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## IN THE NAME OF THEIR FATHERS

Honouring Queensland's  
forgotten Rats of Tobruk

By Mike Colman

FOR 70 YEARS HISTORIANS TOLD  
THE STORY OF THE SIEGE OF  
TOBRUK – AND FOR 70 YEARS

THEY GOT  
IT WRONG,  
STARTING  
WITH THE  
ROLE OF  
THE 2/15TH  
BATTALION.

Story Mike Colman

**A**s 21-year-old Jack Anning looked across the Libyan desert in the early morning light and saw the Panzer tanks coming toward him, with elite German soldiers either riding on the tanks or fanned out jogging behind them, he felt no fear. “I was wildly excited,” he says. “I was sick of running. We all were. We were anxious to have a go.”

It was Easter Monday, 1941, on the outskirts of Tobruk, Libya’s Mediterranean port town near the Egyptian border. Over the next few hours Anning and the rest of A Company from the all-Queensland 2/15th Battalion would indeed “have a go” at Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Korps. In their first experience of combat they would take on one of Rommel’s favourite commanders and his battle-hardened troops.

By mid-morning the fighting was all but over. The German commander lay dead in a ditch, ►



A job well done ...  
Cpl. Jack Anning  
towards the end of  
his military service.

## history

his body covered by a bloodied Nazi flag as his distraught men, many in tears, surrendered their weapons to the Queenslanders.

It was a crucial element in a victory that ensured the continuation of the eight-month-long siege, leading to the enduring legend of the “Rats of Tobruk” and the eventual derailment of Rommel’s march to the Suez Canal. Yet until last year, the only people who knew about it were the ones who were there and the family members they told. The action of the men of the 2/15th during Tobruk’s Easter Battle was lost under the desert sands. It was left to their sons to rewrite history.

### JOHN MACKENZIE-SMITH REMEMBERS WELL

March 2, 1943, the day his father Captain Greig Smith came home from the war. John Smith (the “MacKenzie” was added in 1989) was six years old. His father, the officer commanding A Company, 2/15th Battalion, was a day off his 31st birthday. John was playing in the front yard of the family home on Waterworks Road, Ashgrove, 6km west of the Brisbane CBD. A car pulled up and a man dressed in a light-coloured khaki uniform got out.

“Are you my daddy?” John asked.

“Yes. Where’s Mummy?”

“At the butcher.”

“You’d better go get her.”

The boy raced to tell his mother the news. She took his hand and ran back down the street, calling through the door as she passed each shop, “My husband’s just back from the Middle East, my husband’s just back from the Middle East.”

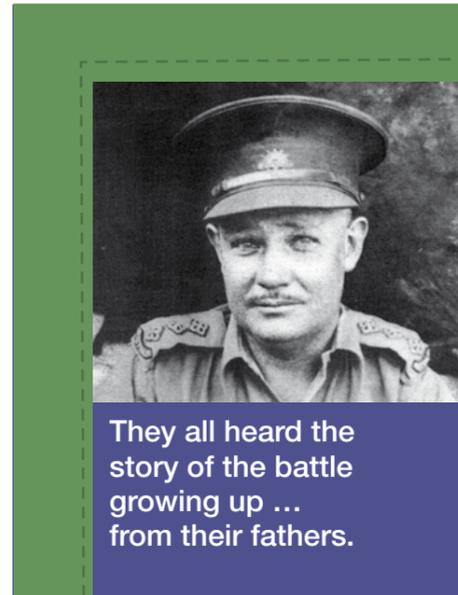
With serious injuries sustained in Libya ruling out a return to the front, Captain Smith brought back souvenirs from Tobruk that would fascinate John and his younger brother Raymond for the next 70 years: a German combat helmet, a Luger pistol, a pair of field glasses, a map titled *Tobruch Defences*, and a bloodstained Nazi flag.

Other sons had their own memories. William Yates’s father, Lt. Ron Yates MC, was the officer who accepted the German surrender on that Easter Monday. Mal Scarr’s dad Bob was on one of two Bren carriers – light armoured vehicles fitted with a Bren machine gun – that strafed the enemy position. Before his death in 1969, Sergeant John “Bomber” Neal (later the Regimental Sergeant Major) would tell his son John of how he shot his rifle into the gun barrels of the advancing tanks in the hope of jamming them. Greg Snow’s father Russell was a member of 2/15th Battalion headquarters company.

