



COMMEMORATING THE

# 85<sup>TH</sup>

ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE SIEGE

# 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

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

Date	Event Description
Sunday April 12	Tobruk Sunday commemorative service. 11am
Saturday April 25	Anzac day – Tobruk House will be open from 9am to 3pm
Sunday May 24	General Meeting and Exhibition opening from 10.30am (see p15)
Thursday June 11	RCH Morning Tea 10.30am – registration essential, details TBA
Sunday June 28	Open Day 11am – 3pm
Sunday July 12	Open Day 11am – 3pm
Sunday July 26	Open Day 11am - 3pm
Sunday August 9	Open Day 11am – 3pm
Sunday August 23	General Meeting and Open Day from 10.30am Shrine of Remembrance service 1.00pm
Sunday September 6	Open Day 10am – 3pm
Sunday September 20	Open Day 10am – 3pm
Sunday October 4	Open Day 10am – 3pm
Sunday October 18	Open Day 10am – 3pm
Sunday November 1	Open Day 10am – 3pm
Sunday November 15	General Meeting and Open Day from 10.30am
Sunday December 6	Christmas lunch – bookings essential, details TBA

Immediate past Patron: Bill Gibbins AM

Committee of Management:

President – Paul Dipnall

Secretary/Treasurer – Lachlan Gaylard

Committee Chair – Stuart Tolliday

Other Committee Members –  
Gayle Sherwell, Glenda Garde,  
Andrew Balcerzak, Tony Codd,  
Karolina Sevcikova

TOBRUK HOUSE NEWS

NEXT ISSUE: JUNE 2026

DEADLINE: MAY 1

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will not be published.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.

President's Message – April 2026

Dear Members,

Yet again it is my very great pleasure to inform you of the following activities and events of our association.

We recently held our AGM which was well attended by members. Thank you to all who were able to be there. The meeting was conducted in a very efficient manner and in accordance with our constitutional requirements.

Various reports were tabled at the meeting, including the annual report, which has now been posted on our website. I encourage you to read it. There is a link on page 5.

I am pleased to advise that a new committee nomination from Mr Andrew Balcerzak, as a representative from the Polish community, was accepted unanimously. We all warmly welcome Andrew to the committee and feel confident that he can play a vital role as lead contact with our Polish community.

I am also pleased and humbled to advise that I have been elected this year as your president, having already served for some time as vice president. It is an honour and a privilege to be appointed as president by my peers; however, I do recognise that this is a tall order given the stature and quality of the men who have preceded me. I will do my utmost to honour the memory of these fine men and uphold the values and virtues of these Tobruk veterans.

As is our tradition, the annual Royal Children's Hospital Rats of Tobruk Fellowship was this year awarded to Justin Kuang at the AGM. We were pleased to meet and warmly greet Justin's wife and family who accompanied him to our meeting. You can read more about Justin on page 6.

Your committee is well advanced with planning for the annual **Tobruk Sunday** ceremony to be held on **Sunday 12th April commencing at 11 am**. We are looking forward with great enthusiasm to commemorate and honour the 85th anniversary of the siege. To mark this occasion, a special display of memorabilia will be on display throughout the year after May. These items of memorabilia have been chosen by our hard-working committee as items of interest representing the personal histories of many veterans. I am sure you will find it fascinating. Accordingly, we have added more open days to our usual calendar. And of course for those unable to attend in person, the Tobruk House News will keep you abreast of all of our happenings.

April is always a very busy month for our association, concluding with **Anzac Day on Saturday 25th April**. As usual Tobruk House will be open from 9am with the ABC telecast of the Melbourne march on the big screen and lunch will be available. If you can advise of your intention to attend it will be appreciated. All welcome.

Kind regards,  
Paul F Dipnall  
President



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

In the continued journey through our many decades of operation we arrive at the 1970s. The 70's was a time of massive cultural change in almost every corner of Australia. Enter Countdown, Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, the Skyhooks, and with the end of the extremely unpopular Vietnam War, a significant change in the general view of Australian society about our participation in foreign battles.

On 26 April 1975, *The Australian* newspaper covered the passing of Anzac Day in a single story, highlighting the extreme decline in public attention. (This decline would only be arrested with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gallipoli landing fifteen years later.)

However, the Rats of Tobruk Association was growing in strength and, with the Rats, in many cases approaching retirement, their interest in their organisation increased. The end of the seventies saw the introduction of annual 'World Reunions' of Rats from all over and subsequently each State took turns in hosting these get togethers.

ROTA branches were all very social. Bingo was very popular and in the bigger branches was a weekly evening event. The marching girls (mainly daughters of Rats) were going strongly and moving their way up the competition ladder.

