



A Rat of Tobruk

To war with a camera

Lt John Rosel, a Hawthorn bank officer, had been in the Militia before joining the Army in 1940.

From training at Wangaratta and Bonegilla onwards, he photographed many of the activities of the 2/24th Battalion, filling two albums. His mates added some pictures of him.



To join the North African Tour of 1940, the Army first took his ID pics....



Then had him pose for the Melbourne *Herald* in a bit of recruitment propaganda. I guess he then put away his whites for the duration.

While my father left no war diary, he captioned the back of many photographs with names and locations, or endearments for his girlfriend Lorna Knowles. I'll insert his notes in quotes in some photos.

The 2/24th was soon getting dirty in Palestine , training with bayonets and one-on-one unarmed combat...



They trained hard, but had only basic weapons, and no experience in working with artillery or tanks.

...interrupted briefly by Christmas Comforts for the Troops,
and Cocky Walpole's bookmaking on the donkey races



That's Cocky at right in the white singlet

There was some tourism...



Unsettling child labour in the bazaar



Sphinx and friends



Dead Sea mates: one would not return

Captain Peter Hayman, shown kneeling in the right hand picture, died on active service



Scrounging:
Freddy
Geale
recycles a
petrol tin



Super
scrounging: Lt
Rose's
makeshift
humpy at
Tocra: around
27 March
1941

Before war intruded and they were trucked west,
to Cyrenaica, to hang around...

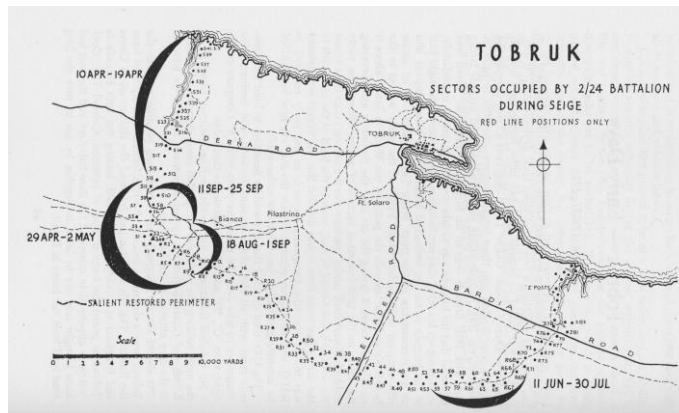
Until General Rommel chased everyone eastwards during “The Benghazi Handicap”, ending in Tobruk



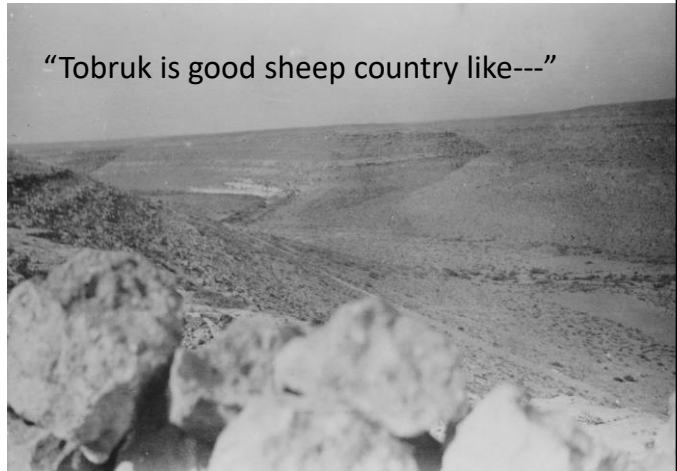
Burning
dump,
Benghazi

As the enemy neared Benghazi, Lt Rosel was sent back there to scrounge any medical supplies. He photographed this dump before retreating...fast.

From the Battalion history:



The order was 'dig in.' Lt Rosel (left) and comrade were genuine Diggers. Their view was depressing.



"Tobruk is good sheep country like---"

Dad and his mate appear to be Resting on Arms Reversed. The Italians had **blasted** their weapon pits into the rock: the Australians had only picks and shovels to improve defences before Rommel struck. They recycled Italian signal wire and some **landmines**.

The rocks in the foreground are probably part of a sangar—a defensive breastwork, a death trap when struck by shells.