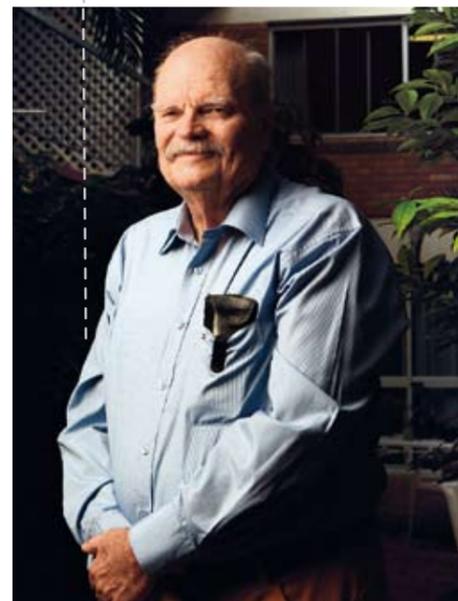
Unlike the others, Steve Rowan never saw his father return from the war. A member of A Company at the time of the Easter Battle, Sgt. Tony Rowan was killed three months later

when he stepped on a “Jumping Jack” landmine outside Tobruk. It was the day after Steve’s fourth birthday, but his emotional ties to his father are as close today as they were then. On his right arm is tattooed the 2/15th Battalion’s colour patch, a purple T for Tobruk, and underneath, the words “Son of a Rat”.

They all heard the story of the battle growing up. They heard it from their fathers or their fathers’ comrades-in-arms. They read their diaries and listened as the old soldiers talked on Anzac Day or at reunions organised by the 2/15th Battalion Remembrance Club. They heard how, after days of fierce fighting, the Germans broke through the line held by the NSW-formed 2/13th and 2/17th battalions. How the 120 men of A Company dug in 100m in front of the guns of Britain’s 1st Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery to



They all heard the story of the battle growing up ... from their fathers.



form a last line of defence. How, despite heavy casualties, the British gunners sent the Panzers packing while the Queenslanders held firm.

They heard how Greig Smith then ordered Ron Yates to lead his 30-man platoon on a counter-attack against the remaining German infantry of the 8th Machine-Gun Battalion, which had supported the Panzer assault; how, although well outnumbered, they killed the German commander and captured 100 of his men. And they heard how no-one ever gave them any credit for it.

### THE “OVERSIGHT” THAT SAW THE 2/15TH WRITTEN

out of history started with the published account of the siege of Tobruk by respected ABC war correspondent Chester Wilmot in 1944. Wilmot, who died in a plane crash in 1954, wrote that the 2/15th had been stationed in reserve at the “Red Line”, Tobruk’s outer line of defence, held by the 2/13th and 2/17th battalions, some 3000m in front of the British artillery, which were on the “Blue Line”. He claimed that after breaking through the Red Line, the German tanks advanced 2000m before being turned back by the guns, and gave credit for the final operation in which the remnants of the supporting German infantry were defeated and captured to the two NSW units.

At the time Wilmot was putting the finishing touches to his book in Sydney, members of the 2/15th had more pressing matters than recognition on their minds – they were fighting the Japanese at Kumawa, New Guinea. It was only later, after the war, when one publication after another rehashed Wilmot’s version of events that they began to feel aggrieved. When they got together they talked about setting the record straight but no-one knew how. They left it until the next reunion and the next, and then time began to run out.

When the battalion’s Remembrance Club was formed in 1946 it had several hundred members, nearly all returned servicemen. Today most members are widows, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the original 2/15th. Last month, just 48 WWII veterans remained; 16 of them Rats of Tobruk, including club president Gordon Wallace, and only three – Doug Smales, Eddie Stott and Jack Anning – survivors of A Company. The story of their part in the Easter Battle was at risk of dying with them.

“The passion was there,” says Steve Rowan, secretary of the club since 2002. “We wanted to get the recognition for our fathers and grandfathers, but none of us had the expertise. We didn’t know where to start.”

