gave themselves after the Nazis referred to the broader Allied forces as being like rats.

Thanks to a brief flirtation with Hollywood, he was arguably the most recognised of all Tobruk's rats – even if no one knew his name.

Driscoll's grandson Simon Hurley was trawling through a Melbourne vintage market 25 years ago when he stumbled upon an old war movie poster promoting *The Fighting Rats of Tobruk* featuring his grandfather.

"He knew it was our grandfather straight away, grandfather's sister had kept clippings, and we knew about the movie poster," Driscoll's granddaughter Angelina Hurley said. "Our grandfather died before I was born, and from what our late father told us, he didn't really like talking about the war ... the experience affected him very deeply."

There are no records revealing how an Aboriginal man became the poster boy for the 1944 film, which starred Chips Rafferty and was an edited version of an Australian production made for the American and British markets.



*Hero shot: One of Tobruk's "Black Rats", Archibald Driscoll's good looks made him a Hollywood poster boy. CREDIT: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL*

Driscoll doesn't appear in the film, but he took part in battle re-enactments while serving in El Alamein as part of an official campaign to record the events of Tobruk. His image was later selected for the film's posters which were used across the US and Britain.

Australian War Memorial's Michael Bell has devoted nearly a decade to discovering First Nations war stories such as Driscoll's, researching their history through a combination of yarns, photos, artefacts and archival records.

"There is no longer the sort of stigma that stopped people declaring their Aboriginality in previous generations," Bell said. "At that time, they were not recognised as Australian citizens, they were not counted in the census, and they could not vote."



*A service photo of Frederick Fletcher Fenn, one of the Black Rats of Tobruk whose heroic acts went unrecognised for generations. CREDIT: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL*

A similar predicament emerges in another "Black Rat" story unearthed by the war memorial. Frederick (Fred) Fletcher Fenn was born in 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. While he knew his father, who he saw on occasions, he did not know his mother. Fenn was placed in an orphanage at five, left to work as a farm hand at 13 and enlisted at 23.

He served as a driver at Tobruk, risking his life to save two of his mates seriously wounded by a shell. One had a leg blown off and was in danger of bleeding to death. Under heavy attack, Fenn ran almost 200 metres to a truck, drove it back and picked up the wounded men, only to run into a barbed-wire entanglement. Still under heavy shelling, he single-handedly cleared the truck and finally made it to safety and medical help.

Years later he described the incident as "one of the most terrifying experiences in my whole life". Fenn was not given any formal recognition for his

heroic act. During an unearthed interview in 1982 Fenn revealed the challenges he faced returning to civilian life, such as being banned from getting a beer in a pub.

"As one with Aboriginal blood, I found some aspects of our society rather strange," Fenn revealed. "Before, during and after the war it was law that I was unable to enter a hotel and drink alcohol – unless I had a special certificate to say I was a person in the opinion of three learned gentlemen able to conduct myself in a proper manner. Even wearing an ex-service badge didn't do anything towards helping my embarrassment when refused to be served, or asked to produce the certificate. This is ended now, thank goodness."

# MORWELL CENTRAL SCHOLARSHIP UPDATE



Dear the Rats of Tobruk Association,

On behalf of the all the winners and the community of Morwell Central Primary School, we would like to thank you for your on-going support. This fund is highly valued and respected across the Latrobe Valley.

This year 6 award is helping all recipients who have shown great resilience, humour, mateship and a 'never giving up' attitude by funding them for their journey into high-school. It really supports them.

We appreciate all the effort you have put into this brilliant award.

Yours Sincerely

Hunter Smith (School Vice-Captain)

Ashden Madex (House Captain)

Wyatt Dowdell (Transition Leader)

Dear Rats of Tobruk,

My name is Cooper Corti. I am 12 years old.

I was one of this years recipients of the Rats of Tobruk awards.

I have just completed grade 6 at Morwell Central Primary School and will be starting year 7 at Lowanna College next year.

Your generous reward will go a long way to help me in school next year.

We have a camp in February. I am very much looking forward to that and especially all the sports and activities.

I want to thank you for your generosity and to let you all know I am very appreciative for it.

I really enjoyed learning all about the Rats of Tobruk from Mr Turner. I found it very interesting.

