



Regimental Aid Post under Fig Tree

# The Service of Dr John David Rice in World War II - SX10147

By Oscar Rice Saint Ignatius College







# Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize 2020

## The Service of Dr John David Rice in World War II

By Oscar Rice, Saint Ignatius College

### Part A:

Dr John David Rice was a Medical Officer stationed at Tobruk and later in Papua New Guinea between 1940 and 1945.



### Siege of Tobruk

Between 10<sup>th</sup> April and 27<sup>th</sup> November 1941, 14,000 Allied soldiers, predominately Australian, were besieged in the North African coastal town of Tobruk by German–Italian forces commanded by General Erwin Rommel. The garrison consisted of multiple 9th Division (20th, 24th, and 26th Brigades), the 18th Brigade of the 7th Divisions along with four regiments of British artillery and some Indian troops.<sup>1</sup> John arrived before the siege and was evacuated before its end.

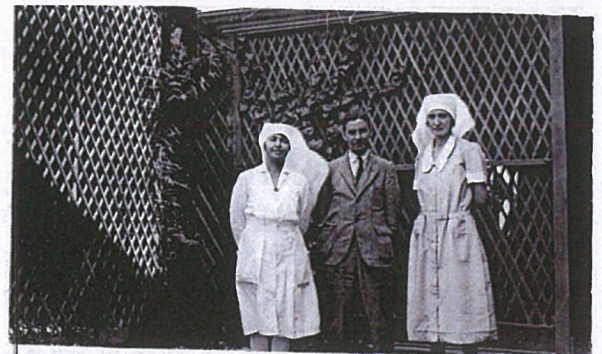
The siege was the last line of defence protecting the strategic port city. Throughout the day allied forces endured multiple air and artillery attacks, while at nightfall they climbed over their defences, sometimes crawling for miles to silently attack and sabotage German positions. This was the first time that the German forces were stopped in their North African campaign. The allied forces were described as rats for their tactic of taking cover in dugout 'rat holes'. The siege finally ended when a British counterattack arrived and retook the territory.



Map of Tobruk perimeter where the Australian soldiers held out <https://ww2-weapons.com/siege-of-tobruk/>

### Pre-War

John Rice was born in Mile End on 2nd December 1907, to Thomas and Mary Rice. John had two sisters and five brothers, attending Christian Brothers College. He studied Medicine at the University of Adelaide, graduating in 1930. He worked as the Surgical Registrar at the Royal Adelaide Hospital before moving to Meekatharra, Western Australia, where he was the only doctor. Returning to Adelaide in 1933, John undertook additional training in general surgery and anaesthesia before opening a general practice. In 1935, at age 28, John married Mollie Scollin and they had three sons.



Dr John David Rice in Meekatharra 1932 alongside 2 Nurses.  
[Rice Family Records](#)

<sup>1</sup> Memorial, T. (2020) Siege of Tobruk - AWM



## During War

According to John's Officer's Service Statement he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force on July 22, 1940 and was posted as the RMO<sup>2</sup> of the 2/43rd Battalion, 9th Division, with the rank of Captain. He began training at Woodside Army camp before being sent to the Middle East in December 1940. On December 5<sup>th</sup>, the battalion marched through Adelaide, where John joined the CO and other officers for lunch with Premier Playford. The 24th Brigade departed Melbourne on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1940, and arriving at Suez City, Egypt on January 29<sup>th</sup>. After training in Egypt, the 2/43 arrived at Tobruk, being under siege by the end of April.

As RMO, John operated a Regimental Aid Post (RAP), treating injured troops and advising commanding officer's (CO) on medical issues. The battalion had to clean up munitions and supplies left by the Italians, whilst watching over many Italian prisoners<sup>3</sup>. The dry conditions prompted John concerns about hygiene as soldiers could not wash their clothes or themselves<sup>4</sup>. Due to ongoing lack of supplies in Tobruk, John's medical platoon had to improvise, operating out of an Italian ambulance, named "Battling Bertha". John later set up a RAP in the Italian Marine barracks, consisting of "three large rooms with Terrazzo floors ... [that he considered] ...the most luxurious of the whole campaign"<sup>5</sup>

From April to June 1941 the battalion moved between the main defensive and secondary counterattack lines. John's RAP worked in various conditions, from artillery shell bunkers to a hole underneath the infamous fig tree. It was here that John's skills were put to the test - trying to save the lives of badly injured soldiers with limited medical supplies, whilst artillery rained around him. Great bravery was shown when one attack went horribly wrong and the Medical platoon Sergeant and Father Gard agreed with Italian forces to hold a cease fire to enter No Man's Land and evacuate casualties. Amid the battle, on 16 October 1941 the 2/43 was evacuated from Tobruk. John Rice received a mentioned in despatches for his "outstanding work".<sup>6</sup>



Photo of the infamous Fig Tree RAP taken in late 2012  
[Rice Family Records](#)

The 2/43 was quickly transferred to aid the 2/27 in Palestine and Lebanon where they mostly treated civilians with injuries from exploding ordnances. After a short stint in Lebanon the battalion was tasked to attack the Ruin Ridge area, where the RAP was placed close to the front line with the battalion. After 2 years with the 2/43 John left to join the 2/8 Field Ambulance AIF to provide medical role rotation.

