



**Thomas (Tom) Page Pritchard  
VX23441, 2/5<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance  
Rat of Tobruk**



Tom Pritchard was born in Portland, Victoria in 1921 (25 May 1919), but grew up and attended school in Box Hill. Tom's father, who had been a miner in England, served in France in WW1 with the 1st Australian Tunnelling Coy and was involved in the famous battle of Hill 60 on the Western Front.

After leaving school at 14, Tom started work in Melbourne with a wholesale tobacco and 'fancy goods' importing business, and he worked there until he joined the army in 1940. With France having fallen, the war appeared to be going badly at the time, and so Tom enlisted with two friends, despite being underage. Like many other young men at that time, he had put his age up and although Tom's mother wasn't too pleased, his father didn't stand in his way. Tom was assigned to the 2/5th Field Ambulance, a unit that was eventually attached to the 18th Infantry Brigade. Training at Puckapunyal from June to October involved first aid and stretcher bearing procedures, and whilst admitting that before this time he could barely 'stick a bandaid on', this training held Tom in good stead for what was to follow. Most of their officers, who were all well respected, were doctors.



Embarking from Princes Pier on the Mauritania in October 1940, the 2/5th eventually found themselves in Tobruk, via Bombay, Palestine and Egypt. Tom was assigned to an ambulance and his duties involved collecting the wounded and taking them to the dressing stations and to the hospital at the harbour. This was no mean feat, as it meant having to balance and hold onto 4 or 5 stretchers in the ambulance, in an effort to steady them, while travelling on terrible roads; a journey which would sometimes take an hour or two. The 'ambulance', unlike the ambulances of today, consisted merely of a driver, a stretcher bearer, blankets and a basic first aid kit. Sadly, many wounded soldiers did not survive this arduous trip. At the beginning of the siege, the shelling and the air raids were relentless, day in and day out, and the living conditions were extremely trying. Water was rationed and Tom has vivid memories of eating 'goldfish', better known as herrings in tomato sauce! He was not exactly sorry to leave, when, as ordered by General Blamey, the 18th Brigade left Tobruk and rejoined the rest of the 7th Division in Syria in August 1941.

The 2/5th then spent a number of months engaged in garrison duties at Aleppo in Syria before returning to Australia to prepare for the war against Japan. Under depressing and very different conditions to those encountered in the desert of Tobruk, in August 1942, Tom and the 2/5th found themselves in Milne Bay, New Guinea. As the roads were impassable, the wounded were often evacuated by water instead. Supplies for the troops were taken up the coast and any wounded were brought back on schooners to Milne Bay. After contracting malaria for a second time, Tom was evacuated back to Australia. He was reunited with the unit for more training in Queensland before taking part in the Markham and Ramu Valley campaigns, which also involved the battle for Shaggy Ridge, a particularly treacherous place, consisting of dense jungle and precipitous slopes. At one stage in this campaign, Tom and his unit were meant to parachute in (for which they had received only rudimentary training), an 'interesting' thought for someone who had never been in a plane before, but luckily it didn't come to pass! After these campaigns, the 2/5th Field Ambulance spent time back in Australia before embarking for the last time, in early 1945, for Balikpapan in Borneo and it was here that Tom found himself when the war finally ended.

Twelve months after the war, Tom married his sweetheart Gwen and settled into family life raising 4 children. He had gone back to work for his previous employer, but eventually left there to work for an electricity supplier in Box Hill. After about 6 years the Pritchard family moved to Creswick and Tom found work in Ballarat with the SEC. He also worked in Hamilton before returning to Melbourne, where he continued to work for the SEC until he retired. Tom was a member of the Rats Committee for many years and is still a most valued member of our Rats of Tobruk Association family, with a wicked sense of humour!