The story of forgotten hero Major General John Murray

Julie Cross, Manly Daily
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Major General John Joseph Murray is a forgotten hero of the northern beaches who served his country with distinction in two world wars, but died tragically young.

Despite living in Manly, and later Mosman, his story, and in particular his pivotal role at Tobruk in World War II, is not celebrated locally.

His brother Thomas Frederick, who was killed by a grenade at Gallipoli a few days after arriving in August 1915, is remembered on Manly War Memorial.
Andrew Murray pays his respects at the grave of his Grandfather — Major General John Joseph Murray, at Frenchs Forest Cemetary. His grandfather's contribution to the wars have largely been forgotten despite being a high profile and receiving bravery awards. Picture: Troy Snook


Murray, born to an Irish father and a mother from Kiama, was a salesman at Anthony Hordern & Sons and was a second lieutenant in the Citizen Military Force when war was declared in 1914.
I Confess
A Memoir of the Siege of Tobruk

Major General John Joseph Murray, DSO & Bar, MC, VD

Aged 21, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force.

By 1916 he was a captain and his first taste of combat was at Fromelles on July 19 later that year, when 5533 Australian soldiers were killed, wounded or captured.

Murray received a Military Cross and went on to lead his men through more awful battles on the Western Front — Bullecourt, Polygon Wood, Anvil Wood, Peronne and Quentin Canal, to name but a few.

After the war he married Madeline Cannon, set up his own successful trucking company and started a family.

Brigadier John Murray of the 20th Infantry Brigade with his battalion commanders Lieutenant Colonel J.W. Crawford and Lieutenant Colonel P.W. Burrows at Tobruk in 1941. Courtesy Australian War Memorial AWM 020772

He continued with the CMF and when World War II broke out he signed up, despite being 47. By this time he was a brigadier and, in May 1940, was tasked with putting together the 20th Brigade.
“I asked myself whether I was sufficiently equipped and whether I had an adequate knowledge of the work before me,” said Murray in his memoirs. “It is a great responsibility handling men’s fortunes and lives.”

Thomas Frederick Murray. Courtesy Manly Library

While his training techniques were considered hard and his demand for discipline tough, he was well liked throughout the brigade.

The war correspondent, Chester Wilmot, a fan of Murray, described him as “a big, genial Irishman who loves a fight”.

As part of the brigade’s training, Murray marched his men more than 200km from Ingleburn to Bathurst, where he gained publicity from an eager Australian media keen to report on any action at home — and a warm welcome from locals along the way.
(L-R) Andrew Murray, Jessica Davis 9, Amanda Hickey, Zoe Davis 11, Gai Hamer, & Jack Davis 7, pay their respects at the grave of relative Major General John Joseph Murray, at Frenchs Forest Cemetery. His grandfather’s contribution to the wars has largely been forgotten despite being a high profile and receiving bravery awards. Picture: Troy Snook

“We were all relieved to see it (Bathurst) not as you might think because of sore feet — although there were quite a few of us with that affliction caused by dancing, not marching — but in order to enjoy a day’s rest after the festivities and feting which we had received on the journey,” he wrote.

Shortly after, they set sail from Sydney for the Middle East on the Queen Mary. By now Murray was a father and as the ship passed his home in Mosman he wrote his feelings were very similar to those he experienced when he went to the Great War, “only this time the ties of home were stronger. The thought kept recurring to me — ‘They can’t do this to me again’.”
Little did he know he was about to face his biggest test so far. With the Germans poised to capture Libya and move on to Egypt, all that stood in their way was the strategic port of Tobruk.

According to historian David Coombes from the University of Tasmania Hobart, it was Murray’s brigade which was largely responsible for repelling the 242-day attack in the cruel extremes of desert. According to Mr Coombes, who wrote the foreword for Murray’s memoirs, the troops faced “unopposed attacks from the German Luftwaffe. Most frightening were the Stuka dive bombers, with their wailing siren, which inflicted huge casualties on the men stationed in the town”.

Major General John Murray (seated) with Captain John Kennaway, aide-de-camp, and Captain William Geikie, Officer of the Day at Headquarters, Newcastle Covering Force, in 1942. Courtesy Australian War Memorial AWM P1058

Murray, whose driver was Hughie Paterson, son of the poet Banjo, wrote: “The din was colossal: it rose in an ever-increasing crescendo until one thought one’s eardrums would burst”.

In the latter stages of the siege Murray came up with the V for Victory campaign to damage the morale of the Italians. He ordered leaflets be printed with ‘V Per Vittorio’, insisting they be fastened to enemy bodies.

After the siege Murray was sent back to Australia, deemed too old for combat. War had certainly taken its toll on his 49-year-old body, returning 19kg lighter.

However his arrival in Sydney coincided with the Japanese threat, which meant Murray was again needed and he was promoted to major-general.

(L-R) Jessica Davis 9, Zoe Davis 11, & Jack Davis 7, from Dee Why, pay their respects at the grave of relative Major General John Joseph Murray, at Frenchs Forest Cemetery. His contribution to the wars has largely been forgotten despite once having a high profile and receiving bravery awards. Picture: Troy Snook

He died in 1951 aged 59 from liver failure caused by hepatitis contracted in the Middle East. He was buried at Frenchs Forest Cemetery.

His late wife told her family on the 50th anniversary of her wedding day she had been a widow for 23 years.

“She was deprived of the company of the man she loved and of the richer life that his generous and gregarious character would have brought her,” said her grandson Andrew (left). All of his children missed him in their growing years and his grandchildren never knew him.”
**This Place They Call Tobruk**
By Hughie Patterson

There’s places that I’ve been in I didn’t like too well,
New England’s far too blooming cold
And Winton’s hot as hell.
The Walgett beer is always warm,
In each there’s something crook,
But each and all are perfect to
This place they call Tobruk.

We reckoned El Agheila
Was none too flash a place;
El Abier and Beda Fomm
Weren’t in the bloody race.
At towns this side of Benghazi
We hadn’t time to look,
But I’ll take my oath they’re better than
This place they call Tobruk.

I’ve seen some dust storms back at home
That made the housewives work,
Here there’s enough inside our shirts
To smother all of Bourke.
Two diggers cleaned their dugout
And their blankets out they shook,
Two colonels perished in the dust in
This place they call Tobruk.

There’s militant teetotallers
Who abhor all kinds of drink,
There’s wives who break good bottles
And pour them down the sink.
This place would suit them to the ground,
We’ve searched in every nook,
But booze is rare as hen’s teeth in
This place they call Tobruk.

There’s centipedes like pythons
And there’s countless hordes of fleas,
As big as poodle dogs they come
A-snapping round your knees.
And scorpions large as AFVs
Come out to have a look.
There’s surely lots of livestock in
This place they call Tobruk.

The shelling’s nice and frequent
And they whistle overhead,
You go into your dugout

And find shrapnel in your bed.
And when the Stukas dive on us
We never pause to look,
We’re down our holes like rabbits in
This place they call Tobruk.

Some times we go in swimming
And float about at ease,
The water clear as crystal
And a nice clean salty breeze.
When down comes blasted Hermann
And we have to sling our hook,
And we dive clean to the bottom in
This place they call Tobruk.

I really do not think this place
Was meant for me and you,
Let’s return it to the Arab
And he knows what he can do.
We’ll leave this God-forgotten place
Without one backward look,
We’ve called it lots of other names,
This place they call Tobruk.

This poem was reprinted in the book *I Confess, A Memoir of the Siege of Tobruk*, published by [Big Sky Publishing](http://www.bigsky-publishing.com), based in Newport.