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<sup>2</sup> Regimental Medical Officer

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Rice, A Doctor in the Second World War - SX10147 Major John David Rice

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Rice, A Doctor in the Second World War - SX10147 Major John David Rice

<sup>5</sup> CAPT JD Rice "Medical History 2/43 Australian Infantry Battalion on Active Service - First Campaign " 2/43 Battalion War Diary November 1941

<sup>6</sup> Walker, Middle East and Far East, p210





Artillery Barrage on the morning of the Defensive  
<https://84075773.weebly.com/operation-lightfoot.html>

In the 2/8 Field Ambulance, now with the rank of Major, he worked alongside other doctors at the Mobile Dressing Station. In August 1942, the 2/8 was in the El Alamein defensive location, supporting a range of Australian Units. The constant threat from artillery meant that the Medical tents had to be dug in and occasionally ambulances were bombed by enemy aircraft. John was involved in the major El Alamein offensive involving 13 Australian Army Units where 449 soldiers were killed, 2032 wounded and 222 missing.<sup>7</sup> As November neared John was later despatched back to his

old 2/43 Battalion due to the RMO (CAPT Colyer) being killed in action. This must have been a sobering moment as he was replacing a doctor killed in the line of service. More than ever he would risk his own life to try and save the lives of others.

Due to the 2/12 being moved out of Palestine, on 31 May 1943, John returned to Australia, working at the 2/12 Army General Hospital as an anaesthetist on the grounds of Scots College in Warwick, Queensland awaiting orders<sup>8</sup>.



Allied Soldiers walking through the swamps of Buna, New Guinea  
<https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/2015/07/30/the-battle-of-buna-costly-for-both-allies-and-japanese/>

John's last move was to the 2/11 Army General Hospital in Buna, New Guinea, once again serving as an anaesthetist. He set up the field hospital in this harsh environment, where Buna was subjected to multiple Japanese attacks. John treated so many soldiers ill with malaria, the medical staff needed extra training. Fortunately, John did not sustain any injuries during the war except a concussion received playing recreational sport in February 1944, requiring 2 weeks rest.

After a short period of leave awarded him by Lieutenant Colonel DW McCredie, John returned to the 2/11 in Aitape, Papua New Guinea doing the challenging work of setting up hospitals and treating troops as they came in. At one stage the sick and injured were so numerous that the hospital overflowed. In early 1945 John relinquished his Medical Ward responsibilities, to focus on anaesthetics, treating 255 men in only a few months. The officer commanding the Surgical Division commented that:

*Major Rice has done a good job as anaesthetist. During the period he has trained CAPT Parker, who is now competent to take over the duties of an anaesthetist.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Walker, Middle East and Far East, p390

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Rice, A Doctor in the Second World War - SX10147 Major John David Rice

<sup>9</sup> OC Surgical Division Quarterly Report for the Period ending 31 March 1945



John departed Aitape by plane on 3 June and returned to Adelaide and was later discharged from service on 21 July 1945<sup>10</sup>.

### Post-War

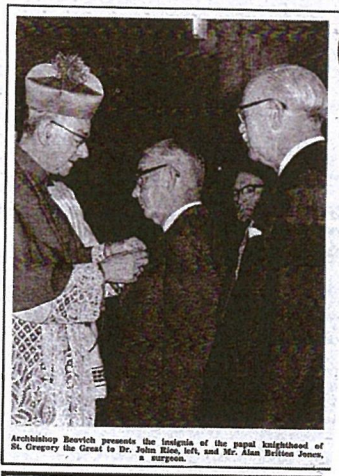
John resumed general practice at Mile End then the Adelaide CBD in 1948<sup>11</sup>. He focused on Gynaecology and Obstetrics delivering over 4,000 babies into the late 1970s. In the early 1950's John was actively involved in the re-establishment of Royal Australian Army Medical Corps RAAMC Units in South Australia. He later served 6 years as the Honorary Colonel of the RAAMC in SA.



From Left To Right: Judy Rice (Daughter in Law), John David Rice, Sue Rice (Daughter in Law) and John Peter Rice (Son)  
[Rice Family Records](#)

John had a close association with the Catholic Church, maintaining friendship with the original Chaplain of the 2/43 battalion, Tom Gard MBE. John was a medical advisor to clergy and an active member of the Master of the Guild of St Luke (Association of Catholic Doctors). John's deep sense in the Catholic faith saw him awarded a Papal knighthood of Saint Gregory the Great by Pope Paul the 6th for his commitment to the church. He later joined the advisory board of Calvary Hospital and subsequently became the chairman. As part of his role, John helped establish the Mary Potter Wing for the care of the dying. He also had a brief role in town planning in the 1950s for the Lyell McEwin Hospital and now the main access road is named John Rice Avenue.