Thank you again,

Cooper Corti

## WHAT ABOUT THE MEDICAL UNITS? *(Story by Glenda Garde)*

As mentioned in the April THN, each edition this year will include information about the make-up of the forces involved in the siege, examining the tasks and experiences of the men who were there. This edition's 'What about...' takes a look at the medical units involved in the siege.

The medical units in Tobruk were 2/4<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital, 2/2<sup>nd</sup> Casualty Clearing Station, and the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> 2/4<sup>th</sup> 2/5<sup>th</sup> 2/8<sup>th</sup> 2/11<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulances.

**Field Ambulances** Our remaining Rat of Tobruk, Tom Pritchard VX23441, was assigned to the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, a unit attached to the 18th Infantry Brigade. Training at Puckapunyal from June to October 1940 involved first aid and stretcher bearing procedures, and whilst admitting that before this time he could barely 'stick a band-aid on', this basic training held Tom in good stead for what was to follow. Most of their officers, who were all well respected, were doctors, some of whom were WW1 veterans.

During the siege, the 2/5<sup>th</sup> was widely scattered. One company helped with evacuations, whilst others operated with the various battalions on the perimeter, and transport sections ran 'shuttle services' between dressing stations and the hospitals. Tom was assigned to one of these ambulances and his duties involved collecting the wounded and taking them to the dressing stations and to the hospital at the harbour. This was no mean feat, as it meant having to balance and hold onto 4 or 5 stretchers in the ambulance in an effort to steady them, while travelling on terrible roads and often under shellfire; a journey which would sometimes take an hour or two. The 'ambulance' consisted merely of a driver, a stretcher bearer, blankets and a basic first aid kit. Sadly, despite their best efforts, as Tom said, "A lot didn't make it back".



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020743



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020326



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

045210

*The 2/4 Australian General Hospital, Tobruk. Photograph published In Australia in the War of 1939-45, Medical, Vol 2, Middle East And Far East*

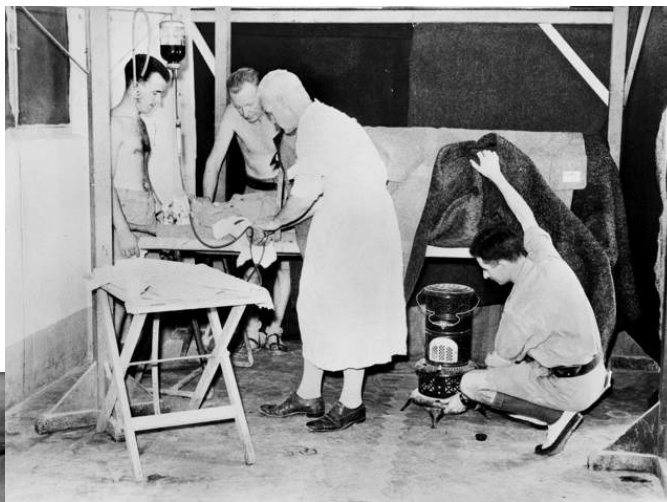
Some in the field ambulance units also assisted doctors working on the wards in the hospital. **2/4<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital** was a medical unit set up to operate hospitals in the field. They examined more than 14,000 casualties during the siege of Tobruk. The work in the actual hospital (the building was a former Italian hospital) was extremely arduous. Operations were performed under trying conditions and doctors were assisted by untrained orderlies etc as all the female nurses had been evacuated prior to the siege. The loss of trained staff significantly impacted the hospital's operations.

'The boys had to do everything that the nurses did without real proper training, like the nurses had had four years or five years, or whatever it was, nursing training.

Well, the blokes six months before had been plumbers and whatever, and in Tobruk they had to become nursing orderlies.' **Norm Marr VX17749**

Despite this, they averaged 15 operations a day, but at one time performed 108 operations in eight hours. On another occasion, they operated in shifts for three days until no further casualties were waiting.

During the siege of Tobruk, both the beach section and the main part of the hospital were bombed and strafed by German aircraft, resulting in casualties among staff and patients.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020330



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

021233

May 1941 Ward 11, 2/4th Australian General Hospital after a high level bombing attack.

'We had a big red cross right in the middle and, from the air, you just could not miss it, but they deliberately bombed it. One particular time, they picked the two of them out, the town and the beach. And the beach, there was one ward which was dug in, it was like a sort of semi-marquee type of thing. Well, all that was left was just a hole in the ground - everything gone - men, everything. And then at the same time they bombed us at the what's-a-

name (town hospital) and one ward was all completely smashed in.' **Norm Marr**

On this occasion several key staff were killed along with 32 patients.