Scrounging was a military necessity at times. At Tobruk some Australians raised it to new heights with captured Italian guns lacking sights, forming the Bush Artillery which made a useful contribution to the defence, volume compensating for dodgy accuracy

On the eve of battle, bandsman Harry Frazer was sent to Lt Rosel's platoon.
A miracle! His honest and colourful letters to his parents were to
complement John Rosel's photos

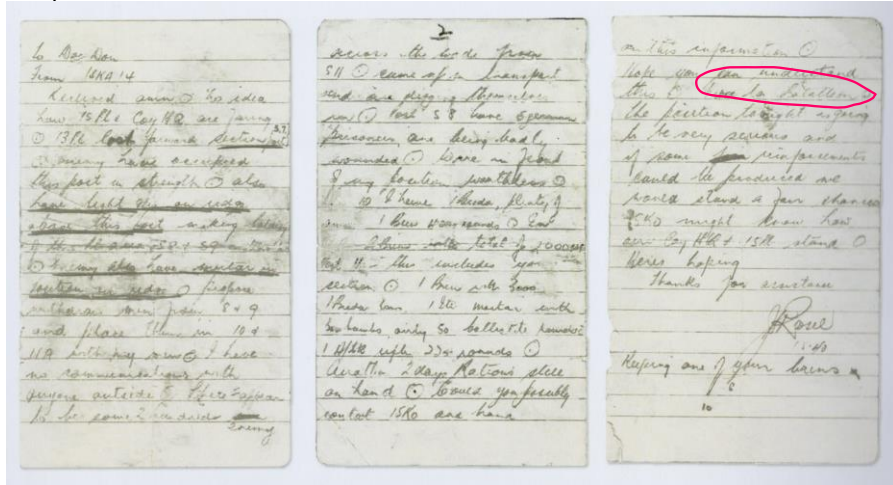


Harry, fourth from right, swapped his cornet for a .303



Harry's 180 letters to his parents in Swan Hill during Army service include some of the more moving human documents of the siege. Harry was familiar with death--his family had the local funeral parlour—but **not** death on an industrial scale.

The 2/24th bore the brunt of Rommel's major attack starting on 30 April 1941. Lt Rosel's field message torn from his diary painted a grim picture, yet included a defiant cry: *Viva la Batallion* (sic.)



I reckon that “Viva La Batallion” echoes the supposed cry of Roman gladiators-- “We who are about to die salute you.”

While he always showed grace under pressure, his misspelling of Battalion suggests he was distracted by noting---**some extracts**---

“Enemy have light gun and mortar on this ridge...
...I have no communications with anyone outside...
appear to be some 200 enemy digging themselves in...
wire is worthless...

....the position tonight is going to be very serious
and if some reinforcements could be produced we
would stand a fair chance...”

Rommel attacked with Stukas, artillery, tanks and German and Italian infantry.

Many posts were overrun.

With communications cut, headquarters did not know what happened to any survivors—many were posted Missing to the distress of their families.

Captain Ian Malloch led a company from the 2/23rd Bn to discover the fate of Lt Rosel's platoon



The famous Australian war correspondent Chester Wilmot described in his book *Tobruk* part of what Captain Malloch's relieving force found: "S10 was still held by Lt J.S.Rosel and half a dozen men, although it was under heavy fire from positions beyond. These seven had beaten off several enemy attacks and had only a thousand rounds of ammunition left."

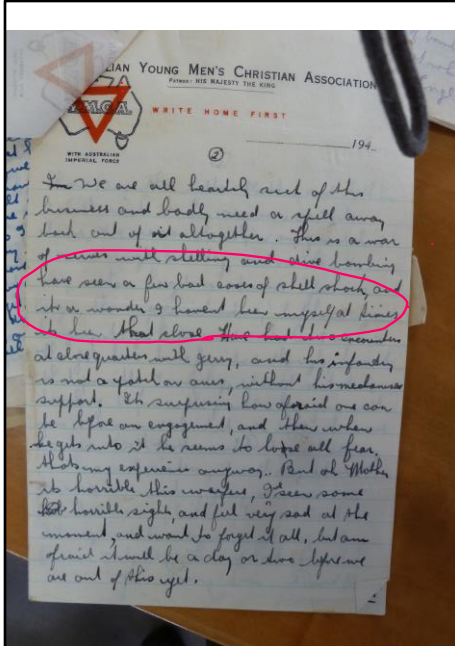


Lt Rosel on a field telephone in Post S10 after the days of combat which brought his MC. The flimsy rock wall gave little protection against shells