The Tobruk Siege Medal, popularly known as the 'T' Medal, was announced by the Rats of Tobruk Association in 1977 to commemorate the valour and endurance of Australian, British, Indian, New Zealand, and Polish troops who endured the Siege of Tobruk from April to December 1941. Delivery of the medals didn't happen until the end of the decade. An announcement in the December 1979 Tobruk House News stated that medals would be delivered at the end of that month. Although unofficial, it is a deeply cherished symbol of solidarity among the "Rats of Tobruk".



*The original Tobruk House bingo ball cage.*



*The inspiration for a specific Tobruk medal likely came from the original triangular "Lord Haw Haw" medal, (above left) which had been made in Tobruk from shell casings and other scrap metal during the siege. Later, approximately 200 circular Tobruk medals (above centre) were also minted by the 9th Division engineers, again using metal salvaged from a downed German aircraft. Later they were produced by a commercial firm in Palestine. The ribbon colours of the 'T' medal reflected those of the official Africa Star medal (above right) which was issued to all British and Commonwealth troops involved in action in North Africa.*



The 'T' Medal is an unofficial commemorative medal. It was originally issued with instructions that it should be worn on the right breast and specifically not with the official medal group.

Many Rats ignored this instruction, and proudly had it mounted along with their other medals. In more recent years it has commonly been accepted worn on the left breast, usually mounted alongside official awards.

*(The 'T' medal can be purchased through the Rats of Tobruk Association. Call 0432 232 502 during business hours to place an order.)*

Another milestone of the 1970s for the Melbourne branch was an at-the-time very fashionable kitchen renovation at Tobruk

House. There were so many regular social events held in addition to the meetings – Bingo, monthly dances plus the meetings of all the auxiliaries including the bowling club, and so no doubt the original 1950's era kitchen was not up to the task. Note the very 'on trend' floor tiling pattern too.

(Many people may recall similar colour schemes from their parent's kitchens. I certainly do! – Ed)



# ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

The Annual General Meeting of the Rats of Tobruk Association was held on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> February at Tobruk House. The comprehensive annual report was presented and accepted by the meeting. You can download a copy from our website – just click on the image for the link.

The members of the previous committee were all elected unopposed and we are pleased to welcome new member Andrew Balcerzak who also represents the Polish community. Andrew has been a regular associate member for some years and has become a familiar sight at all our events, so he has a good knowledge of ROTA and our activities.



*The newly elected committee for 2026: L – R Andrew Balcerzak, Lachlan Gaylard, Glenda Garde, Gayle Sherwell, Paul Dipnall, Karolina Sevcikova, Tony Codd, Stuart Tolliday*



*Royal Children's Hospital Foundation representative Kathryn Sell presents the 2026 ROTA/RCH Fellow Justin Kuang to the meeting.*



*Newly elected president Paul Dipnall presents the 2026 Fellowship medallion to Justin Kuang*

As a regular highlight of the Annual General Meeting, the newest Rats of Tobruk Royal Children's Hospital Fellow was presented with the medallion and a ROTA badge by the president. This year the Fellow is Justin Kuang. Justin spoke of his career and expressed his gratitude for the fellowship.



*"I grew up in Melbourne, completing both primary and secondary school here before moving to South Australia to undertake my medical studies at the University of Adelaide, where I completed most of my paediatric training. Adelaide quickly became a second home to me. Most importantly, it was there that I met my now wife, and it is the birthplace of our daughter, Chloe. We later moved to Sydney to complete two further years of Neurology training at the Sydney Children's Hospital before returning to Melbourne for the Rats of Tobruk Fellowship at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne — this time with our son, James, in tow.*

*Neurology has been an area of interest to me since my internship years. I have always been drawn to the close relationship between underlying pathology and its clinical expression, and the breadth of diseases and treatments encountered in children's neurology. During the early years of neurology training, I was particularly struck by the fortitude of children with epilepsy and their families. It became clear to me*

*what an immense privilege it is to walk alongside and care for these patients.*

*My application for the Rats of Tobruk Fellowship was driven by a desire to work at a children's hospital renowned for its expertise in epilepsy care including surgery, which can at times represent the only viable solution for a child's epilepsy. The fellowship offers the invaluable opportunity to collaborate closely with leaders in the field — to learn from them, work alongside them, and to share in the journey with families seeking hope and healing.*

*I would therefore like to sincerely thank the Association for granting me this opportunity. As I undertake this fellowship, I will do my utmost to ensure that the spirit of the Rats of Tobruk continues — a spirit of service to others and of helping those most in need. On behalf of the many children and families who have benefited, and will continue to benefit, from the opportunities this Fellowship has created, I extend my deepest gratitude."*

## 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 working with researchers across the world to change that.

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



*The entrance to the Rats of Tobruk Cockatoo ward at the Royal Children's Hospital*

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))

# TOBRUK SUNDAY 2026



COMMEMORATING THE 85<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE COMMENCEMENT  
OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

**SUNDAY APRIL 12TH 2026**

A COMMEMORATIVE SERVICE WILL BE HELD AT **11AM** IN MOUBRAY ST  
(AROUND THE CORNER FROM TOBRUK HOUSE).