### Australian Casualty Clearing Stations

played a crucial role in providing medical care to the wounded soldiers. Once the headquarters of an Italian artillery unit, it transformed into a vital medical facility during the siege. The station served as a lifeline for injured soldiers, providing essential medical aid and facilitating their evacuation to safer areas.

"Oh well, we had taken over what was originally an old Italian ammunition tunnel that was at the harbour itself. There was a sheer cliff rising up, oh I've forgotten the height, probably a hundred feet and this tunnel went into the base of this cliff. It went in and then sort of horizontal or parallel to the face of the cliff and this was taken over as an evacuation hospital and the soldiers who were listed for evacuation at the AGH would be sent down during the day to this tunnel.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

007587

A casualty being taken into a casualty clearing station, once the headquarters of an Italian artillery unit. (negative by f. Hurley).

We'd hold them there 'til night fall and during the evening we'd load them onto barges and just before midnight we'd send out the barges and we'd rendezvous somewhere in the harbour with the destroyers that came in overnight. They would arrive sharp at midnight and each night we'd meet them at a different place in the harbour and, 'cause the Germans knew what was going on and they would bomb the harbour every night trying to catch the destroyers, we had to get different places every night so they wouldn't know where we were." **Lloyd Tann VX18566**



**The Fig Tree** Of course no description of the work of medical units in Tobruk would be complete without mention of the well-known fig tree.

Marking the entrance to a network of caves used by the Australians to treat the wounded, it became known as the Fig Tree Hospital (It was not really a hospital but was a triage site.) and was the only feature in an otherwise barren landscape. It was visible from miles away and as a result was an easy target for German artillery. The site was heavily shelled for several hours per day.

The caves were a place to stabilise the wounded before transferring them to the Australian General Hospital near the harbour.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL 021024

**Matt Hogan VX34091 recalled:**

"A staff car would drive the doctor, who was a captain usually, and then in the ambulance there'd be a driver and medical personnel. The stretcher bearers would be in a truck and then we'd go in behind the, say the 2/9th Battalion, and we would pick up some of the wounded we

brought in so far, and then we'd have to pick them up from there and their doctor would administer to them and then the ambulance would then take them, in this particular part, they would then be evacuated to a place they used to call the Fig Tree. Now this was an old fig tree growing in the desert somehow or other and had been there for a long time and underneath the fig tree the Italians had built sort of, well not a bomb shelter, but some sort of shelter, like a bunker and we would put the wounded there until another ambulance would come in and take them back to Tobruk Hospital.

I remember one night in particular; my night eyesight had never been very good, and I always had trouble at night time, and anyway this is pitch black and the driver of the ambulance was not too good, and he asked me if I'd drive his ambulance, and I said, "I'm not too good, I can't see much." So he said, "I'll sit on the bonnet and you can drive." That's alright, so he's waving left right, left right, whatever you want to do, and we went back to the fig tree. When we got to the fig tree, we opened up the back and we had four bodies in the back, they had all died."

The majority of men serving with the Allied forces in Tobruk were roughly evenly split between the Australians and the British. There was a convenient division of labour between the two, and the Australians were responsible for the Tobruk hospital, the casualty clearing stations and the field ambulances. The courage and dedication of medical personnel, along with the resilience of the Rats of Tobruk, remain a testament to human endurance during times of conflict.

# YOUR INVITATION TO THE ANNUAL ROTA RCH MORNING TEA

The Royal Children's Hospital Foundation  
Level 2, 48 Flemington Road  
Parkville Victoria 3052 Australia  
TELEPHONE +61 3 9345 5037  
FACSIMILE +61 3 9345 6900  
EMAIL [rch.foundation@rch.org.au](mailto:rch.foundation@rch.org.au)  
[www.rchfoundation.org.au](http://www.rchfoundation.org.au)  
ACN 007 143 142 ABN 15 007 143 142



Mr Stuart Tolliday

Dear Stuart,

I would like to invite the Committee, members and friends of the Rats of Tobruk Association to the annual Rats of Tobruk Neuroscience Fellowship Morning Tea at The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) on **Friday 7 June, 2024**.

