Recovered memories of Tobruk

MALCOLM BROWN
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THEY lay hidden in a family’s home for more than 60 years: important papers, minutes and general orders retained by Major-General John Murray, one of the three brigade commanders who held out against the might of Rommel’s and Mussolini’s armies at Tobruk.

Nobody even knew of their existence until his grandson Dr Andrew Murray and granddaughter Monica, cleaning up the family home in Newcastle after the death of their mother in 2007, found them behind a sofa: historical records of one of the Australian Army’s finest hours.

One paper, dated July 29, 1941, and marked “Secret. To be Destroyed After Reading”, said: "Information is to the effect that at the moment the morale of the enemy facing the perimeter is very low, particularly that of the Italians.”

General Murray wrote that patrols should take pamphlets headed "V Per Vittorio" ("V for Victory"), to be attached to "bodies, posts, wire, sandbags, sangars etc."

The patrols had other purposes: reconnaissance and stopping enemy patrols, but he wrote that the pamphlets should be placed to have maximum effect, particularly behind enemy lines.

The cache of hidden papers included commiserations to the mother of Greg Kierath, of Narromine, NSW, killed in action. They also included a message of praise to the 20 Australian Infantry Brigade as it left Tobruk.

Born in 1892, John Murray fought in some of the fiercest battles on the Western Front in World War I, and volunteered again in World War II at the age of 47. He served with distinction, ending as General Officer Commanding the Northern Territory Force, Darwin.

In 1945 , with the war ending, he typed up his memoirs of the Tobruk campaign, leaving a warm, dramatic, humorous account of the brutal battle that stopped the march of the Afrika Korps.

In one anecdote a soldier, brought before him for disciplinary action and given the option of immediate treatment or court-martial, leaned forward and said softly: "If it’s all the same to you, we’ll let the matter drop.”

General Murray wrote: "Well, what could you do?! ‘Charge dismissed!’ This was one of my proudest moments, for I was able to withhold my mirth until the orderly room was cleared.”

His account also contained the story of the trainee paratrooper whose reserve chute failed, and allegedly said: “Just like the bloody Army! I bet there’s no truck waiting to take me back to camp!”

He gave accounts of the Stuka raids, the shelling, deaths and hardships. General Murray's driver Hughie Paterson, son of Banjo Paterson, wrote poems, one being This Place They Call Tobruk.

General Murray himself probably wanted to publish his memoirs, but he died in September 1951, of cirrhosis of the liver, blamed on the hepatitis he contracted in Palestine.

General Murray's surviving son John gave the General's medals to the Australian War Memorial and the family found a publisher, Big Sky Publishing, to convey the thoughts, feelings, and papers, of an almost forgotten hero 70 years ago.