FOLLOWED BY LIGHT REFRESHMENTS IN THE HALL.  
PLEASE JOIN US FOR THIS SPECIAL OCCASION.

# ANZAC DAY 2026

**TOBRUK HOUSE**

**44 VICTORIA AVENUE**

**WILL BE OPEN ON ANZAC DAY**

**FROM 9AM TO 3PM**

**PLEASE REGISTER YOUR INTEREST**

**VIA <https://www.trybooking.com/DKQLK>**

**OR CALL 0418 882 323**

# THE POWER OF PHOTOGRAPHY- 'REVEALING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE WORLD' *(Story by Glenda Garde)*

For anyone who has perused the Australian War Memorial's extensive collection of photographs and perhaps those on display in our permanent exhibition at Tobruk House, many of the following photos will no doubt look familiar. However, some of the names associated with the Tobruk collection may not be. So, what do we know of these men?

## **Damien Parer VX334**



*Damien Parer with his movie camera*

Damien Parer's exceptional work was frequently featured in newsreels, and his name became widely recognised during WW2. He primarily took motion pictures with a few stills. As one of Australia's most famous war photographers, he was the first official Australian movie photographer of the Second World War. Working for the Department of Information (DOI), Parer sailed to the Middle East with the first contingent of the Second AIF in January 1940 where he filmed on board HMAS Sydney after it had sunk an Italian cruiser.

Parer was on board another ship, HMS Ladybird when she bombarded Bardia and he also advanced with the infantry at Derna, which was his first experience of close action. It was here that he decided that he needed to film from as close to the action as possible, sometimes even in advance of the troops.

Acquaintances later recalled that from the moment Parer made this decision he was doomed to die on the battlefield.



*Parer- Two of the Australians who volunteered for service in Tobruk and spent weary months of the siege doing the dangerous job of loading and unloading vessels at the blitzed wharf.*



*Parer- Tobruk 1941*



*Damien Parer and George Silk, photographers with the Department of Information at Tobruk Harbour, preparing to capture the next air raid.*

He filmed in Greece and in Syria, covering the action from aircraft, the deck of a ship and on the ground with the infantry. After Syria he travelled to Tobruk in August 1941 before covering the fighting in the Western desert.

Parer returned to Australia to cover the fighting in the Pacific arriving in New Guinea in June 1942 and later filmed the Australians fighting along the Kokoda Trail.

Parer completed his most significant work in New Guinea, including the Academy Award-winning Kokoda Front Line (1942).



Increasingly unhappy with DOI for its interference, Parer resigned his position with the department on 24 August 1943, and began working for Paramount News.

He went on to cover American operations and was killed by a Japanese machine-gunner at Peleliu in the Palau archipelago on 17 September 1944. His colleagues were proven correct.

*Left: Parer- Members of the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Btn. after the relief of Tobruk. The last of the veterans of the siege. December 1941*

## George Silk



*George Silk with his camera*

George Silk's career as a war photographer began in 1939, when he was a combat cameraman for the Australian government, covering action in the Middle East, North Africa and Greece.

Trapped at Tobruk in Libya, he was captured by German forces but somehow escaped 10 days later.

The New Zealand-born photographer joined Damien Parer in the Middle East in May 1940 as the second of Australia's official Second World War photographers. Silk was responsible for still photographs; Parer and Frank Hurley, who was appointed soon after Silk, were largely responsible for moving images.

The young photographer fully understood the significance of his appointment. He later recalled thinking of his role at the time as a "crusade": he "was going to save the world by his photographs".