This special event celebrates the transformative impact of the Rats of Tobruk Neuroscience Fellowship for the staff at the RCH and the children and young people they support. It will also be an opportunity for us to acknowledge the deep connection between our organisations.

Your visit will include morning tea with Associate Professor Mark MacKay, Director of Neurology, the RCH, and other RCH clinicians, as well as a behind the scenes tour of the Cockatoo Ward, the hospital's neurological and surgical ward, affectionately known as the Rats of Tobruk Ward. It will also provide an opportunity to meet me as the new Chief Executive Officer of the RCH Foundation, alongside members of our team.

**Date:** Friday 7 June, 2024  
**Time:** 10.30am – 12noon  
**Location:** The RCH Foundation Fundraising Resource Centre,  
Level 2, 48 Flemington Road, Parkville 3052.  
Access details will be provided on RSVP.

Light refreshments and complimentary car parking will be available at the event. Please note that there will be a short walk required for those going on the Cockatoo tour. Please let us know if you have any accessibility requirements when you RSVP.

For enquiries and to RSVP, please contact Kathryn Sell, Philanthropy Lead, Planned Giving via email at [kathryn.sell@rch.org.au](mailto:kathryn.sell@rch.org.au) or by phone on (03) 9345 5539 by Wednesday 29 May.

Warm regards,

**Ryan Brown**  
Chief Executive Officer

*The future of children's health is in our hands*



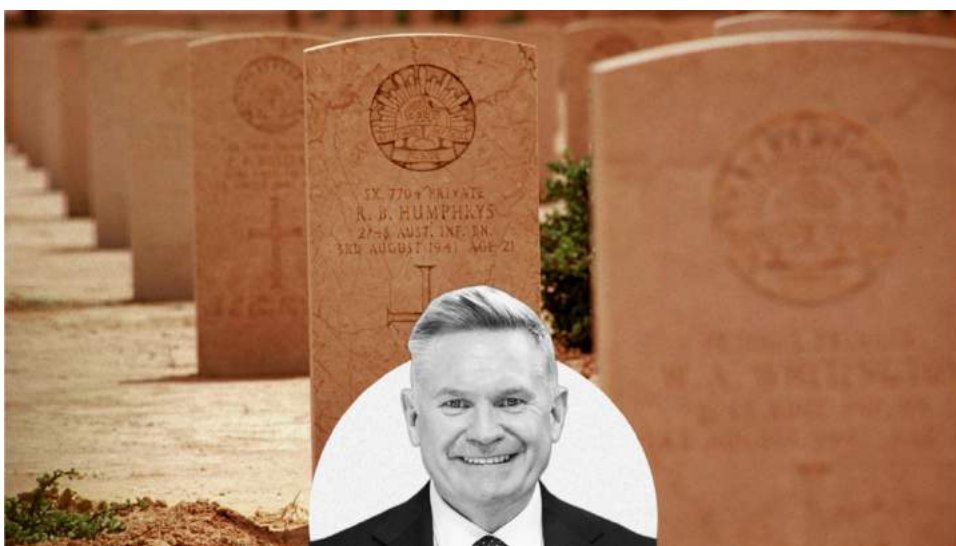
Please note that you must RSVP to Kathryn Sell as described above if you wish to attend this special event.

## THE GRAVES OF OUR VETERANS LAID TO REST OVERSEAS

This story is an extract of an article by Michael Usher in The Nightly on April 24 2024 headed "Thank you to the caretakers who protect the graves of our Anzac veterans laid to rest overseas"

On the edge of the Libyan desert, where pale, dirty sand meets the soft coastal edge of the Mediterranean Sea, lies an immaculately curated corner of Australia. In all this unremarkable landscape, a very special piece of Australia is gently groomed and guarded, every day, all year round for the past 83 years. It is the Tobruk War Cemetery. There are 559 Australians buried there, and perhaps a few more as some of the headstones mark the graves of the unknown. These soldiers were the legendary Rats of Tobruk who fought and died in this northern part of Africa, right near the Egyptian border during the brutal eight-month siege of 1941.

I visited there with the late AFL great Ron Barassi. His father Ron Snr was one of the Australian soldiers who signed up for King and Country at the height of his footy career, to fight a war a long way from the Melbourne footy grounds where he was a champion. Ron Snr was cut down in battle on July 30, 1941, during that siege. He was only 27.



