



# Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## 85TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

Rat's Tales Vol 3 Issue 1

Editors: Sue Trewartha  
Chris Kelly "The Pen."

May 2026



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The weekend had eventually arrived! People were gathering in Sydney to attend the 85th Anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk. At last all the work behind the scenes was coming together.

Decorations for all aspects of the weekend were boxed up and travelling long distances; from South Australia, Tasmania, Queensland.

Special projects, merchandise and memorabilia were packed in vehicles to be transported to Sydney.

The Anniversary book was trucked from Adelaide where it was printed, to Five Dock RSL, Sydney, ready to be packed for preorder deliveries and others packed ready to hand out at the launch.

Those talking at the Reunion, to present various items to attendees, nervously reviewed their speeches and notes... often! Checking they had everything they needed, several times.

Behind the scenes, organisers dealt with last minute changes, sadly a few people pulled out of attending due to the fuel crisis and prices, so things were changed for that. All problems were sorted calmly and with big smiles from the organisers!

Many people had accommodation near Five Dock RSL and were pleased to catch up with other Descendants staying at the same place.

And just where do you start to write about the 85th Anniversary Reunion weekend held over 10 to 12 April 2026, at Five Dock RSL, Sydney, NSW?

What an amazing weekend!

From the end of the 80th anniversary Reunion, ideas were in the melting pot, roaming around in our heads, with founders of DOTROTA, researchers and committee and many other helpers, eventually bringing it all together for this weekend.

This story cannot be written without acknowledging the amazing dedication of Betty Murphy, descendant of Joseph Oakley, QX4796, 2/13th Field RAE, and her daughter Sarah Maas, and son Travis Murphy and the work done behind the scenes. Without them, this event would not have taken place. They are part of a wider group of helpers, researchers and descendants of the Rats of Tobruk, who are determined to keep the name of the Rats of Tobruk alive. Much preparation took place to bring this event to fruition and helpers gathered at Five Dock RSL to set up the site.

Amongst those who helped on Thursday 9 April, before the launch, organise the books for delivery for the pre-ordered ones, were Bruce and Carolyn Quinn, Anne and Philip Traynor, Brendan and Michelle McEvoy, Val Collins and Sue Trewartha.

Each book was wrapped in brown paper, reminiscent of the old days, and tied with string. DOTROTA stickers were put on each one. Yards of brown paper, tape and string cut and disposed of, wrapping and tying each book, then they were packed, addressed and checked ready to be posted next morning.

Martin and Claire Forsyth and Peter Collins came along and soon the orders with more than one book to be dispatched, were organised and put into piles ready to be addressed by Sue and Michelle.

It was a huge job, with books going every direction and in various piles on various tables! Each person with their specific job, and no one dared move something if it wasn't their responsibility!

This huge pile of ordered books were posted Friday morning. Within four days many books had already arrived at their destination – well done



Australia Post! Many more books have been posted since the Reunion. Our first print run was sold out in less than three weeks!

85th Anniversary Book ready for posting on Friday 9 April 2026.





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### SO WHAT WAS HAPPENING AT THE REUNION? Programme of Events

**Friday, 10 April 2026**

#### Meet and Greet session

7.00pm Auditorium  
Meet and Greet session  
85th Commemorative Book Launch at Five Dock RSL  
(Drinks and Dinner at own expense before launch.)

**Saturday, 11 April 2026**

#### Get together

1.00pm to 3.00pm  
Five Dock RSL Sports Bar  
(Drinks and Lunch at own expense)

Special presentation by Researcher, Ray Windlow, focusing on Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Association research activities and the work they do, with updates on projects including Digital Museum and Grave Mapping initiatives. Presentation by Chris Kelly POW

#### Remembrance Dinner

6.00pm Auditorium  
Sneak preview of 85th Anniversary Project  
Presentation by researcher Ray Windlow focusing on association research activities.  
Opportunity to mingle, reconnect, share stories and memorabilia.  
(Drinks at own expense.)

**Sunday, 12th April 2026**  
**Commemorative Service**

11.00am Five Dock War Memorial  
Crn Park and First Avenue, Sydney.  
Dedication of the relocated NSW Rats of Tobruk Memorial  
Planting of a Tobruk Fig Tree  
Unveiling of the 85th Anniversary Project  
Renowned violinist Rachael Bostock  
**Farewell Sunday after Service**  
Following the service, a light lunch will be provided at Five Dock RSL. Auditorium.  
(Drinks at own expense)



### GETTING ORGANISED!

Our helpers, volunteers and organisers were soon into getting things ready for the descendants coming from far and wide, descending on Sydney. Amongst the hustle and bustle of the preparation on Thursday and Friday, were Martin, Peter and Kevin with Kaye Ross and Robyn Moody carefully watching and instructing, gathering the empty book boxes and stuffing them into the hessian sandbags and tying them up so they could be used on the stage to represent sandbags around the Rat's doovers.

