

## **Thomas Richard Worgan and Pamela Cotton.**

**by Andrew G. Connor**

Tom Cotton was my godfather. He was company and then battalion commander of the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion A.I.F. during WWII in which my father, George B. Connor, served. I only met Tom twice that I can remember, as our homes were hundreds of kilometers apart, but every year he used to send me strange (for a child) birthday gifts – starting with engraved pewter beer mugs, followed by a silver cutlery service, in annual installments. Tom and his wife Pam had no children of their own, although I have since discovered that Tom has many relatives in England and Australia. On his death, Tom appointed me as joint executor and, after Pam, the main beneficiary of his will. Among other things, I inherited a portrait of him by Ernest Buckmaster, reproduced on the next page. After Tom’s death, my family came to know Pam very well. Now that I am retired and have some spare time, I thought it would be good to do some research and put together what I know about my godfather, Tom Cotton.

In researching their story, I have drawn heavily from newspaper reports in England and Australia; *“The Footsoldiers”* by W. Crooks; the Australian War Memorial unit war diary 2/33 Infantry Battalion; *“The Spy Catchers; The Official History of ASIO, 1949-1963, Volume I”* by David Horner and *“The Protest Years; The Official History of ASIO, 1963-1975, Volume II”* by John Blaxland. The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion A.I.F Association kindly gave me access to some of Tom’s letters. Selected references are included as footnotes. I have spoken with some of Tom Cotton’s relatives in Australia and England in an attempt to add some personal perspective, but Tom and Pam did not maintain contact with their families after World War II, and were quite private people.

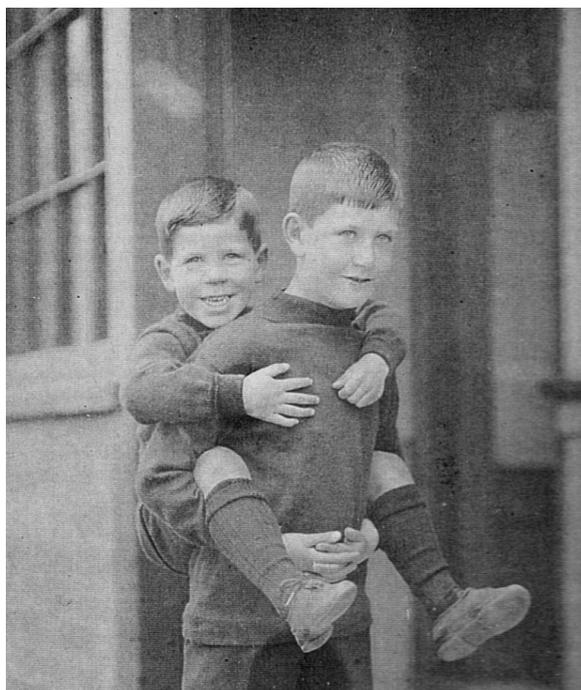


Lt. Col. Thomas Richard Worgan Cotton  
by Ernest Buckmaster

## **TOM’S EARLY LIFE IN ENGLAND (1907 - 1924)**

The Cotton clan were dairy farmers from south-west England and, since about 1820, have been living off the land in the Baltonsborough - Glastonbury area of Somerset (see Appendix for Tom’s ancestry). Tom Cotton’s father, Frederick William Cotton, was born in Baltonsborough in 1874, the youngest of six children including four brothers, so it was unlikely that Fred would inherit any land. Fred was educated at boarding schools in Somerset and Gloucestershire and in 1892, matriculated to university where he studied medicine<sup>1</sup>. He graduated from University of Bristol in 1899 and enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.) for an initial seven-year period<sup>2</sup>. In January 1901 aged 26, Fred married Muriel May Pictor, a stone merchant’s daughter from Box, Wiltshire<sup>3</sup>. Soon after their marriage, Fred and May, as she was always known, were posted to South Africa, where Fred saw action during the Boer War<sup>4</sup>. Their next posting was to Murree in the Kashmiri foothills (now in Pakistan) where their first child, Robert Worgan Cotton III<sup>5</sup> was born on 15 August 1903<sup>6</sup>. The name ‘Worgan’ came from Fred’s great-great-grandmother Ann Worgan (c.1728-1800). Worgan has persisted as a family name in every generation of Cottons down to the present, and some family members held the superstition that the Worgan name guarantees survival beyond infancy.

Fred and May returned to England and were stationed at Dover in Kent when Thomas Richard Worgan Cotton was born on 14 November 1907<sup>7</sup>. It appears that the R.A.M.C. moved Frederick regularly to various postings around the country, and the family moved with him. By 1909, he had the rank of Captain. When their third child, Margaret Rosemary Worgan Cotton (known as Rosemary) was born on 21 August 1911, the family was living in Fleetwood, Lancashire where the British Territorial Army occupied the Euston Barracks and a campsite.



Thomas R. W. Cotton (aged 4) and Robert W. Cotton (aged 8), in Fleetwood, 1911.

In 1912, Fred Cotton applied for, and was posted to India with the Territorial Army. He took May, Tom and Rosemary with him, but Robert stayed with extended family in Somerset and attended boarding school. When World War I began in August 1914, Fred remained on active duty in India. Tom returned to England in 1915 to begin boarding school. Another son, Peter, was born in India but died of Spanish influenza in 1916. The family returned safely from India in May 1919 and Lt. Col. Frederick

<sup>1</sup> Bristol Mercury 19 Feb 1892

<sup>2</sup> Army and Navy Gazette, 19 May 1900

<sup>3</sup> Somerset Guardian and Radstock Observer 12 Jan 1901

<sup>4</sup> Roll of Individuals entitled to the King’s South Africa Medal and Clasps. 3 Jan 1903

<sup>5</sup> The name ‘Robert Worgan Cotton’ was used prolifically. I added numbers to distinguish individuals.