For Silk, the photograph was an object of

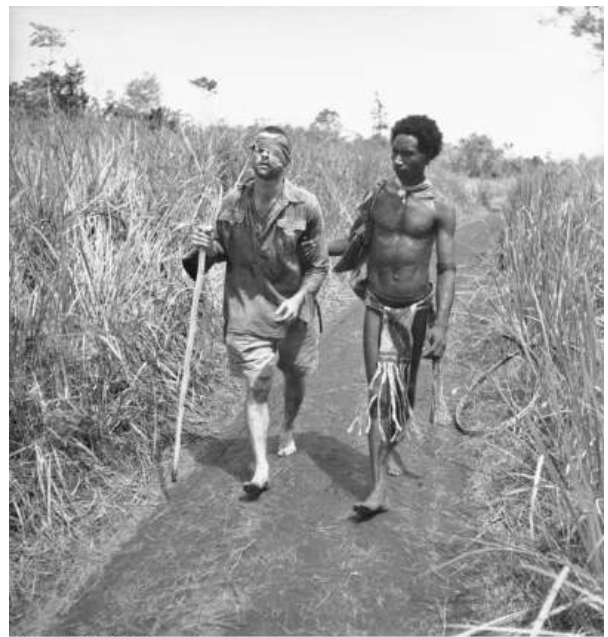
enormous power; it could reveal truths about the world and mobilize action.

His photographs of Australians fighting in Greece, Syria and Lebanon, and at the siege of Tobruk, are among the best of any photographs taken during the war.

Silk was hired by Life magazine in 1943 and photographed action in the Pacific and in Europe. In New Guinea, he took what is probably his most famous photograph (right), in December 1942. The photo shows a blinded Australian soldier, barefoot, eyes bandaged, being led through the remote countryside by a traditionally clad tribesman.

Silk also took the first photographs of Nagasaki, Japan, after the atomic bomb was dropped there on 9 August 1945.

Following the war, Silk's work primarily focused on sports photography, and he found innovative ways to capture motion. His expertise included sailing and he once shot the America's Cup races atop a 90-foot mast! He died in 2004.



*Silk- New Guinea December 1942*

## Frank Hurley



Frank Hurley

Frank Hurley had been a prominent commercial photographer in Sydney before his appointment as official photographer for Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (1911-13), and for a second Antarctic trip as photographer for Ernest Shackleton's 1914-16 expedition. He was one of the most famous Australians of his day.

During WW1 Hurley spent over three months photographing the Western Front, where he produced some of the finest and most captivating photographs of his long career.

Hurley was also appointed an official war photographer during the Second World War, where he again photographed Australian troops in the Middle East, including Tobruk.

Hurley's desire to attain 'perfect' images of the war meant that he missed the opportunity in Tobruk to capture the drama of the actual situation, preferring instead to 'stage' many of his photographs (see below). His approach had always been pictorial and artistic rather than news oriented.

Post war, he became a guest storyteller on ABC radio program 'The Argonauts' and provided photographs for numerous John Sands calendars, tourist booklets and postcards. He died in 1962.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

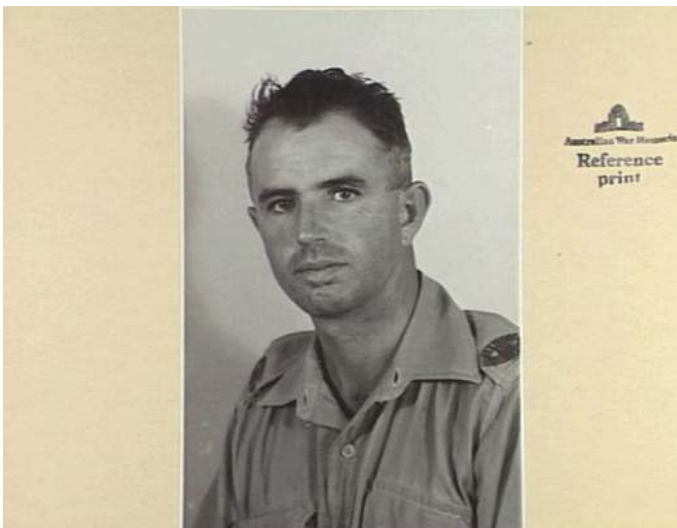
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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

007495

Hurley- Tobruk. 'Sentinel'



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

022003

X17395 Warrant-Officer (later Lieutenant) Thomas Fisher, Official Photographer with the Military History and Information Section (MHIS) in the Western Desert; taken in Libya, North Africa, December 1941.

## THOMAS FISHER NX17395

Thomas Fisher was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1906 before the family emigrated to Australia. He enlisted on 27 May 1940 in NSW.

Attached to No. 5 Field Unit, MHIS, he embarked from Melbourne in March 1941 and saw service across North Africa, including Tobruk during the eight-month siege.