When I travelled with Ron Jnr — strange to call him Junior given the giant he was — Libya was a wreck of a country in the wake of the Arab Spring and the downfall of the Ghaddafi regime.

It was a risky journey, but a pilgrimage Ron had to make. He knew it was the last time he'd visit his father's grave, and sadly it was.

*Michael Usher and a picture of the headstone of a relative at the Tobruk War Cemetery*

Ron draped a Melbourne footy club scarf over his father's headstone and simply wept. It was a chilly dawn. The sun peeked over the low wall of the Tobruk Cemetery and soft, warm streams of light caused the tears on Ron's falling freely on Ron's cheeks to glisten. I stood back a few paces while Ron quietly let his thoughts roll through the emotions of a boy losing a father. In the same moment, a five-year-old who never got to know his dad, and a footy hero honouring a war hero. It was so overwhelmingly emotional, powerful, and respectfully quiet.

But here's what also struck me about that moment, and I've been fortunate to experience this a few times before. In this quiet corner of a then chaotic Libya, reflecting on what must be a godforsaken hell hole during that marathon siege of 1941, it was simply beautiful.

Not by any classic definition at all, but beautiful, nonetheless. Some war cemeteries are oil paintings of manicured green lawns, perfect hedging, and symbolic, seasonal flower beds. Not here, just not possible on the edge of a desert and blasted by a salty sea. But it was immaculate. The dirt was swept daily in neat patterns. The rows of symmetrical headstones dust free, and the main monument is cleaned to reflect the best light.

And this doesn't happen by accident. There at the gates of the Tobruk War Cemetery was an elderly Libyan gentleman who was the keeper of the keys, and the keeper of the grounds. Through all of Libya's strife, this man had kept our scared site spotless. For every stiff desert breeze that threw its sticks and stones and sand on the graves of our boys, he was there to sweep it clean.

And this is where we should all find a point of national pride. I know I've felt it overwhelmingly when I've been beyond grateful to visit Australia's war cemeteries throughout Europe, northern Africa, Turkey and Papua New Guinea. The Office of Australian War Graves with the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission make sure the grounds of these hallowed sites are always maintained and never neglected.



## ANZAC DAY AT TOBRUK HOUSE

Tobruk House again welcomed members and guests (as well as quite a few curious visitors) for lunch and to watch the march on our big screen. This year there were 8 groups from the military as well as the Rats of Tobruk Memorial Pipes and Drums. The catering group did their usual marvellous job of feeding the 122 who stayed for lunch and of course we were treated to a performance from the band.

Thanks to all who attended. It is always very much appreciated as we cannot continue as an association without 'bums on seats' at events such as this.

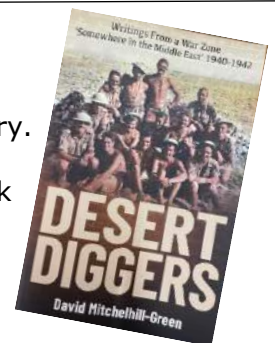
...And if you've never been to the hall on Anzac Day, you really don't know what you're missing. It is quite a unique setting, and we do our best to make sure that we all have an enjoyable time. Not so long ago, our dads, grandads and uncles filled the hall. Now it's over to us.



## GENERAL MEETING – FRIDAY MAY 31

This will be our first general meeting since the annual general meeting in February. Join us for an update on the association's finances and latest news. Following the brief meeting our guest speaker - David Mitchelhill-Green will speak about his latest book; 'Desert Diggers'

Copies of the book will be available for purchase on the day for \$30. Lunch after the speaker will be available for \$10. RSVP 0432 232 502



## NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members:

**Richard Weston Robert McDowell Peter Tilbrook Penny Mackenzie  
Andrew Mackenzie Donald Mailing Stephen Wright Graham Osborne  
Christine Rebesco Angus Wallace Sue Colburt Graham Martin Julie Fair  
Fiona Tolliday Richard Tolliday Peter Yewers Brett Mason Michael Dowling  
Bruce Jarvis Douglas Perry Lee Robinson**



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

# BANJO PATERSON'S SON HUGH KEPT RATS OF TOBRUK MEMORY ALIVE WITH POETRY

Story from ABC Central West By Hamish Cole



Hugh Paterson, son of Banjo, and his wife Rhona White, following his service in World War II. (Supplied: National Archives of Australia)



Alf Cantrell: the Banjo Patterson Museum in Yeoval. (ABC Central West: Hamish Cole)

Even as he came under fire from the German artillery at the siege of Tobruk in World War II, Hugh Paterson continued his family's legacy of poetry.