For the launch of the book at Five Dock RSL on 10 April, at 7pm, a group of helpers set up a table of memorabilia, with the book on display. Simple table decorations included hessian as a tablecloth, soldier's uniform, rocks depicting the desert terrain, a Bofors bullet shell, soldier's helmet, poppies and a small sprig of rosemary fallen off a bush a few days earlier on Anzac Parade, Canberra.

Behind the display was a beautiful handmade backdrop, made by Kaye Ross, Tasmania, a huge job, so well designed and made, words could not describe the time and effort that went into it. Kaye's fabric panel is loosely based on the map of Tobruk given to her by Gordon, "Don" Rogers, QX10148, and features beautiful collages of photos of different places, people and activities during the Siege.

Kaye made a beautiful, poignant diorama of knitted soldiers, sailors, nurses and airmen along with an amazing display of miniature items she made, all transported from Tasmania; it was another highlight of the weekend. She and friend, Robyn Moody, secretary of George Town RSL, Tasmania, spent a lot of time setting it all up along the front of the stage. Others who helped Kaye with the knitted soldiers were Lois Ralph, Vonda Grace, Kathaleen Puckey, Virginia Whitehorse; Greg Lions cut the timber for the memorial, a copy of the original Tobruk Memorial. Thank you to George Town RSL for use of their rooms. These items on display were for sale after the event.

On Thursday and Friday, Betty Murphy and her trusty helpers set up tables in the foyer to display historical items and memorabilia. There was also a wide range of Anniversary merchandise available.

Some talented ladies had handmade crafts; knitted and crocheted rats; book marks, door stops rat toys and there was some beaded suncatchers. Thank you to Heather Green, Kam Wheeler, Judy Crosswell, Val Collins, Julianne Hein, Sarah Maas, Carol Smith and Sue Trewartha for the great work they did.





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## MEMORABILIA

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Along with those items, a wide range of stubby holders, pens, notepads, badges, key rings, magnets, DOTROTA stickers, shirts and other memorabilia, were on sale over the whole weekend.

An amazing display was created to mark the 80th anniversary by Sarah Maas, and several helpers, a work taking over 12 months to create. These handcut card stock dog tags, each individually numbered and named, strung and arranged in alphabetical order, hung from a frame, representing a soldier involved in the Siege, were again on display for this 85th Reunion. It created a lot of interest as people looked for their Rat's name. The careful, handmade process emphasizes remembrance and human connection.

Another job behind the scenes that Sarah Maas did was to produce the handbook for those attending the event. The 44 page A5 booklet contains a story of Tobruk history compiled by Matt McHugh, a OOB (Order of Battle) prepared by Deb Goodwin, listing units that were at Tobruk during the siege) various interesting pieces of interest including the programme for the weekend, and stories about things happening; a story about the Banjo, (see other part of newsletter about this); the Owen Gun Story; and a story about chocolates ordered 85 years ago; cheese; Thomas Gard; founder of the Rats of Tobruk Assoc, NSW, in 1944; and other fascinating snippets.

This booklet was distributed to those attending the Official Dinner, placed in the gift bag for each person. It was quite interesting watching a troop of helpers putting the various gifts into the numerous bags needed and watching as the line up of bags were placed in piles around the room and then moving the bags to be stored ready to go on each chair. If you were not in that "troop", you were not permitted to touch or shift or help in anyway, lest the "bucket brigade" of gifts were disrupted!

A gift given to DOTROTA, made by the men from the Yankalilla Men's Shed in SA, were 200 Rats of Tobruk magnets, placed into the gift bag. Thanks to Don and Hanna Law for design and organizing this donation.

See photo of wooden magnets and other memorabilia given out at the Reunion on the right.

DOTROTA name lanyards had a tribute photo of your Rat on the back.



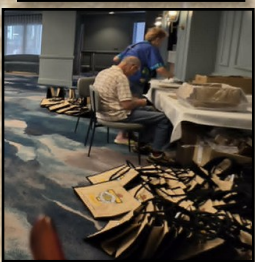
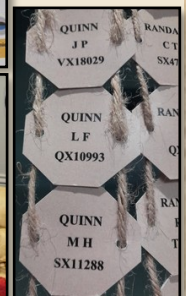
Another of Sarah's masterpieces, a diamond dot DOTROTA badge. Below is Betty's handmade Butterfly won by Tricia Price.



Notebook and pen, RAT air fresheners, bullet pens, bottle openers, Rat stubbie holders,



Rat magnets, bookmarks designed by Sue Trewartha for the launch of the book, and printed and laminated by Ceduna Area School.