Returning to Australia, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant at the end of May, before embarking from Townsville, Queensland, for New Guinea to cover the Kokoda campaign as part of the New Guinea Force Public Relations Field Unit.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL 020634  
 VX17395 Warrant Officer Class I Thomas 'Tom' Fisher of No. 5 Field Unit, Military History and Information Section (MHIS) directing a cine camera beside the intact window of a damaged building.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL 020308  
 Fisher- A section of the office of the General Staff Branch at Headquarters 9th Division, Tobruk.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL 020753  
 Australian soldier reading a copy of the Tobruk newspaper "Dinkum Oil" which gave troops a daily summary of the happenings abroad. (Fisher)

Fisher followed various units for several months, among them the 2/31st and 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalions, with almost 1,400 of his photographs held by the Australia War Memorial.

He was posted as missing in New Guinea on 16 November 1942, his death being confirmed several weeks later, aged 34.

Even 12 months later, his family were still only able to say in death notices published in the newspapers 'reported missing, believed killed'.

It later transpired that as the official photographer assigned to the US advance on Buna, the small boat he was in was part of a convoy attacked by Japanese fighters. He was one of many men killed or wounded.

Fisher was the only Military History Section photographer to be killed in action in the Second World War. He has no known grave, and his name is commemorated on the Port Moresby Memorial. (Damian Parer was working for Paramount when he was killed.)

The importance of the work of these photographers cannot be overestimated. Their photographs provide a valuable insight into life in Tobruk and many other theatres of war. These men and their work should not be forgotten.

When thinking about war photography in general, art historian Dr Caterina Bellinetti writes – "All images of war are hard to face, some more than others. Many have wondered about the ethical issues of recording violence, but Bourke-White\* provided an answer that still rings true today: "Difficult as these things may be to report or to photograph, it is something we war correspondents must do. We are in a privileged and sometimes unhappy position. We see a great deal of the world. Our obligation is to pass it on to others."

*\*Margaret Bourke-White was the first female official war photographer and was attached to the US Army in WW2. Her photographs from the Nazi Buchenwald concentration camp shortly after it was liberated appeared in Life magazine with the caption "Dead men will have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them."*

## OUR LAST REMAINING POLISH RAT (Story by Andrew Balcerzak)

*I'm sure that all readers of the Tobruk House News will recall the passing in 2024 of Tom Pritchard, the last Australian Rat of Tobruk. However it may come as a surprise to many to learn that there is still one Polish Rat of Tobruk with us. Our thanks to new committee member Andrew for providing this wonderful story.*

### THE STORY OF WŁADYSŁAW (GEORGE) KRZYSICA

The Siege of Tobruk (April to November 1941) ended with a crucial Allied victory in WWII, halting the German-Italian advance toward the Suez Canal. As the only deep-water port in the region, holding Tobruk denied the Axis a crucial logistical point and forced them to transport supplies from Tripoli, over 1,500 km away.

The stubborn defence by the "Rats of Tobruk" and other Allied forces had prevented the German "Desert Fox" Erwin Rommel from capturing Egypt and the Suez Canal. However, the Australian government demanded their troops be relieved due to their exhaustion and also the need to bolster defences of Australia in case of an expected Japanese invasion. Thus, the Australian troops were replaced by The Polish Carpathian Brigade and the British 70th Division.

Polish troops, you may ask? What were they doing in the Middle East?

The odyssey of the Polish Carpathian Brigade is arguably one of the most interesting events of WWII and can be illustrated by the example of the only surviving Rat of Tobruk in Australia, Władysław Krzysica. As Władysław adopted the name "George" after moving to Australia, I will refer to him by that name going forward.



George Krzysica - Photo by Andrew Balcerzak

George Krzysica was born in 1923 in the beautiful Polish town of Czarny Dunajec located at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains which form the southern border of Poland. It is an area where poetry, music and dance are part of everyday life. George learnt to play a musical instrument as soon as he could hold one.

He joined the Polish Army in Cracow at the age of 16. Shortly after, in September 1939, Poland was invaded by Germany from the west and the Soviet Union from the east. Despite the brave defence of their country, it was impossible to hold out against both of these powerful enemies.

The promised assistance from Poland's allies, France and England, did not materialise. The defenders of southern Poland who were not killed or taken prisoner began evacuating to the south of Europe via Romania. George was one of them. They eventually reached the Levant.

In December 1939 the Polish Government in exile made an agreement with the French government to create a Polish unit in the French territory of the Levant (Syria). The Carpathian Brigade was formed in April 1940 under the command of General Władysław Kopanski. The planned numbers were 208 officers and 6840 soldiers.

Two months later, the French capitulated to the Germans and all the pacts made with Poland's government in exile were annulled. The Vichy government of Philippe Petain, now a German ally, allowed the Brigade to defect to British controlled Palestine where it joined the British forces stationed there. The Brigade, initially composed of 319 officers and 3,437 soldiers, was soon reinforced to roughly 5,000 men.

