

Shrine talk for 2/24 Battalion, 2006

*presented by Dr Mark Johnson, History Master at Scotch College, Melbourne
and now patron of 9th Division. 15 October, 2006*

If someone were to speak for just one minute on each 2/24th Battalion man who died in the Second World War it would take more than six hours. That's a measure of the sacrifice of that unit. I don't have 6 hours, but just a few minutes to tell you about the men of this great battalion. It was formed in July 1940, just after Germany had conquered France. The British Prime Minister was warning that if Germany won the war, 'then the whole world would sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age...'

Churchill's call was heard by the men who joined the 2/24th Battalion. They felt it their duty to enlist, even though it meant leaving jobs and dear ones in Australia. Raised and trained in Victoria, in November 1940 the 2/24th sailed for the Middle East, where it fought its first campaign in the desperate battle to hold Tobruk against the Germans. At that time, April 1941, there was no more important place to hold off that new Dark Age: if the Germans captured Tobruk, they would take the Suez canal and the oilfields beyond. The 2/24th paid a terrible price to ensure that Tobruk did not fall. In the fighting for the area that became known as the Salient, about half of its men were killed or captured. They included soldiers like privates Les Bennett and Jack Lopez, who left their posts to attack oncoming troops with grenades. Later they were killed by an enemy mortar shell. When the siege settled down, the battalion did its share of nerve racking night patrols, in which it lost men like Private Doug McAlister, who died in an Italian hospital after being wounded.

On leaving Tobruk, the Battalion trained and garrisoned Syria but was called back to the desert in July 1942. Again the situation was desperate, but the 2/24th helped turn the tide in the significant but little known fighting around Tel el Eisa. There it captured the Germans' key intelligence unit in North Africa, as well as crucial ground. The Germans tried desperately to regain the lost territory, and the battalion suffered: among those killed in the shelling was Captain Peter Hayman, MC. Another Captain, John Christie, though recently wounded, risked and ultimately lost his life taking ammunition to beleaguered men. The captured ground was held and became a springboard for the great allied advance at El Alamein in October 1942. The significance of that battle is reflected in the timing of today's annual event, on the Sunday closest to 23 October. At 9.40 p.m. on that date 64 years ago 880 allied guns opened fire on Axis positions. The 2/24th Battalion was at the forefront of the allied advance.

It suffered terrible losses in the 12 day battle that followed. Among them was Joe Moloney, original editor of the battalion's newsletter, The Furphy Flyer, which is still going today. There was 38 year old Private 'Mick' English, wounded while trying to re establish contact between two separated companies. Geoff Robinson carried him out, but Mick died three weeks later. In the terrible night of 30/31 October, the depleted battalion had to attack deep into the enemy positions. It took huge casualties, and many leaders were killed and wounded. Acting Company Sergeant Major Tex Alleyne took command of a company but found time to pause under heavy fire to bind up the wounds of a comrade. Soon afterwards Alleyne was himself shot and killed. The battalion was decimated, but recovered to fight in the 1943 offensives in New Guinea. Though new to jungle warfare, the 2/24th helped conquer the Huon Peninsula. The cost included the lives of such as Captain Big 'Jack' McNamara, MC, a

legendary soldier not just in the battalion, but the whole of the great 9th division. He and seven others were killed in an ambush near Wareo.

The battalion history called this 'a deadly, soul destroying Campaign'. The 2/24th's last campaign, on Tarakan island, was even worse. Among the 72 members killed there were stalwarts like Captain Geoff Travis, MC, an original who always led by example, but also young reinforcements like 20 year old Western Australian Private Ken Christmass, who was fighting his first campaign: he won the Distinguished Conduct Medal but died of wounds on 31 May.

The 2/24th was one of the best battalions ever to leave Australia. This is indicated by its high tally of decorations but also the fact that it suffered more battle casualties than any other Second AIF battalion: some 335 killed in action or died of wounds. More than 30 others died of illness or accident, and nearly 900 were wounded. The names of its dead will live for evermore. So will the names of the more than 3000 members who survived the war, many of whom have since passed away. In 1940 Churchill predicted that if the people of the Commonwealth stood fast, then for a thousand years people would say 'This was their finest hour': no one can deny that 1940-1945 was the finest hour of the volunteers who joined the 2/24th Battalion.