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## THE EMPTY CHAIR AND NO SURRENDER ROSE

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An Empty Chair, symbolising and honouring those missing, killed in action or no longer with us, was adorned with a jacket, belt and slouch hat, with a single white rose on the seat. Boots and helmet sat underneath the chair.

This is the poem displayed at The Empty Chair.

### The Empty Chair

*Tonight we see an empty chair and feel the weight of absence.*

*This chair stands empty, but the room is not.  
Their presence is felt in the very air we breathe  
in our shared heritage, in our memories,  
and in the profound gratitude of every person here.  
The long line of the Rats of Tobruk has passed from the  
living world, but they are woven into our memories,  
held in our hearts.*

*Through the stories we tell and the pages we open tonight,  
we remember the bravery and courage they found under fire;  
the endurance that sustained them through the desert's  
unimaginable hardships,  
and their fierce love for home and family.  
We remember their endurance in the heat  
and bravery in the dark.  
We remember the unbreakable bond of mateship that  
defined them and their steady courage under fire.  
Their bravery and sacrifice will never be forgotten.  
We remember the men who endured the unimaginable for  
the families they loved and the country they held so dear.  
Though they have marched out of sight, they  
remain here,  
we feel them tonight — in our memories, in our hearts,  
and in the minds of all who know their story.  
Although the last of them has found rest and gone  
from sight  
their spirit remains on guard and forever in our hearts.*

*Forever honoured.*

*Forever remembered.*

*Safe in history now.*

*We Will Remember Them.*



**No Surrender Rose:** It is a few years now since Betty Murphy and the late Gordon Wallace worked with Treloar Roses, in Victoria, to create a rose called "No Surrender."

This rose is described by Treloar Roses as "an extremely tough and disease resistant rose, with an almost evergreen habit. The dark green leaves frame masses of nostalgic English style blooms in purple red with a gold reverse. This variety is a wonderful choice for en masse plantings in parks and open spaces or as a making a striking feature in any garden. Growth to 1m. It was awarded Silver Medal at the 2020 Australian National Rose Trial Garden Awards! The "No Surrender" Rose has been named to commemorate the 80th anniversary of The Siege of Tobruk in April 2021. Treloar Roses will donate \$2 from the sale of each rose to the Descendants of The Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc to help fund various veteran related projects.

The beautiful blood red and sandy gold rose was to be planted in each state in Australia, exactly a year before the 80th anniversary, to have the roses blooming and Official Plaques laid for that occasion. But COVID19 put a stop to that and we could not gather at that time. But from June to August 2020, as each state's restrictions eased, finally 14 "No Surrender" Roses were planted at 14 locations across all states and territories. DVA funding enabled DOTROTA to ensure lasting memorial plaques were in place to remind us of the service and sacrifice of our Rats of Tobruk and Avalon Memorial created a plaque for each state.



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## LAUNCH OF "THEY SHALL EVER BE REMEMBERED"

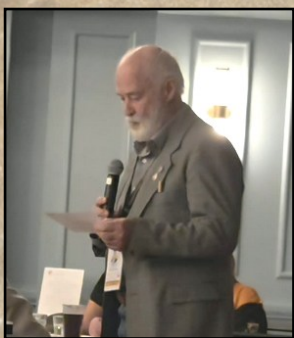
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Thank you to Brendan McEvoy for advice and for reading the transcript from Lieut Lance Heffron's diary at the start of the launch of the book. It was fitting for him to read this entry, as Brendan's father was in the same unit as Lance, making us wonder if they knew each other.



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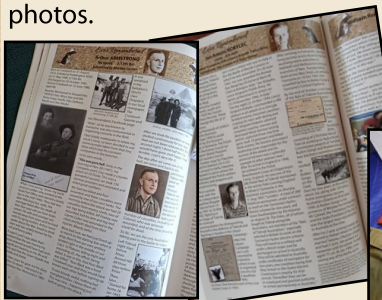


The first official event of the Reunion, the Anniversary book was launched at the Meet and Greet, 10 April 2026 upstairs at the Five Dock RSL, Sydney.

What to do after the 80th anniversary handbook containing 18 stories from living Rats at the time?? *What can we do this time?* Sadly, for our 85th Anniversary, there are no known Rats still living. *What can we do to honour them?* Sue Trewartha suggested asking our descendants to write in with their Rat's story and put into an A5 booklet, thinking we would be lucky to get 30 or 40 stories or perhaps 50.

It took no time for that many stories to come in and we decided to make it an A4 book, one story to a page, in alphabetical surname order.