Fittingly, it was John MacKenzie-Smith, the son of A Company’s commanding officer at the time of the Easter Battle, who led the way. A retired senior lecturer in teacher education, Dr MacKenzie-Smith, 75, is now a respected historian but until 25 years ago had little interest in military

history. It was his father’s death from cancer in September 1987 that sparked MacKenzie-Smith’s curiosity over the bloodstained flag he had brought back from Tobruk, eventually leading him to uncover the truth of the Easter Battle.

“My father would tell my brother and me what had happened over there if we pressed him,” he says. “I basically knew by the age of seven what the story was. It was to do with the concrete things he brought home: the German flag, the German helmet that we used to goosestep around the yard with, the Luger pistol, a pair of binoculars and an Italian map of Tobruk defences. These were his pride and joy, so early on we learned he was in a battle at Tobruk which also involved tanks. He told us they took on the German infantry that arrived there and defeated them and took 100 prisoners, but the leader of the infantry was killed. Because he was their commander, the Germans draped the flag over him. Then, after the battle was over, Aussies being Aussies, Dad’s men whipped the flag off the German and gave it to my father. It was like they had captured the enemy’s standard and presented it to him as their commander.”

The word-of-mouth stories were MacKenzie-Smith’s only link to the action of that Easter Monday until 1976, when his father gave him a copy of the June edition of the Remembrance Club magazine *Caveant Hostes* (the battalion motto, from the Latin for “Let Enemies Beware”). It included a detailed description of A Company’s involvement on the day by Company Sgt. Maj. Kevin Robinson, who led one of the two sections involved in the counter-attack. It backed up Captain Smith’s version of events and added another layer to the story of the flag.

Detailing how the Germans had taken cover in a “half-dug tank trap”, he wrote: “I believe one of the Bren gunners in Lt. Yates’s group shot the German Commander, a Lieutenant Colonel, through the neck and killed him, and that seemed to demoralise the Jerries. They covered him in a big swastika flag.”

As his father lay dying 11 years later, MacKenzie-Smith brought him a copy of the recently released official Australian War Memorial (AWM) history of Tobruk and El Alamein, written by former barrister and World War II officer Barton Maughan. The section on the Easter Battle gave scant mention to the 2/15th. “He didn’t say why the action was important or the circumstances,” MacKenzie-Smith says. “Most of all he didn’t say where it was and that was vital, because that was the thing that wrote them out of history for nearly 70 years.”

The book did achieve one thing, though. It started MacKenzie-Smith and his father talking about the flag. “I said to him, ‘Dad, who was under that flag?’ and he said, ‘I don’t know. He



Ranks of the Rats ... (top) Australian troops on the front at Tobruk, 1941; map (above) shows the North African location; (opposite) John MacKenzie-Smith and (top) his father Greig.

was just another bloody Hun to me.’ That might shock people today, but that encapsulated the way they took on Rommel. They took him on face value, not on reputation.”

MacKenzie-Smith says for nearly three years after his father’s death he put thoughts of the flag “to the back of my mind” as he taught and studied for degrees, but eventually his curiosity got the better of him. “It became my quest. I wanted to find out who was under that flag.”

With Sgt. Maj. Robinson stating in his *Caveant Hostes* article that the felled German was a Lieutenant Colonel, and knowing the action occurred on April 14, 1941, MacKenzie-Smith combed published reports on the battle in search of a match. He found it in Maughan’s official history. The officer could only be Lt. Col.

Gustav Ponath, a recipient of the Knight’s Cross, Germany’s highest battlefield decoration, and commander of the 8th Machine-Gun Battalion.

The site and circumstances of Ponath’s death have long been cause for conjecture in both Germany and Australia, and his remains have never been found. The official war diary of the 8th Machine-Gun Battalion states that Ponath was killed on the Red Line, 3000m south-west of the 2/15th position. “That war diary cooked the books,” MacKenzie-Smith claims. “It wasn’t going to say their men were captured ignominiously or that Ponath died in a ditch. It had them on the frontline, valiantly trying to make their way back to their base when Ponath was shot by a member of 2/17th battalion.”

MacKenzie-Smith wrote to the AWM about his theory, “but they thought it was just Joe Blow and ignored it”. Researching in July 2009, he came across *Axis History Forum*, an online discussion board for those interested in German military history. In response to a member’s request for any information about Ponath, MacKenzie-Smith gave a brief description of his death, including Robinson’s view that Ponath was “cut down by a Bren gun burst to the neck”.