On 12 January 1941, the reorganisation of the Brigade in keeping with British regulations was completed and the unit was renamed the *Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade*.

During the offensive by Rommel's Afrika Korps, the brigade was moved near the front to strengthen defensive positions and on 18 August 1941 the first convoy of the brigade's units left for besieged Tobruk to begin relieving Australian troops.

George said: "As we entered Tobruk the Australians took us to our positions. The next day there was a general air strike and the bombing went all day. The men stayed in the dugouts, caves, crevasses and wherever they could find shelter. Every day the German air force bombed us. You were in danger all the time. It didn't matter whether you were in the front line or at the back because the German air force was everywhere day and night.

I was not scared in Tobruk. My worst experience was sitting alone in a fox hole facing German tanks with a meagre gun in September 1939. In Tobruk I was not alone. There were the Australian and Polish comrades"



*Australian soldiers welcoming two infantrymen from the Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade in Tobruk.*

George has very fond memories of his interactions with the Australian Rats of Tobruk despite the language barrier: "We knew only few words of English, but we got on very well with the Australians. We overcame the language barrier by using all of our arms and legs to mimic the messages (George laughed...). They were good boys and despite the language problems we understood each other very well. We shared a destiny of being far away from our homes and families. Australians just like us wanted to do a really good job. Australians were very generous and shared their beer with us even when everything, even water, was in shortage."

Following its withdrawal from Tobruk in December 1941, the Brigade took part in an attack on the German Gazala defensive line.

In March 1942 the Brigade was withdrawn from the front and returned

back to Palestine. There it was joined by the Polish forces of General Władysław Anders who had evacuated from the Soviet Union.

Anders, by an agreement with Stalin, evacuated a motley crew of orphan children, men and women, among them soldiers, all of whom were taken by the Soviets and imprisoned in the Siberian gulags 1939-1941. They numbered in hundreds of thousands.

The Brigade officially ceased to exist on 3 May 1942 and became part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps. George became a part of Anders' Army, a force of 100,000 troops. They played a crucial role in the breakthrough of the German Gothic Line, in Italy, and later liberated Ancona and Bologna.

In May 1944, George and his units were tasked with taking over the strategic monastery of Monte Cassino which helped break the German Gustav Line and opened the road to Rome.

Monte Cassino was a major battle costing 55,000 allied casualties. There were four major unsuccessful allied attacks on Monte Cassino (January to May 1944) before the Polish troops overran the Germans.

George recalled that the severe bombing of the mountain was astonishing. The troops stationed at the foot of the mountain felt like they were in an earthquake for weeks due to the intensity of the US Airforce bombing.



George also met the famous bear Wojtek (pronounced Voytek). Wojtek was a baby bear brought by one of Anders' soldiers from Iran in 1942.

He later became a mascot of Anders' Army. Prior to the battle of Monte Cassino Wojtek was promoted to the rank of corporal. He enjoyed the soldier life and actively assisted carrying boxes of ammunition to the front line.

*Wojtek was a Syrian brown bear who was given to Polish soldiers as a gift by an Iranian shepherd near Hamedan, Iran. He became famous and after the war spent his retirement at a zoo in Scotland, dying in 1963.*

As the war ended, in June 1945, George and his Polish comrades

were evacuated to the United Kingdom. Some later decided to return to Poland which by now was under the domination of the Soviet Union. However, a majority of the Polish troops, including George, considered the option of a life in the "free world".

The United Kingdom had a post-war economic problem and was not keen on foreigners remaining in their country, even those who had helped save it in the 1940 Battle of Britain.

But incredibly, the Australian Rats of Tobruk, came to the rescue. They did not forget their Polish comrades and lobbied the Australian Federal and State governments to allow them to come to Australia. This campaign was so successful that the Australian Government relented and accepted the Polish Rats of Tobruk on 2-year work contracts.

George was one of the first Rats of Tobruk to be accepted into Australia. He embarked on the "SS Austurias" at Southampton on 29 August 1947 along with 277 other Polish Rats. George was 24 years old when he arrived in Fremantle on 21 September. He arrived a few days later in Melbourne by ship and then took another sea journey by sea to Tasmania which was his and his friends final contract destination.



KACZOR, M. MACKO, J. GAWLIK, W. KRZYSZYCA, T. KLEBAS, K. OVIKLA, H. MAJORSKI. ORCHESTRA IN TARRALEAH - 1948

*Photo courtesy of Polish Museum and Archives Australia*

George considered himself very lucky to survive the war. His expectations after the war would be considered very low by today's standard and so he did not mind the hard work and harsh conditions of the Tasmanian Hydroelectric Power Scheme in Tarraleah: he was just happy to have a life without the need to hide from enemy fire.