30 or 40 stories now turned into 273 stories, some on one page, a few two or three stories to a page for those who didn't have as much to share, and a few with two pages for their story. Writing it down like this, makes it all seem easy, but the reality was that the Descendants stories, telling us in their words what they wanted us to know, being restricted to about 850 words and 3 to 6 photos per page, and then placing in the book, adding photos, setting up a place for poetry written by our Rats and getting the back cover sorted out, and of course, continual editing, took some time. Attempting to get funding for this book (but DVA deemed it not significant) was a further thing to do. Sue Trewartha's local Ceduna Foreshore Hotel, a community owned business, was very interested in the 23 local men, Rats of Tobruk, who went to War, and helped support this venture. Numerous people helped with typing up some handwritten or newspaper copies; Deb Goodwin, Marie Hughes, Naomi Abbott, Carol Smith, for typing and editing, Kaye Lee, Di Barrie and Jill Douglas, researchers for their town or unit, submitting stories and Frank Davies family, England, for various photos.



Huge thanks to Erica Bodger for the back cover painting. Erica is Sue's sister and when asked if she did "commissioned work..." replied... "Looks like I do now!"



A long year of working on organising and editing these stories, saw this publication come into being, printed in SA, trucked to Sydney ready for the launch night 10 April 2026.



Everyone gathered upstairs for a Meet and Greet session, and at 7pm, Sue Trewartha,

daughter in law of Sydney Arthur, Art, Trewartha, SX11220, 2/43<sup>rd</sup>, editor, at last revealed the name of the book, kept under wraps for the whole time. Words from Lieut Lance Heffron, SX11171, 2/48th Bn, determined the name of the book. On the night, Brendan McEvoy, son of Laurence Henry "Bill" McEvoy, SX11122, also 2/48<sup>th</sup> Bn, read from Lieut Heffron's diary.

### "My Most Miserable Hour".

Lieutenant Lance Howard Heffron, SX11171, 2/48th Battalion, on 12 November 1941, wrote in his diary:  
*"I left a few men in Libya in their last resting places. I managed to visit the Cemetery before I left. I never spent a more miserable hour I can assure you and it was hard to leave them there, but I know they shall ever be remembered."*  
Lance Heffron, born in Adelaide on 25 Jun 1915, arrived in the Middle East on 23 March 1941, did desert training, was ill in hospital with sandfly fever before being Taken On Strength to the 2/48<sup>th</sup> Battalion in May 1941. Sadly, he was Killed In Action on 22 July 1942, buried at El Alamein."



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## LIEUT LANCE HEFFRON

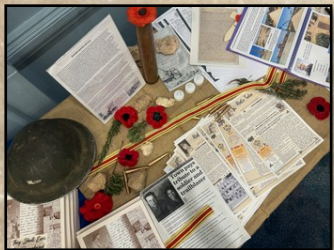
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Bob Hare speaking at book launch.  
Below: A toast to end the book launch.



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Sue placed a copy of the book on the Empty Chair before explaining the name of the book. Several people have asked for a copy of the speech.

"The Promise Kept.

*"In the heat and dust of 1941, a soldier stood among the fresh graves of the Tobruk Cemetery, amongst the white crosses, and made a promise to the dead. He was tired, he was grieving, and he was a long way from home. That man was Lance Howard Heffron, SX11171. On 12 November 1941, he sat down and wrote in his diary that he had "never spent a more miserable hour." He looked at the wooden crosses of his mates and felt the crushing weight of their absence. But in that dark moment, he reached for a pen and made a defiant promise. He wrote: "They shall ever be remembered." And as soon as I read those words very early when I was collecting stories... I knew that was going to be the title of the book.*

*Heffron didn't know then that he only had seven months to live. He didn't know that his own name would soon be carved into a cross just like the ones he was looking at.*

*For well over eighty years, those words sat in the quiet pages of a diary. But words like that don't stay silent forever. To Heffron, that "miserable hour" in the cemetery was a lonely one.*

*But tonight, he is not alone. We are the "ever" he was writing about.*

*We are the memory he promised, extending now, not only to those in the Tobruk cemetery, but all who fought there.*

*It has been exciting since the book has gone to the printer, that we have located a distant relative to Lance. Although his family isn't present to see it, we are here to ensure that the memory he cherished is held safe by all of us, forever. Today we prove him right. By having his family connected to us today, the distant relatives of the man whose private diary inspired our title, we are proving that his words were a prophecy that we are fulfilling together at this launch.*

*As Rat's descendants, we didn't just want to recount the battles. We wanted to answer Lance. We want to tell him the hour is no longer miserable—it is sacred. When we started this project, we didn't just want to write a history book. There are plenty of those on the shelves. We wanted to write a memory book, with these pages holding the voices of our heroes.*