As the son of renowned bush poet Banjo Paterson, Hugh was among the 14,000 Australian soldiers who have become known as the Rats of Tobruk after holding off Axis troops for eight months in 1941. But he often destroyed his poems and there's no single collection of his work. Now, the poet's legacy is being praised for documenting the wartime conditions the Rats faced.

"He always thought his poetry was never as good as his father's," said Alf Cantrell, who runs the Banjo Paterson Museum in Yeoval in Central West New South Wales.

"He would destroy his poems and not share them. But he's left a wonderful legacy by giving us a description of what life was like in Tobruk."

Alf Cantrell believes Hugh Paterson's poetry is at the level of his father's.

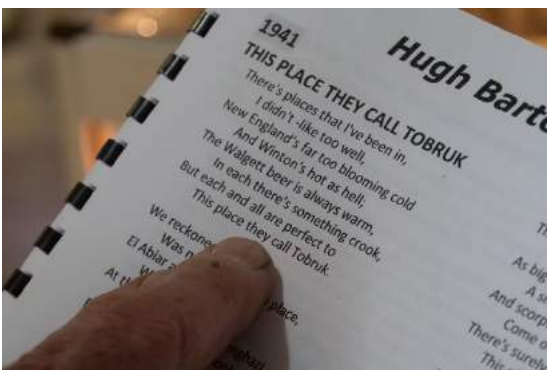
The North African port town was subject to repeated assaults and almost daily shelling and bombing, due to its importance for the Allies' defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal. It was within this cacophony of

violence and daily battles with the elements, which saw 832 Australians killed, that Hugh Paterson penned verses that would define the conflict. Mr Cantrell said, while fewer than five of his poems on the topic had been preserved, they're incredibly insightful.

"His style is very similar to Banjo's," he said. "He uses names and places and weaves a great story around them. He puts a picture in your mind immediately so you can see where he is and what it is he is seeing."

There is only one 'Rat of Tobruk' who is still alive today, 102-year-old Tom Pritchard. He served as a stretcher bearer. Lachlan Gaylard from the Rats of Tobruk Association believed this makes Mr Paterson's poetry all the more special.

"It is a really contemporaneous record that we have of what life was like," Mr Gaylard said. "The poem 'This Place We Call Tobruk', is possibly the most accurate depiction of life in Tobruk. The legacy that will come out of Hugh Paterson's poetry is that he has given many people a greater understanding of the conflict."



Hugh Paterson's poem 'This Place They Call Tobruk' is his most famous verse from World War II. (ABC Central West: Hamish Cole)

Mr Cantrell said Hugh was nicknamed "Banjo Junior" and felt embarrassment when compared to his father's work.

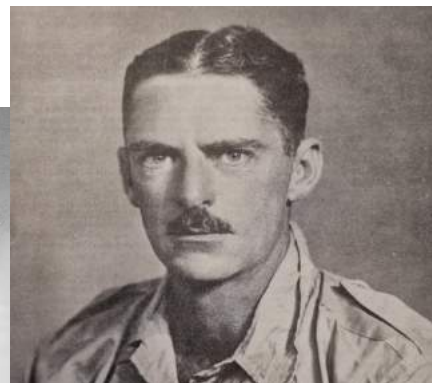
"He always thought his poetry was never as good as his father's. He would write a poem, recite it to the troops and then destroy it," he said.

"He has left a wonderful legacy as a poet and a member of the armed forces in Tobruk. It is unfortunate that we don't have a complete collection of his poems. They're spread to the four winds around the world."

It was a brutal conflict. In January 1941, Australian troops captured the Libyan coastal town, forcing the Axis powers to bring supplies across 1,500 kilometres of desert from Tripoli.



*The siege of Tobruk began in April and ended in December, with Australian troops under constant fire. (Supplied: Australian War Memorial)*



*Hugh Paterson was one of the last to depart Tobruk in August 1941. (ABC Central West: Hamish Cole)*

When the siege began in April, the Australian troops, made up predominantly of the 9th Division, were told there would be no surrender.