By chance Toowoomba ophthalmologist Dr William Yates, son of Lt. Ron Yates who had died in 1975, happened to read the posting. “I was surfing the net and I came across this entry about Ponath,” he says. “I was interested because I recall as a boy Dad telling me that he had killed Ponath. He said that the Germans had been trying to surrender and Ponath had run back into the trenches and started firing, and my father had spun around with his pistol and shot him.

“Dad felt sorry about Ponath. He had a lot ▶

## history

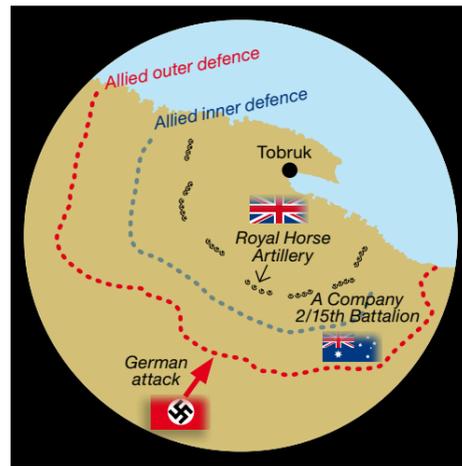
of respect for him. We always knew it was Ponath because Dad used his name. He'd gone through his wallet and found a photo of his wife and son, who would have been about the same age as my older brother. Dad always said he intended to write to Ponath's widow but never did."

Yates replied to MacKenzie-Smith's posting, giving his version of events and the two men began corresponding. It was Yates who urged MacKenzie-Smith to focus on telling the story of the 2/15th involvement in the Easter Battle for once and for all. "It was such a big event in Dad's life but it was like it just disappeared off the pages of history," he says. "John being a historian, I said, 'It's up to you to correct this or [the true story] will never be told'. Luckily he decided to take up the challenge. It's just sad that our fathers weren't alive to see it."

In June 2010 MacKenzie-Smith began researching in earnest. The history of the 2/15th Battalion up until Easter Monday 1941 was relatively easy to access. The first Queensland battalion of WWII, it was formed in January 1940 and just over a year later was part of the Australian 9th Division sent to North Africa where it came under the command of Lt. Gen. Leslie Morshead. Its mission was to relieve elements of the 6th Division, which had been dispatched to Greece following the Allies' crushing defeat of Italian troops in Libya. Crucial to that victory was the capture of the heavily fortified harbour port of Tobruk, a vital source of supply by sea.

The Queenslanders arrived in Libya in early February and headed to the frontline near Mersa Brega, 490km south-west of Tobruk. At the same time, Rommel and his Afrika Korps were moving north in a bid to regain ground lost by the Italians and push on to Egypt and the Suez. Not equipped for a confrontation with Rommel, Allied Command ordered a tactical withdrawal from Libya. The Allies' plan was to make a stand at the border with Egypt, but they needed time to prepare. General Morshead's 9th Division was ordered to dig in at Tobruk and hold off Rommel for as long as possible. Allied Command hoped for 30 days. Morshead and his "Rats" gave them 240.

Battered by blinding sandstorms, under attack from German aircraft and with Rommel on their tail, the Allied forces endured a nightmarish two-and-a-half weeks on the run from Mersa Brega before making it to Tobruk and digging in on April 9, 1941. The 2/15th had been particularly hard-hit. On April 7, after a two-hour battle, its entire headquarters company, including commanding officer Lt. Col. Robert Marlan and his second-in-command Maj. Charles Barton, plus five more officers and 150 rank-and-file, had been captured by the Germans. After the war, those who'd been taken prisoner that day spoke of the well-drilled



Colours lowered ... Australian War Memorial historian Dr Karl James (top) with the flag from Tobruk; (above) how the battle was configured; (opposite) survivor Jack Anning.

outfit that had surprised them in the desert, and its dashing CO. It was Lt. Col. Gustav Ponath and the 8th Machine-Gun Battalion.