*We've taken the faded telegrams, the grainy photos, worn letters, original service records and the stories told over Sunday roasts around kitchen tables and we've turned them into a permanent record.*

*It was not written by historians looking in from the outside. It was written by sons, daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren; families — by those who carry these stories in their hearts. Tonight is about reaching back through the decades to take our grandfathers' hands and say to them, "We haven't forgotten."*

*While my own journey with these pages began only a year ago, the soul of this book was born eighty-five years ago in the dust of a desert and over the last year, getting to know these families through their words, weaving them into this book, has been very special. More than just a collection of paper and ink, this book is a living reminder of why these stories must be told. In the heat of that conflict, surrounded by the names of mates who wouldn't be coming home, a soldier named Lance wrote a vow into his diary—a simple, solemn promise that they would **ever be remembered**. Tonight, as we open this book, we aren't just reading history. We are finally answering that call. We are making good on a promise made half a world away, eighty-five years ago.*

*To the descendants and families who contributed to this collection: **thank you**. It isn't always easy to reach back into the past—to sift through old letters and pull out the memories of those we miss. But because you did, those stories are there for generations to come.*

*Each story is unique, each is deeply personal, they give us a window into what the Rats of Tobruk endured—and something of the lives they built when they finally came home. Thank you for trusting me with these precious pieces of your history.*

*We hope we have done them proud."*

Lance, we heard you; they **are** ever remembered!

Two descendants shared short paragraphs from the book. Bob Hare read from his story and Carol Smith read from her stories. See next page:-



Sue Trewartha and Bob Hare at the launch.





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## FROM "THEY SHALL EVER BE REMEMBERED" BY CAROL SMITH.

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Carol Smith was kind enough to read out short versions of two of the stories she has written for "They Shall Ever Be Remembered" at the launch of the book. She wrote several stories in the book - all so emotional. *Just imagine what our Rats and others went through as Prisoners of War!*



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### HARRY HERBERT MILLER WX11952 – 2/28TH

When is something just a co-incidence, an amazing co-incidence, or perhaps some form of divine guidance. *You be the judge!*

May 2023 and we were returning from a visit to the Institute of the Partisans in Varallo. There were eight of us travelling around in a "people carrier" a small white van with sliding doors. None of the four Italians with us spoke English and my Italian is very limited.

On the outskirts of the little village of Mosso there stood a church and cemetery. When our Italian friends said that an Australian soldier had been killed over by the Church I was keen to stop and place a poppy and flag. By this time, in our travels, there were flags and poppies all over Biella. I opened the sliding door and looked up as I put my foot on the ground, and right in front of me was an elderly Italian gentleman leading a little dog. He was so close I could have touched him.

Two of our party were local Italian historians, and when they spoke to them, I caught the word "Australiani".

This dear little man virtually lit up like a Christmas tree – he was unbelievably excited and I will never forget his reaction. So excited, he even seemed to be talking too fast for the Italians who were busy trying to translate for me.

Grabbing my arm, and gesturing, he led me over to the side of the Church and showed me bullet holes. He was clearly telling the story that Harry Miller had been executed right here, at the Church of Mosso St Maria.

Harry along with a group of Partisans had been captured when their ammunition had run out. They were held overnight and had been shot the following day against the wall of this Church on 21 February 1944.

This sprightly old 94 year old gentleman had been a 14 year old boy when the executions had taken place. *He had seen it all and watched as they dragged the bodies into the cemetery for a quick burial.*

He showed us where the firing squad had stood, where the men had fallen, how they were dragged into the cemetery and buried in a rough grave. I had long given up trying to work out what he was saying and was grateful that the Italians were all on their phones trying to translate.

I was concerned that reliving the events, and all the details he wanted us to know, would upset him. But it was just the opposite, he actually looked relieved. Our Italian friends said that he was so happy that he had finally been able to tell Harry's story to another Australian – he had passed the baton on.

One second earlier, or one second later, I would probably not have made eye contact with Signor Garbaccio and this whole scenario would not have unfolded – *some things are just meant to be.*

### RONALD McINTYRE – VX48203 – 2/32nd

The sight of the telegram boy was enough to fill any mother's heart with dread and my grandmother was no exception. She received two nearly identical telegrams - her eldest son Ron McIntyre and adopted son, Charlie Mills, were both captured with 2/32nd at El Alamein 17 Jul 1942. The boys enlisted together in July 1940 and arrived in the Middle East early March 1941. In April they were given two hours notice they were heading for Tobruk and arrived early hours of the morning and were attacked by dive bombers – for them the "Siege of Tobruk" had begun. Ron's diary gave some idea of conditions there; "Conditions are terrible. One hot meal a day which we eat at midnight; 600 yards separate us from Jerry who looks down on us, his snipers are very accurate; Heat and flies are maddening; Heavy mortar bombing; Erect wire in front of positions which is a hazardous owing to flares and machine guns."