George applied for Australian citizenship, as indeed did most of the Polish Rats. This was granted in October 1949.

Life in Tarraleah was monotonous, but the Polish Rats entertained themselves the best they could. They formed a band which played for Australians every Saturday. This was the only recreation and interaction these single men had with the Australian female community. George, who had been a musician for as long as he could remember, played the saxophone. They also occasionally travelled to Launceston and other "exciting places" to perform.

George met his wife, Weronika, through a friend. Weronika was a displaced person from Vilnius. Vilnius was previously a Polish city that became a part of the Soviet Lithuanian Republic after 1945. They married in 1963. In the 1970's the family, now including children Anna and Mark, moved to Melbourne. Weronika died in 2002. George later moved to Queensland to be closer to his children and now lives in a Noosa retirement village.

George experienced life as a soldier alongside Polish, Australian, British, Indian, New Zealander, South African and Czechoslovakian comrades. He told me about his experiences living in pre-1939 Poland, the Second World War and his later life in Australia. Reflecting back on those challenging times, George was very philosophical about the war and bears no hatred towards his former enemies. Moreover, George pays tribute to the Australian brotherhood in arms established in Tobruk 1941 that unexpectedly enabled him to come to Australia after the war.

I will be forever grateful for having had the opportunity of speaking with George Krzysica who was kind enough to share with me the wisdom of a man who lived for over 100 years, many of them in difficult circumstances. The last Rat of Tobruk.

If you would like to know more about the Tasmanian Hydroelectric Power Scheme you can use this link [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=III2U-14\\_BA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=III2U-14_BA)

## RATS EXHIBITION COMES TO KOJONUP, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The Kojonup Memorial Hall, 97 Albany Highway, Kojonup (next door to the main Shire offices) will host the Rats of Tobruk Exhibition from 25 April to August 30 this year. This series of panels tells the entire story and includes recollections from many of the men who forged the legend that surrounds the Rats of Tobruk.

It will be open for viewing from Thursday through to Monday between 10am and 2pm each day or at other times by prior arrangement. For more information call 0477282463.



*The Kojonup Memorial Hall was built in 1926 & celebrates its Centennial this year with the Rats of Tobruk Exhibition*

## NEW 85<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION AT TOBRUK HOUSE

Anyone who has visited Tobruk House would no doubt have looked at some of the memorabilia scattered around the hall. If you found that to be of interest, then you are in for a treat.

ROTA is pleased to announce that **Sunday May 24** will see the launch of an expanded exhibition displaying memorabilia and short biographies of a number of Rats of Tobruk, as well as information about their units. We have gathered items from a variety of sources, and we look forward to sharing this unique exhibition with you.

This display will be open to the public on our regular open days throughout this special 85<sup>th</sup> siege anniversary year. See the calendar of events on page 2 for dates.

## WE CAN NEVER SAY ENOUGH THANK YOUS TO OUR FALLEN

Story by Flip Shelton in the Herald Sun 24 April 2025

My grandfather Jack Shelton was a Rat of Tobruk. Killed in action on May 1, 1941. Rank Lieutenant, 2/24<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF. Jack played 28 games of footy for St Kilda and 7 for South Melbourne. He was married to Winifred and was the father of two boys. He grew up one of 12 siblings, in the Victorian town of Avenel. He was born on January 24, 1905.

We have two wartime photos of my grandfather. One is him standing in front of some army barracks, perhaps at Puckapunyal, smoking a cigarette, his thumb resting in his army jacket. The other he is sitting high on a camel, perhaps in Egypt. It was taken six months before his death. In both photos his face is expressionless, but what of the feelings inside I often ponder. The only memory my father has of him is waving goodbye as he left for his service from the Avenel train station.

For as long as I can remember I have attended the Dawn Service at the Shrine of Remembrance. I don't really know when or why I made that decision to first attend. A gravitational pull perhaps. Every year I wake early and walk to the Shrine in the pre-dawn darkness. As I walk past, or alongside people, no-one is chatting. It is a solemn pilgrimage with just footfalls heard. No dawn chorus from the birds just yet. The morning has an eerie quiet. I like to get to the Shrine early to ensure my position on the barricade where I have direct line of sight to the orchestra and speakers and to have an unhindered view of the Shrine's reverential stature, most recently lit up in red. In years past I have shared a few quiet words to my neighbours in the crowd. Where have you travelled from? What is your connection? One year someone held their umbrella above me as the rain came down. Another time someone handed me a tissue after I had run out. Gestures I will always remember.