The Siege of Tobruk began on Good Friday, April 11, 1941 when Rommel launched his first attempt to break through the Red Line outer defences. Three days later, after fierce fighting during which the 2/17th's Jack Edmondson earned the first Australian Victoria Cross of WWII, Ponath and his troops broke through the line and headed towards the guns of the Royal Horse Artillery. And that's where things got murky. Every document MacKenzie-Smith found had the 2/15th back in reserve, out of harm's way as the Brits and New South Welshmen fought. Even the official 2/15th war diaries were inconclusive. Yet he had heard his father's stories, read Robinson's account and now had William Yates offering his own father's recollections. Most of all, he had the flag. How could his father's men have possibly taken it from Ponath's body if they hadn't been involved in the action?

It was then he came across his father's papers

and what he calls "the bingo element". "That was the breakthrough that was going to put them back into history," he says. Sitting in the comfortable lounge room of his home at Hendra in Brisbane's inner north, MacKenzie-Smith hands over an official-looking map. Captioned "The Easter Battle 1941", it clearly shows the outer defensive Red Line marked with crosses designating Australian infantry and an arrow pinpointing the German attack. Some 3000m to the north, above the words "Blue Line", are four crosses sitting inside semi-circles, designating artillery. Alongside them, someone – presumably Captain Greig Smith – has written "R.H.A." for Royal Horse Artillery and just below, between the guns and the enemy, "A Coy 2/15".

As well as the map, Smith's papers held another clue – a photocopy of a special "order of the day" sent out by Maj. Gen. John Lavarack, Commander of the Western Desert Force, on the evening of Easter Monday, 1941. In it Lavarack praises "all ranks ... on the stern and determined resistance offered to the enemy's attacks with tanks, infantry and aircraft today". He makes particular mention of "a prompt counter-attack by reserves of the 20th Bde". The words are underlined, and alongside, Smith has written "Our Coy".

MacKenzie-Smith pushed ahead, alerting the Remembrance Club of his work. The sons of the Rats answered the call. William Yates provided his father's diary. Mal Scarr arranged an interview with his father Bob who, a week before his death, shared his recollections between gulps from an oxygen mask. Steve Rowan gave access to his father's diary and sorted through the boxes of old copies of *Caveant Hostes* magazines stored in his garage. A former National Service artilleryman, he helped reconcile the coordinates recorded in the 2/15th war diaries with Capt. Smith's Italian "*Tobruch Defences*" map. John Neal, an expert on 2/15th history and military matters in general, provided invaluable advice and anecdotal evidence, as did MacKenzie-Smith's brother, Raymond Smith. Greg Snow accessed and processed photographs from Remembrance Club records.

The result was a 100-page manuscript that has been expanded with the inclusion of excerpts from the Rats' diaries and *Caveant Hostes* articles. Titled *Tobruk's Easter Battle 1941: The Forgotten Fifteenth's Date with Rommel's Champion*, it was published by Brisbane's Boolarong Press in September last year.

The ultimate endorsement came when the AWM acknowledged that the battalion's role in the battle had been overlooked for 70 years. For almost a year MacKenzie-Smith and AWM historian Dr Karl James had been discussing the issue via email. In March 2011 MacKenzie-Smith sent a copy of his manuscript to James and

soon afterwards received the message that he and everyone associated with the 2/15th Battalion had been hoping for: "From now on no book on the Tobruk Siege can be written without incorporating the substance of this report."

Which raises the question, how could history have been so wrong for so long? "I don't think it was malicious, but I acknowledge that the members of the 2/15th had a genuine grievance," James says. "One of the problems was that the battalion's own war diaries were vague. One of the earliest books written about Tobruk was by Chester Wilmot. He interviewed the company commander of 2/17th Battalion, who described the action in which Jack Edmondson got his VC. Wilmot concentrated on that part of the story and he was so influential that his description set the agenda. Everyone writing about Tobruk for the past 70 years has followed his lead. I was impressed by John MacKenzie-Smith's research. It is good to see the children of veterans telling their parents' stories. The World War II generation is fading away, and if we don't grab their stories now they will fade away with them."

MacKenzie-Smith donated the bloodied swastika flag that started it all to the AWM. It was the centrepiece of last year's AWM display to mark the 70th anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk, with a caption that for the first time publicly stated the 2/15th Battalion's correct position on Easter Monday.