Both were captured at El Alamein on 17 July and handed over to the Italians. They passed through interim POW camps, eventually arriving at PG57 Gruppignano, Aust and NZ POWs - it was here many mates were reunited. When POWs were needed to work in the rice fields Ron and Charlie were railed to PG 106 Vercelli where they became separated and lost touch. After the armistice in September Ron not knowing where Charlie was, took off on 8 Sept and headed north, within days Germans flooded northern Italy, those who stayed were recaptured and sent to Stalags.

Through "Frank the Australian" Ron joined a partisan group and was fighting with them in Varallo and was wounded by a grenade, taken to a stable and shrapnel dug out of his legs with a pen knife. I imagine the only anaesthetics would have been grappa if he was lucky. Cino and Gemisto, well know Partisan leaders, were good friends of Guido Angelino Catella from the little village of Coggiola, and it was there Ron was taken to convalesce. Ron was joined by Frank Blewett, Jack Giles, Ray Jones and a NZ Bert Loy.

Guido had risked his life many times helping POWs on their path to Switzerland. Why Ron didn't cross I don't know, but from reports I have read, he and the others fought with the Partisans around the Mountains, but their home base always seemed to be Coggiola. Guido's family had built a cave in the mountains near the village and the five would shelter there if the Germans or Fascists were around. I visited Coggiola in 2023 and climbed up into that Cave and have no idea how the five managed to shelter there; cold, damp and small - but preserved by the Catella family as it was, over 80 years ago. Ray Jones in his interview with the AWM spoke of the risks the Catella family took and said "If they find out they're been helping us, then they're gone." In November 1944 Mission Cherokee became operational; to help organize and arm partisans and assist POWs to get to Switzerland. Ron and Frank's role was to contact the POWs still in hiding in the area – possibly about 40.

In May 1945, American 5th Army liberated Ron and others and another telegram boy paid a very welcome visit. My grandmother sat on the front steps totally numb until the neighbours and family arrived. I believe the impromptu street party went on for hours. Welcome home Ron.



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## RAY WINDLOW, CHIEF RESEARCHER AND DATABASE EXPERT

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Around 1 pm on Saturday afternoon, descendants gathered downstairs in the Sports Bar, to listen to a presentation from Ray Windlow, our chief researcher and database expert, talk about the work done by the volunteer researchers to record each Rat of Tobruk's information, to be kept forever.

Researchers are Ray Windlow, Deb Goodwin, Betty Murphy, Craig Proctor, Sue Trewartha, Denise Dobinson, Martin Forsyth and Matt McHugh, who also maintains Owen Carlton's database.

**From Ray.** On Saturday afternoon someone let me loose with my laptop, a big screen TV and a microphone and I was able to show people what we have done, where we are at and what was planned for the future. I am far from confident behind a microphone as you can probably attest, held it too close, too far away etc, but I enjoyed sharing with you immensely. Over the course of the remaining events I had many, many people come to me with questions and to share stories, it was, I confess, a bit overwhelmed at times trying to answer everything as best I could without making you feel like I was pushing your inquiry aside. And hence my apology, if you felt like I did this to you when you approached me over the weekend. To be honest I just couldn't keep up with everything going on, particularly focusing on the presentation and then the mid dinner speech where I got to voice my opinion on commemoration and where so many are going wrong and have lost focus on what it's all about. I confess I was concerned about the content of that speech but the number of people who came and congratulated me afterwards was very reassuring that I was pretty much echoing many people's thoughts. It was wonderful seeing that large room full of proud Descendants.

### RATS SEARCH FACILITY ON OUR WEBSITE

We were proud to release the Rats Search Facility to the public at the Reunion.

The website address is

<http://ratsoftobruk.au>

"RATS SEARCH".

It may take a few seconds to load up so be patient as it is an external call to our database system stored elsewhere. Ray also spoke about the newly released Rats of Tobruk **DIGITAL MUSEUM**, an initiative by the Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc.

The concept is not new, after all, people like the AWM and Victorian Collections have operated similar sites for many years.

But for us it is with twofold purpose.

To display relevant images and pictures from the Siege of Tobruk and from RATS of Tobruk soldiers AND to offer a place for families to store their digital media as passed down from their Rat so they are online for family to see and share, but also to share with extended family of our members and researchers.

