

Joan Spooner's Story:

An Australian War Hero has been honoured at Australia House recently on the anniversary of the Declaration of World War II. The life of Australian soldier Alfred Spooner was celebrated at Australia House as London Legacy and the Deputy Australian High Commissioner unveil a permanent display of World War II veteran and Rat of Tobruk, Alfred Spooner's medals, slouch hat and war trinkets.

In officially unveiling the display Deputy High Commissioner Frances Adamson said, "we're delighted to honour the life and service record of Alfred Spooner, whose bravery, tenacity and unrelenting spirit in the direst of circumstances typify the well known character of the Australia soldier. The remarkable work of London Legacy in supporting returned servicemen and their families is ongoing, and today also provides us with an opportunity to be reminded of the significant contribution they continue to make to the lives of those who have fought and suffered for ours."

The display was organised by London Legacy in concert with High Commissioner Richard Alston after Alfred's widow Joan Spooner, now 85 herself, expressed concern as to who would preserve Alfred's mementos when she was unable. Given that Alfred's service to Australia continued well after the end of the war with 30 years of service at the Australian High Commission, it is fitting that his kit and memorabilia will find a permanent resting place there.



Alfred Spooner's story is well worth telling, albeit 65 years late, as his widow Joan, aged 85, keeps Alfred's story alive in her everyday life as she battles against the ravages of old age.

She asked Lindsay Birrell, Acting President London Legacy, only a few months ago, "What will I do with Alfred's slouch hat, belt and medals?" Joan had meticulously kept all of Alfred's mementos from his Prisoner of War days but was worried what would happen to them.

We should mention that Joan is a war widow of an Australian ROW & Rat of Tobruk who, since Alfred's death 25 years ago, has been supported by London Legacy, which is a UK Registered Charity. But it was also discovered that Dr Edgley, the Australian High Commission doctor in 1944, had taken a special interest in Alfred because of the terrible medical experiments carried out on him, which left him with ongoing medical problems. In fact Alfred got a job on the staff of the High Commission at Australia House thanks to Dr Edgley and worked for the High Commission for some 30 years, during which he was on the committee of London Legacy and a Legatee looking after our widows.



The Spooner Cabinet at Australia House, London.

Alfred was released from his Prisoner of War camp in 1944 to be demobilised from the Army in the UK, having left Australia in 1940 on the Queen Mary with thousands of men bound for the UK, then to the desert and in his case with the 2/13 battalion.

He was a Rat of Tobruk, was overrun by Rommel in Libya with 300 men, he fought his way almost back to his battalion, crossing the desert some 300 miles, hiding in a shell hole, 3 German soldiers attacked him so he was forced in self defence to kill them. By this time he

was extremely weak but nearly made it back using his Australian gift of being able to plot his course by using the stars.

He thought he had succeeded only to discover that some soldiers he thought were Australians were in fact the German Salvage Corp, speaking English so he was captured and spent 4 years as a POW. His accounts of his treatment in a succession of Camps would fill a book! Alfred's story is written up in the Official War history of the Rats of Tobruk.

Alfred met Joan in 1944 soon after his return to the UK; Joan's mother had been sending him food parcels during the war so he got in touch. The rest is history and they were married in 1945.

When Mr. Birrell, Acting President of London Legacy approached His Excellency the High Commissioner, Richard Alston, with Alfred's story and a request that a place be found to display Alfred's war memento's in Australia House, he immediately agreed and asked Air Commodore Steve Martin (Head of the Defence Staff at Australia House) to assist; today Her Excellency the Deputy High Commissioner for Australia, Ms Francis Adamson, unveiled Alfred's kit and memorabilia. She spoke about Alfred's career with the High Commission and his long service during which he was a Legatee and worked for London Legacy.

In researching this story it became obvious that Joan Spooner had a significant story, in her own right, to relate about her volunteer service also; she worked as a volunteer with the British Red Cross for 54 years, was commended by the Queen Mother, given a reception by the Mayor of Sutton and written up in local papers as Sutton's Vera Lynn. The Mayor of Sutton, Councillor Wallace, spoke at the unveiling today in glowing terms about Joan's contribution to Sutton and the wider community throughout her long life.

Amongst the keepsakes held by Joan all these years are some very interesting items including a small penknife Alfred kept right through his war years hiding it from prison guards. He made a crib board with the knife from food parcels, bit and pieces etc. Both are displayed in his collection on show today in Australia House along with his slouch hat, belt, medals etc.

Truly a remarkable story, which helps one to appreciate the work of London Legacy and the Legatees who look after our New Zealand & Australian war widows, still living in the UK.