Dr. John David Rice passed away after a brief illness on 18th October 1981 in his beloved Calvary Hospital.



John receiving his Papal Knighthood from the Bishop  
[Rice Family Records](#)

Exert from The Southern Cross Newspaper October 22, 1981 showing Johns Death, showing how regarded he was amongst the people of Adelaide.  
[Rice Family Records](#)

... a new master of the Guild was elected. He is ...  
... Secretary is Dr. Margaret Leach, of Calvary.

## Papal knight dies

Dr. John Rice died at Calvary hospital on Sunday after a short illness.

Pope Paul VI conferred a knighthood of the Order of St. Gregory the Great on Dr. Rice in 1967. The Order of St. Gregory, the Great honours those who have served the Church and the Vatican with distinction.

In a message to Dr. Rice, Bishop Kennedy said: "When the Pope conferred the knighthood of St. Gregory the Great on Dr. John Rice and the late Dr. Alan Britton Jones, Archbishop Beovich commented: 'The Holy Father has no more devoted sons than these two men.'"

Dr. John Rice was the friend and confidant not only of Archbishop Beovich and Archbishop Gleeson but also of many priests and religious of the archdiocese.

"Professionally he was outstanding in his own field. He was held in respect and honor by his colleagues. He was regarded in a similar way by hundreds of the people of Adelaide who had experienced his kindness and generosity."

On behalf of Archbishop Gleeson, I extend the sympathy of the archdiocese to Mrs. Rice and to the family.

Dr. Rice obtained his medical degree in 1930. He served with the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps during World War II (1942-45). In 1950, he was actively involved in the reforming of the Army Medical Corps units in SA as part of the Army Reserve.

His final association with the Army was in the late 1960s when he served two terms as Honorary Colonel to the RAAMC.

Dr. Rice was a past master of the Guild of St. Luke.

He was a pioneer of the Cusa movement in Adelaide and its first doctor-lecturer.

The Cusa movement was responsible for Pre-Cusa courses which were the forerunners of the present day marriage preparation courses.

In 1968, he was one of the first doctors involved in the setting up of the Catholic National Family Planning Services.

Dr. Rice was also closely associated with Calvary Hospital.

He is survived by his wife (Mollie) and three sons - two members of the medical profession and a lawyer.

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The Southern Cross Newspaper, Thursday October 22, 1981 - Page 3

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Rice, A Doctor in the Second World War - SX10147 Major John David Rice

<sup>11</sup> Rice Family History Records



## Part B:

Throughout John's time at war, he displayed many characteristics of the ANZAC spirit. These were shown in his every action; whether it was risking his own life to treat the injured on the battlefield, or advising his commanding officers on strategies to protect soldier's lives and treat local people upholding his doctor's duty, or in playing around in his time off building strong relations with his fellow soldiers. Like other ANZACs, John showed **compassion and mateship** when caring for those around him, but also **courage** when presented with multiple accounts of danger. These included his work at the RAP at the base of the fig tree in Tobruk, where he **improvised** with limited medical supplies and toiled for hours and days on end in treating the injured whilst the battle raged around him. At all times his patients were his first priority.

As a Doctor, John showed **selflessness** when looking after wounded or sick patients. He combined his knowledge of caring for soldiers and showing compassion even when outside his aid post. Another example of John's care for others was when he assessed and treated children from surrounding villages in the Middle East who were unwell with fever and enlarged spleens, likely due to malaria. In true ANZAC fashion, John found time in his busy clinical life to relax and often got involved in sports with his fellow soldiers. John always strove to get things done, and always found time to advise his commanding officers on related medical issues, including a trip to Finschfen, New Guinea, in March 1944. John's deep faith valued the humanity in everyone and he sought to be a practical and caring hand wherever it was needed.

Courage is all about getting on with the job when faced with extreme danger, such as when he was in Buna being attacked in an air raid by the Japanese. His courage is further evidenced by the mention in despatches whilst fighting with the 2/8 Field Ambulance. He showed resourcefulness when John and his Medical Platoon colleagues commandeered an ambulance captured from Italian soldiers and used it as their starting base of operations, before moving on to the Italian Marine Base. John's selflessness and work for others was also seen outside of the war in his work with the wider community, whether in a remote town in Western Australia, or in the city of Adelaide. He assisted a great deal in the local Catholic Church, advising clergy and helping progress services in the community, including the Calvary Hospital and the development of the Lyell McEwin Hospital. He delivered thousands of babies whilst working as a family GP, cared for countless local patients, and still managed to find time for his family, including his 14 grandchildren. He was devoted to serving his community and country.

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