To accomplish this we will be offering a folder under the soldier's name where uploaded digital images of memorabilia will be stored. That includes, photographs, letters, pictures of personal possessions or souvenirs, Xmas cards, postcards, wallets etc. Whatever you have a photo of that may be of interest to your family and others can be uploaded and stored on our server and potentially may be included as a primary exhibit in the museum. Regardless of whether it becomes a primary exhibit or not, the soldiers folder will always be there for viewing. Watch for updates on when this public upload facility becomes available. Exhibits will purely be concerned

with the Siege of Tobruk and the men of the siege, with the ability to search for specific words to help those searching.



Miriam Clancy, Ray Windlow

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# Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## OTHER REUNION HAPPENINGS

Rat's Tales Vol 3 Issue 1

Editor: Sue Trewartha.  
Chris Kelly "The Pen."

May 2026



Following Ray's presentation was Chris Kelly, who has supplied this summary of her talk about her dad, a Prisoner of War.



### From Chris Kelly:

Who would have thought an edelweiss and tatty old canvas bag of letters would lead to this, but Dad and I shared a special bond, I broke my promise not to cry.

My two page 'account' morphed into an historical novel – I didn't see that coming – as I learnt more than anticipated about the man I adored, his mates and their plight. I would love to see it published this year to honour 'Bill'. One can hope.

The edelweiss, coupled with Dad's romantic tales of Italy and Austria, masking his pain, drew me to the other side of the world and I returned last year to attend the 80th anniversary of VE Day at Stalag 18a and travelled to the camp where he worked, it was inexplicably special, and after, my youngest son joined me. We visited two more camps, including the one he arrived on foot, after taking on the alps to get there, the place he gained his long-awaited freedom. The ICRC in Geneva and Mount Vesuvius were also 'must sees'. To witness my son recite 'In Flanders Fields' - at the special service put on for us by those who tenderly care for Campo 57, was a memorable moment. So too, my chat with some of the senior history students at Wolfsberg High - we all share two sides of a



history our ancestors were part of, through no fault of their own.

I had opportunities overseas I could never have dreamt of had I not been

the descendant of a POW, for me it's a double edge sword, but one I hold dearly.

Dad was a wonderful human and I'm blessed to be in a position to honour him and to help other descendants in the process. They are all in a better place now, watching over us, smiling, happy knowing the camaraderie lives on. Lest We Forget.

### Flying Officer Simon Shahin

Special guest at the 85th Anniversary weekend was Flying Officer Simon Shahin, who is an Electrical Engineer currently serving in the Royal Australian Air Force



on Air Mobility Aircraft. We wanted to know more about him and he told us the following: He is a Classical Pianist, Distance Runner, and Skydiving Enthusiast.

Simon is an Assyrian former refugee, who fled with his family from the war in Syria of the Middle East, resettling in Australia a decade ago, he joined Defence to serve out of gratitude for the foregoing afforded opportunity.

"Dinner and Memorial Service for the 85th Siege of Tobruk were amazing events that I was fortunate to attend, through which I met many descendants and veterans and learnt about exceptional stories of courage and sacrifice. This collective experience brought me closer to the Australian history, teaching me about great examples of fine heroes, some of which made the ultimate sacrifice so we can enjoy the freedom and rights we have today." **Lest We Forget.**



Val Collins, Josh Smith, Simon Shahin, Peter Collins



Simon Shahin, Travis Murphy

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# Rat's Tales



Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## OFFICIAL DINNER

Rat's Tales Vol 3 Issue 1

Editor: Sue Trewartha.  
Chris Kelly "The Pen."

May 2026



Saturday morning saw a dedicated band of helpers working on the table decorations for the evening dinner. All this time, floating around everywhere were Sarah Maas and brother, Travis, Betty's family, stepping up to do the hard yards, moving, shifting, collecting, being asked for instructions, and when anything went wrong or needed attention, they were there to fix things. An amazing pair, and it was not just at the event that they were outstanding, but for months, probably years, there behind the scenes, assisting Betty.

Sunflowers were chosen as a symbol of remembrance for their enduring association with loyalty, resilience and hope. Turning instinctively toward the light, they embody steadfastness in the face of hardship, qualities reflected in those who served and endured. The sunflower stands not only as a tribute to sacrifice, but as a living emblem of gratitude and continuity. Bright and unmistakable, it reminds us that even in the shadow of conflict, memory endures and hope persists.

Table settings included a laminated sketch or cartoon placemat sitting on white tablecloths at each table setting, with a modern and 1941 version of the menu for the night on display. A grey felt Rat, handmade by Betty Murphy, and balanced delicately on a teacup, held not only a few delicious chocolates, but a scratchie ticket. Beautiful crocheted sunflower drink coasters, handmade by Val Collins, wife of Peter Collins, whose dad was commonly known, after the war, as the "Face of Tobruk", were a beautiful addition to the table décor. Also on the table were large sunflower serviettes. The crowning glory of the decorations were the beautiful handmade sunflower strands, lit by tiny lights and placed around the centre of the table. Betty's work on them was amazing. Also handmade were the wonderful wooden Rats, standing proud in the very centre of the table. These were lovingly made by Rex Finlay, another of our descendants; a fitting centrepiece for sure!