The Military Cross citation is rather bland:

*At Tobruk, Lieut John Rosel was in command of a platoon occupying three posts when enemy attacked on evening of 30 April 1941. He displayed **calmness and outstanding leadership** when communications between his company HQ and BHQ had been severed by enemy artillery. His platoon fought off repeated attacks and held all three posts. After the enemy had captured his company headquarters he took control of the company, displayed initiative in making contact with BHQ and with the unit on the right flank. He made several endeavours to relieve the company HQ and continued to hold posts against determined attacks."*

What this meant in terms of fear, triumph, exhaustion, the madness and exultation of combat, he would never tell his me.



One of Harry Frazer's letters:

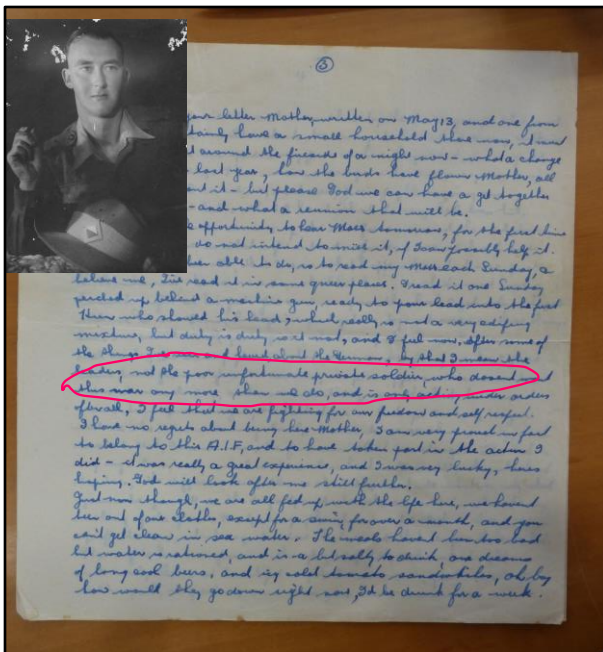
...“have seen a few bad cases of shell shock and it's a wonder I haven't been myself at times it's been that close....”

Harry Frazer gave his parents a soldier's perspective: the attack started with “a terrific artillery barrage which he kept up for two hours solid while his tanks and infantry moved up....after that I have not a very clear recollection of what happened. There were huge tanks everywhere and swarms of Dagoes and Jerrys, the noise was terrific....at one time there were 200 attacking our little fortress...we stood there and blazed away until at last the enemy retired. Between us we had stopped easily a hundred of the Jerries.”

...“It was hell let loose but thank God I came through alright. We were very lucky in our section of 10 having only two slight casualties.”

Two weeks after the battle, he wrote “ I feel no longer, the urge for adventure, but have a great longing to get home and never leave again. The job has to be finished though to make that possible.

“But oh mother it's horrible this warfare. I've seen some horrible sights and feel very sad at this moment.”



A kinship with enemy soldiers

"The poor unfortunate private soldier who doesn't want the war any more than we do..."

A man of faith, he wrote of reading his Mass book "in some queer places...one Sunday perched behind a machine gun, ready to pour lead into the first Hun, which really is not a very edifying mixture, but duty is duty..."

Before and after: A dirty Digger



Above, John Rosel all spit and polish at Bonegilla.
Right, all scruffy and sandy and shirtless (seated left) with some of his platoon on the Tobruk perimeter



Note the Tobruk tan on the soldiers at right.