"They were told there would be no Dunkirk, there would

be no evacuation but looking back on it with historical perspective, Tobruk was the key to holding Egypt and the Suez Canal," Mr Gaylard said. "If they lost Egypt and the Suez, they would have lost the entire Middle Eastern campaign in the desert so Tobruk at that time was pivotal to winning the war."

It was within this context, that the Australian soldiers faced brutal conditions, according to Mr Gaylard.

"They had their backs against the sea, they were under-resourced, and it was sweltering heat during the day and freezing cold nights. It built amongst the men a great comradeship because they thought if they could get through Tobruk they could get through anything."

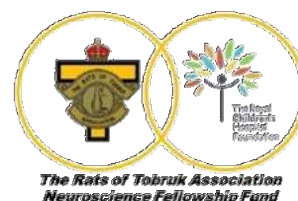
## THE RATS OF TOBRUK NEUROSCIENCE FELLOWSHIP

Each year in Australia, over 250,000 people are diagnosed with epilepsy. Yet, for around half of those, including around 35 per cent of children, the cause of the epilepsy is unknown.

Thanks to the Rats of Tobruk Neuroscience Fellowship, supported by the Rats of Tobruk Association, teams across the RCH are hoping to change that.

This fellowship was established by the Rats themselves to be their legacy, and since it began in 2010 it has provided opportunities for twelve young doctors to advance their studies and knowledge of child epilepsy.

These doctors are now contributing to the efforts to discover the cause and find treatments for child epilepsy in hospitals around Australia and the world.



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  
Kathryn Sell, Planned Giving, RCH Foundation  
(03 9345 6389 or email: [kathryn.sell@rch.org.au](mailto:kathryn.sell@rch.org.au))



# 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**



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



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



ROTA POLO SHIRT  
Sizes S, M, L, XL, XXL  
XXXL, XXXXL, XXXXXL  
**\$45**



ROTA 'BASEBALL' CAP  
One size fits all  
**\$28**



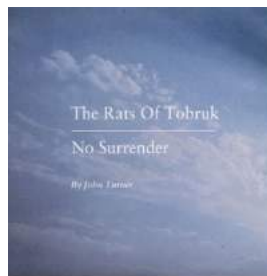
SIEGE OF TOBRUK 'ROLL-UP'  
STUBBIE COOLER  
**\$10**



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



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



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



80<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SIEGE  
MEDAL  
**\$50**







## RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC MERCHANDISE ORDER FORM

Item	Cost per Item	Quantity	Size (Refer page 20)	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				\$11		Postage for up to 2 medals to same address.
ROTA Rugby Top	\$60				\$15		
ROTA Polo Shirt (New look navy blue with yellow stripes)	\$45				\$11		
ROTA “baseball” style cap	\$28				\$11		
ROTA Bar Mat	\$40				\$15		
ROTA ‘roll-up’ Stubbie cooler	\$10				\$11		
Badge Car Window Sticker <small>(Sticks to inside of window)</small>	\$10				Inc postage		20% discount for more than one sticker.
‘The Rats Of Tobruk’ CD	\$15				\$11		
			Colour				
Ladies Poppy Scarf (light weight)	\$15				\$11		Postage for up to 4 scarves to same address
<b>\$15 postage for orders of multiple items to the same address</b>				Total amount to be paid:		<b>\$</b>	

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: 633 000 Account No: 197610603**

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

To arrange this please call: **0432 232 502**

**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**

**email: ratsoftobruk41@gmail.com Phone: 0432 232 502**

# What's on at The Shrine



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.

## TRENCHES TO RUNWAY



This exhibition delves into the profound impact of military clothing design and wartime conditions on popular fashion, tracing these influences from the 1870s to the present day. Discover how wartime led to innovative design solutions and how the fashion industry reinterpreted these styles, giving them new meaning and expression in civilian life.

## INK IN THE LINES



This Australian War Memorial touring exhibition focuses on the stories of Australia's military veterans, through stunning photography of their tattoos. Many members and veterans of the Australian Defence Forces have tattoos, and while their reasons for getting tattooed are as varied as the people themselves, self-expression and belonging play a part. They also share a common purpose in getting inked: to remember.

## TOYS, TALES & TENACITY



This first-of-its-kind exhibition at the Shrine explores the experiences of children during war through toys and games. Come for an immersive and thought-provoking journey as we explore the intertwined stories of war, childhood, and the enduring spirit of youth in the face of adversity.