Specially created biscuits tinged with gold and featuring the DOTROTA Badge were a unique addition at each setting. You almost do not want to eat them, they are so beautiful. Made and delivered by Alycia

Rositano, (Alycia Biscuits) and her two young sons, it was a treat to meet them during setting up. They went away with two signed 85th anniversary books, one for themselves and one for their school library. A white triangular shaped cardboard name tag, topped with a cutout Rat, completed each setting.



A: Elizabeth Irvine, Barbara Snowball, SA.  
B: Ann and Phillip Traynor, Carolyn and Bruce Quinn, Qld.

During the evening, scratchie tickets revealed either a block of cheese, (not a winner) or a Rat picture, with one winner at each table, receiving an 85th anniversary medallion. The dinner continued the excitement of the weekend, the babble of voices as people introduced themselves around each table, and the interest as people connected with each other, showed the evening was off to a great start. Roast lamb or chicken was on the menu, followed by chocolate mud cake or sticky date pudding.

A box with cheese, salami and crackers with Italian stickers, was given out, representing food found by Aussies in Tobruk, left behind by retreating Italian soldiers.



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# Rat's Tales



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## OFFICIAL DINNER



**85TH  
ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE SIEGE OF  
TOBRUK  
10 TO 12 APRIL  
2026.**



1 Commando Company and served till 1963. He was active in various Polish Organisations such as the Polish Home Army Assoc, now defunct as he is the only one left, as well as the Polish Ex Servicemens Association, SPK.

We thank everyone who travelled long distances to attend the Reunion. With people attending from all states, it was lovely to see the Rose brothers, both in their late 80s, one flew from Perth to Adelaide to meet his brother, and they drove over to Sydney. They had only on 8 March enquired to Martin Forsyth, after speaking to his sister, Yvonne, if their father was a Rat, and receiving a lot of information and confirmation that he was a Rat, and by 13 March had joined DOTROTA, bought shirts and booked tickets to the Reunion,

*Martin Forsyth, Maurice and Brian Rose.*



attending a 2/43rd Bn Club luncheon in Adelaide on the way to Sydney!

It seems that many descendants drove with car and caravan to attend. In the time where fuel prices went sky high because of the Iran/Israel war, it was quite an effort to do that. Thank you everyone who made the effort in getting to Sydney for several days.

What a treasure to see Leche, "Les" Gade, Vice President Polish ex Servicemen Association, aged 96, and Dr George Toepfer, representing his father Cpl Jozef Toepfer, and Nicholas Machinko, attend. Les was at all events and appeared to relish everything going on. Les is a Veteran of Polish Home Army Warsaw 44 Uprising, was a POW in Germany for around 6 months, had two yrs service in the Polish Army in exile, part of British Army of Occupation in the British Zone, and arrived in Australia early Dec 1949 as a migrant.

In 1958, after becoming naturalised, he joined



Raffle tickets that had been on sale for some time, were drawn and a huge range of prizes were given out during the evening. Thanks to Kaye Ross and Robyn Moody, for the time and work they put into sorting out and packaging all the prizes. Kaye Ross' beautiful knitted soldiers, sailors, airmen and nurses were also sold during the evening.

See page 14, *next edition*, for the Banjo presentation made at the Dinner.



During the Saturday night dinner at the 85th Anniversary Weekend in Sydney, guests experienced a deeply moving tribute with the unveiling of the Ghost Soldiers project. Following dinner service, attendees were told that some very special VIPs were about to be introduced. As the stage curtains opened, there stood six "ghost soldiers", full size replica soldiers, with the voices of the descendants of Ghost Soldiers echoing throughout the room creating a powerful, emotional atmosphere. A heartfelt slideshow honouring the Rats of Tobruk accompanied the tribute, reflecting on



Above: views of tables and attendees at the Official Dinner.

Right: Kaye Ross giving out raffle prizes chatting to Eyan Dower.

Left: George Toepfer, Les Gade and Matt McHugh.

B: George Toepfer, Nigel Cox, President of Gaythorne RSL Qld and Les Gade.



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Our memories of a wonderful weekend.



# Rat's Tales



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## PHOTOS FROM SATURDAY NIGHT OFFICIAL DINNER





# Rat's Tales



NOTE this newsletter has been split into two editions. Next one in early June.

Descendants of the Rats of Tobruk Australia Association Inc

## PHOTOS FROM SATURDAY NIGHT OFFICIAL DINNER