If the enemy or desert sores didn't get you, the flies would. Harry swore there were "14 million flies a man"

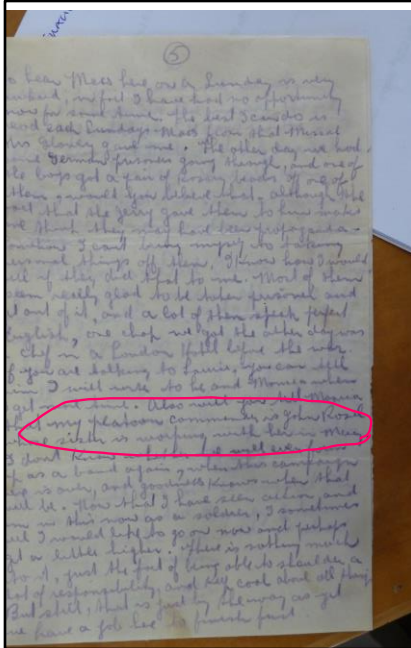
Rest and reflection



Diggers rest and read by their Bren gun

More from Harry: "It's surprising how afraid one can be before an engagement and then when he gets into it he loses all fear, that's my experience anyway.

"I feel very proud to have been one of the few who actually held, for the first time in this war, a determined and carefully planned German attack."



You've gotta be joking!

17,000 km from home, John and Harry, from opposite ends of Victoria, discover they have something besides soldiering in common....

Their sisters nursed together in the Mercy Hospital in Melbourne.

A small human contact in an inhuman global war.

All worn out



The sole of "Tich" Masters' boot appears worn out: the surrendering Italians are also worn out

When the siege settled down, boredom took over. ...Harry dreamed " of long cool beers and icy cold tomato sandwiches, oh boy how would they go down right now, I'd be drunk for a week."

...He complained about a very strong west wind "bringing all the dust in Libya...a dust storm here has got anything the Mallee can produce licked hollow."

..."Gosh I'd love a hot bath. Some clean clothes and some green grass to lay on...**it's over two months since I had a fresh water wash all over.** Mother,

I'm brown as a berry but I think half of it is dirt."



Private Terry Jones (left) and Captain Graham Anderson (left, above) were among the many who did not return from Tobruk and El Alamein

“The May Show’, as the Bn called it, was a disaster for the 2/24th. Its history notes that “few AIF Battalions had a more severe introduction to battle....in our first major action we lost three rifle company commanders, and more than six rifle platoons out of the 12.”

At Tobruk the battalion had five officers and 67 other ranks killed in action or died of wounds; 17 other ranks died from other causes. Nine officers and 83 other ranks were wounded. There were 255 prisoners of war.

...Lt Rosel returned to Australia to train troops, and missed El Alamein, where the Battalion had 119 killed.

There’s a story from El Alamein about a transport officer bringing **20** trucks at night to pick up the Battalion late in the battle. With few troops present, and dawn approaching, he cursed the Regimental Sergeant Major for the delay. He got a curt reply:: “Leave three or four trucks and amble the rest of them off. **THIS** is the 2/24th Battalion!” The RSM told his mates “He peered closely into my face and when he saw I was not being funny, he just said ‘**God Almighty!**’ and went on his way.”

The cost



This photo in Private Harry Frazer's album is captioned "Burial Middle East."

Harry again: "This war is a rotten business and has taken some bonza chaps that I know, that you know....it will be a terrible shock to many to hear about Tommy Wilkins, I was only about 200 yards away....you can assure his friends **if it will help at all**, it was quite instantaneous, a shell must have landed right at his feet...."

.....one could easily go to pieces at some of the things he sees.”



Lt Rosel's medals and an ash tray souvenired from the famed Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo rest on a Tobruk page from his albums

John and Harry were luckier than many of their comrades.

Harry was shot in the arm at El Alamein. Postwar, he quit the family hardware and funeral parlour, and farmed near Benalla. He visited the Army School of Music in Melbourne to donate the cornet he had played for his mates on quiet nights on the desert battlefield.

A fortunate life

Dockside reunion in 1942



John and Lorna married in 1942 before he went north to train troops for jungle warfare.

He survived desert and jungles and German, Italian and Japanese threats with no scars...but was invalided home from the islands at war's end...with **piles**.

...Exactly 40 years after Rommel's troops failed to kill him, his cigarettes did, at only 64. Cigarettes were about the only Comfort for the Troops readily available in Tobruk. A non-drinker, he swapped his limited beer ration for cigarettes. It was his only vice.