Lt. Jack Shelton

From the reflective Ode of Remembrance, beginning with those words "They shall grow not old.." to the haunting Last Post, played by a bugler, to standing in silence for one minute, shoulder to shoulder with about 40,000 others, and then The Reveille, the bugle call that marked the start of another day of war – it's impossible not to feel an ache consume your entire body. I can assure you it's not from the cold hard concrete below your feet.

For me it's The Last Post that unravels me because I know this bugle call, which represented the end of the day's fighting was something my grandfather would have heard daily until his death. For the soldiers, it was a sound that signalled they had survived another day. For some no doubt a blessing, perhaps for others a curse. The Last Post is also played at military funerals – something my grandfather Jack never had. He has no known grave but is commemorated at the Alamein Memorial in Egypt, along with 11,868 British and Commonwealth casualties.

The poem 'In Flanders Fields' written by a medical officer while in the theatre of war, while he himself became a casualty, is so poignant. Could he ever have imagined his poem being read in front of so many people so often? His words: "ye break faith with us who die. We shall not sleep," a gentle plea for us to remember their sacrifice. And for those of us who attend or watch Anzac Day services throughout the country, or reflect on this day wherever we are, we indeed keep the faith. The 'Abide With Me' hymn played by the orchestra on the sloping grass banks, the silhouette hitting the Shrine with some distortion, has a haunting sadness about it. It's at this point that the stoic shoulders around me often shudder and shake.

At the completion of the Dawn Service, there is a gentle surge as the barricades are removed and the throng respectfully moves up the steps of the Shrine to the Sanctuary to lay a poppy – the symbol of remembrance of those who have died. But it's also a symbol of hope. At the top of the stairs, I like to look back over the crowd towards the Melbourne city centre, with the Eternal Flame flickering and the avenue of pine trees and nearby gardens bathed in early morning light. It is a beautiful sight. The service at the Shrine is a place to gather in grief and gratitude. It is an opportunity to acknowledge and honour those men and women who were injured or died in war, and those who continue to serve, or suffer. Our presence each year says thank you, again and again.



# ROTA MERCHANDISE

See Order Form on page 18 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**



'HEROES OF TOBRUK'  
STUBBIE HOLDER  
**\$10**



'HEROES OF TOBRUK'  
BALLPOINT PEN  
**\$5**



ROTA TOTE BAG  
40cm x 35cm  
**\$16.50**



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



'HEROES OF TOBRUK' MUG  
**\$15**



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



## RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION INC MERCHANDISE ORDER FORM

(PRICES VALID JAN 2026 – JUNE 2026)

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		
ROTA badge car window sticker	\$10				\$4		Postage for up to 5 stickers to same address.
ROTA Rugby Top	\$60				\$15		
ROTA Polo Shirt (navy blue with red stripes)	\$45				\$11.50		
ROTA “baseball” style cap	\$28				\$11.50		
ROTA Bar Mat	\$40				\$16.50		
Heroes of Tobruk stubbie holder	\$10				\$11.65		Postage for up to 2 units to the same address
ROTA Tote bag (RATBAG)	\$16.50				\$11.50		Launch special offer – 2 for \$30 (+ post)
Heroes Of Tobruk Mug	\$15				\$11.65		
Heroes of Tobruk pen	\$5				\$4		Postage for up to 3 pens to the same address
			Colour				
Ladies Poppy Scarf (light weight)	\$15				\$11		Postage for up to 4 scarves to same address
\$16.50 postage for orders of multiple items to the same address			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: 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



## DESIGNING REMEMBRANCE



Marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, *Eucalypts of Hodogaya* reflects on a remarkable story of post-war reconciliation and remembrance.

This exhibition explores how Australian and Japanese architects, gardeners, and builders overcame cultural divides after the Second World War to collaborate on a site that blends Eastern and Western traditions in a garden of peace.

## TASTE OF COMBAT



This exhibition honours the vital work of the Catering Corps and unveils the fascinating science and innovation behind military meals. Explore what and how troops have eaten – from the Boer War to Afghanistan. There are personal stories from cooks on submarines to soldiers with field rations, showcasing the skills and adaptability of Defence chefs, whether cooking in combat zones or delivering fine dining for diplomats.

## HERstory



Discover HERstory – This exhibition shines a light on women based in Victoria, sharing their stories of service, courage and contribution from 1942 to the present day. Through powerful portraits and personal reflections, *HERstory* pays tribute to the strength, resilience and legacy of Australia's military women. 20

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.