**WHEN WILLIAM YATES WAS TEN YEARS OLD,** his father gave him his campaign medals and the Military Cross he had been awarded for his actions on Easter Monday. William swapped the campaign medals with another boy for some marbles and never got them back, but he still has the Military Cross and its official citation. If military historians and authors had delved into the AWM records and accessed that citation, they would have found exactly what 9 Platoon, A Company of the 2/15th Battalion did during the Easter Battle.

Better still, they could have asked Jack Anning. Now 92 and living in a nursing home in the northern Brisbane suburb of Toombul, Jack's body might be bowed – he uses a wheeled walking frame, the result of a horse falling on him 40 years ago – but his mind is every bit as sharp as the day in 1940 when he walked off the family property at Charters Towers and joined up in Townsville. He remembers names, faces, dates and emotions with crystal clarity. Most of all he remembers that Easter Monday morning.

"I happened to be on guard with a couple of other fellas and just as daylight was breaking I saw the tanks about 3000 yards [2700m] away and the troops behind. I was watching straight up the road as clearly as anything, because that's

the way of the desert. You can see a long way. I warned the fellas behind me that were asleep. I could see the troops, quite small, come in behind the tanks, form up and come towards us. There were about 30 tanks and some men riding on them, some trotting along behind. We were in front of the guns, about 150-200 yards. We weren't worried. We were fully trained and we were tired of being chased from pillar to post.

"Half-an-hour after that was when the planes came in, ours and theirs. I remember particularly a plane was shot down and I jumped up in excitement and a fella called out, 'Hey mate, sit down, sit down. He's one of ours'. One tank came up very close to us. It was hit by the artillery and went skewiff and cut across our trench and spun away. We were shooting at the tanks, trying to put one through the slit the driver looks through. Then the tanks started turning around and heading back. Some of the [attacking German] soldiers took shelter in this trench, which was about waist-deep.

"[Sgt. Maj.] Robinson was the first to discover them and [Capt.] Greig Smith ordered us down to pick them up and we went down with great excitement, I can tell you. Old Greig told me

When we were fighting we never even thought about medals.



PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID KELLY, IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

to leave my rifle and he gave me a Tommy gun – a Thompson [sub]machine gun – and told me to keep an eye on Lieutenant Yates.

"We thought there was a just a few of them but when we got down there they started firing, and there was about a hundred of them. That's when I wondered how we were going to get out of it. We started to run out of ammo and Yates told me to conserve my fire. Then Greig sent down two Bren carriers and some mortars. That's who saved the day, because there was still plenty of fight in those Germans. The carriers came one at each end [of the trench] and did a little bit of machine-gunning. Once the mortar [shells] started to fall amongst them, they were finished.

"The German officer got out of the trench and spoke to Robinson but he wouldn't surrender to him because he wasn't an officer, so Robinson sent him over to Lt. Yates. I knew he was some sort of boss because he was slinging his weight around a fair bit but I don't think he had any identification on him. He wanted to organise a surrender; make sure his men were going to be looked after. Then he got back in the trench and started shooting and that's when Yates shot him.

"I saw him shot, and I say that man committed suicide. He had no intention of surrendering. It was his second-in-charge who surrendered. That's the fella who put the flag on him. He asked Yates could he kneel down and say goodbye to his friend and he was crying away while he was doing it. Yates naturally said yes, and when he was satisfied the fella was dead he got up and handed over to Yates. Some of the men started to cry.

"I couldn't tell you who took the flag off him. All I know was it was taken off. I didn't think too much more about it after that. We had Tobruk and El Alamein and New Guinea and then that was it. I went back to the bush. I think I came down to one or two reunions but apart from that my war was over. We won, as far as I was concerned.

"I didn't hear any inference that maybe we weren't being treated fairly. I thought we were all soldiers and we all took part in it and won it. It was only when I retired to Brisbane around 1969 that I started to hear talk that we weren't getting credit for what we'd done. I'd never worried about it before. That's not why we were there. When we were fighting we never even thought about acknowledgement or medals."

He opens the storage box under the seat of his walker and pulls out an envelope from which he extracts two small sheets of paper. The pages are yellowed and the writing faded, but the words are clearly legible. It is a letter from Lt. Ron Yates to Jack Anning's father. Dated October 9, 1943, it reads: "Dear Mr Anning, I thought you would like to know that Young Jack has been doing a wonderful job ... " He grips the handles of the walker and smiles. "That's my medal," he says. ■