...I was the first of their six children. We revered him as a great father, and incidentally, a hero. If I may borrow from Chaucer, writing of another warrior 600 years ago—

A very parfit gentle knight.

THANK YOU

I have his albums here, and books, if you'd like to chat later.

TIME FOR QUESTIONS???

And there's more....

The 2/24th Bn enjoyed the comforts of the cattle stalls at Wangaratta Showgrounds



Those who listened to their English Literature teacher at school may have remembered a line by the soldier/poet Wilfrid Owen : “What passing bells for these who die as cattle?”

Wangaratta
adopted
them and
gave them
this 14ft
banner



Which Lt Alan Macfarlane had the honour of bearing as they proudly marched past the people of Wangaratta towards new barracks at Bonegilla.

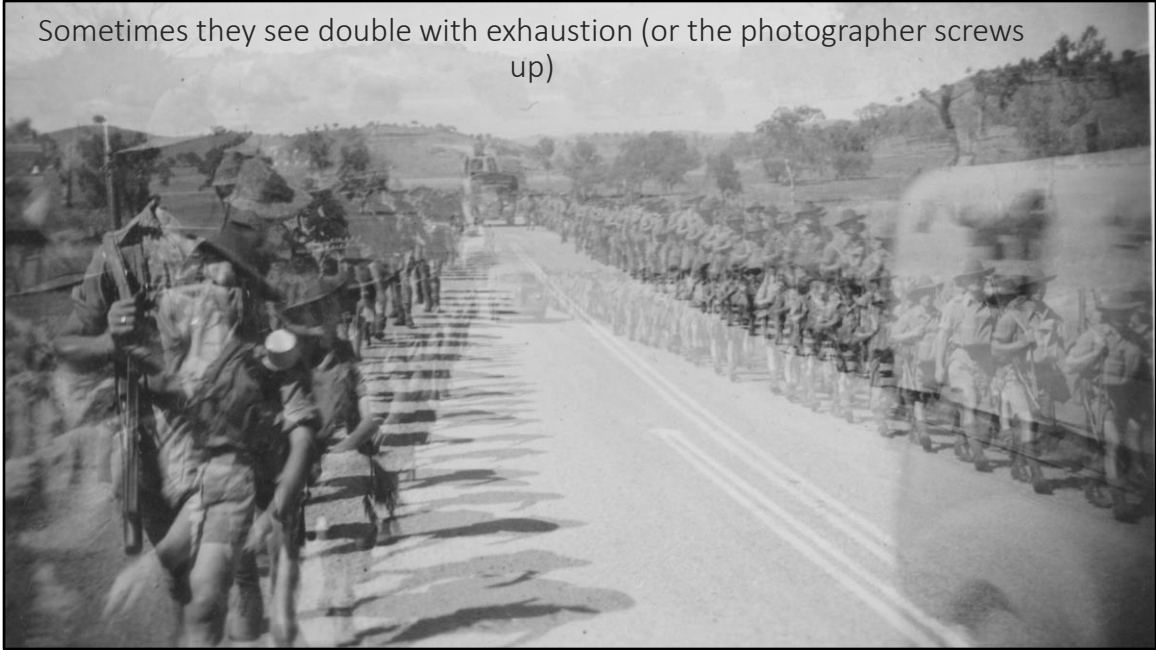
Until he twigged that his mates had slipped two bricks into his haversack.

His Diggers take a smoko on interminable route marches...



Maybe next week , they'll be
big bronzed Anzacs

Sometimes they see double with exhaustion (or the photographer screws up)





Sixty years after the war, a former fellow officer paid tribute to Lt Rosel's care for his platoon: "He nurtured them."



They get up at 5.30am on bivouac...note his first ciggie of the day...

At last, they have to farewell loved ones...



Before tourism in Ceylon
and Somewhere in Egypt...



They haggled with older locals...

And smiled at the younger ones



They lined up for
pay....

...and invested some on the Tote for
the Christmas 1940 donkey races



Soak or swim during training?



Lt Rosel makes the best of it; comrades enjoy "The Med" after a route march



Harry's daughter Christine donated his letters to the Australian War Memorial, which also holds some of my father's photos.