<sup>6</sup> England Census 1911

<sup>7</sup> England Census 1911

Cotton retired from the army. Meanwhile, Robert and Tom “*had grown away from their immediate family and it is recorded that they did not recognize their parents when they returned from India and settled into private life.*”<sup>8</sup>

In 1920, the Cotton family was living at 10 Eversley Park, Chester, Cheshire and Frederick had a medical practice. Frederick was 46 and May 42 years old when their post-war surprise baby, Philip Rodney Worgan Cotton was born there on 21 March 1920. The other three children ranged from 9 to 17 years old – a considerable age gap!

Soon after Philip’s birth, the family moved to Marnhull, Dorset where Frederick had bought a medical practice. The family lived on a semi-rural block named ‘Tapsays’ with space for growing stock and stock feed, which was May’s hobby. Robert and Tom began attending the Officer Training Corps attached to the Dorset Regiment<sup>9</sup>. Having been impressed by his close contact with Army life in India, with Cadets at school and then with the Dorset Regiment, Tom begged his father to be allowed to go to Sandhurst, with the aim of joining the Army (the Dorsets) in India. This wish was denied, much to Tom’s disappointment<sup>10</sup>.

Britain was experiencing post war fatigue and recession (which would deepen to depression in the late 1920’s). Labour unionism, socialism and communism were rising, unemployment increasing and the U.S.A. took over Britain’s pre-war position as the world’s leading economy. The British Empire was in decline as many of Britain’s colonies began to seek greater (or total) independence, including Australia. In 1921, the Australian Federal Government took over control from the Australian States of all immigration and pursued it vigorously, after a virtual cessation during WWI. The *Empire Settlement Scheme* was introduced whereby Britain and Australia were to share equally in the cost of promoting migration from Britain. Between 1921 and 1929, 221,000 assisted and 100,000 unassisted migrants came to Australia from Britain, attracted by Australia’s promise of guaranteed employment, good wages, land and plenty of opportunities.<sup>11</sup> The Western Australia Government established the *Group Settlement Scheme* in 1921 and promoted it heavily in Britain.



The Cotton family had some experience of emigration to Australia. At least 21 adults and more than 18 children from Baltonsborough emigrated to Australia between 1840 and 1852, most settling permanently.<sup>12</sup> Six of Fred’s eleven uncles and aunts (Austins) had emigrated to Australia in the 1850’s and 1860’s, mostly to take up farming and grazing properties in Victoria. Fred’s brother Colston and sister Eliza Eleanor (‘Cissie’) Cotton had emigrated to Australia in the late 1890’s and early

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, Gordon (Maj. 2/33Bn, retired) “A Tribute to Tom Cotton” Unpublished and undated.

<sup>9</sup> Military Service and Enlistment Records, National Archives of Australia Items 6461448 and 6463510

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, op.cit.

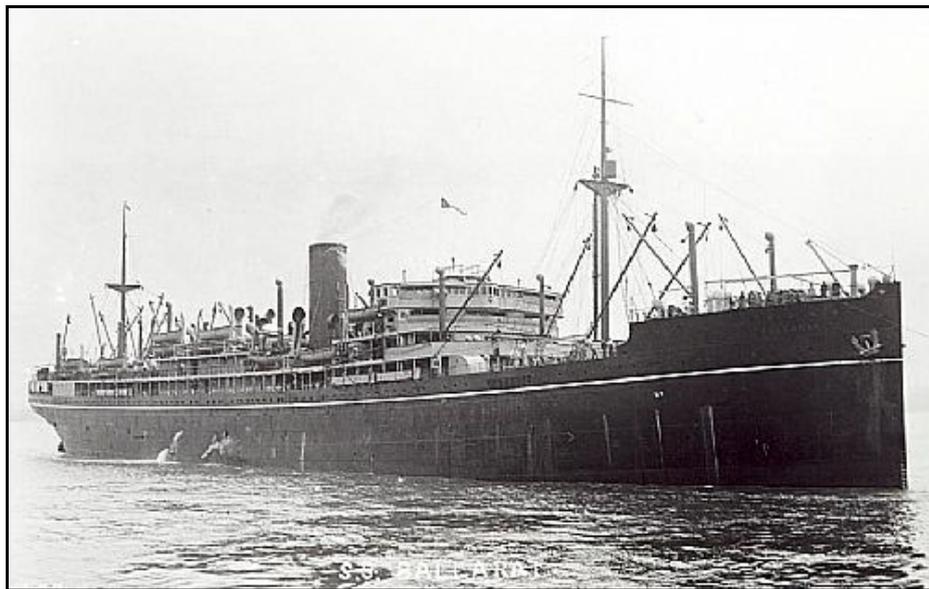
<sup>11</sup> National Archives Australia; [http://www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/research\\_guides.htm](http://www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/research_guides.htm)

<sup>12</sup> 'Parishes: Baltonsborough', A History of the County of Somerset: Volume 9: Glastonbury and Street (2006), pp. 59-75. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=117177>

1900's, leaving the eldest son Robert Worgan Cotton III to inherit the family dairy farm at Baltonsborough. No doubt there was frequent correspondence between the Australian and British family members, and there is a record of one family returning to the U.K. briefly for holidays in Teignmouth, where they entertained family visitors from Baltonsborough.

Seeing little opportunity for a career in farming, or in the military in Dorset, Robert and Tom were attracted by the farming opportunities offered in Australia. They made contact with their relatives in Victoria who invited them to come. Robert (20) and Thomas (16) worked many part-time jobs to save for the passage, and then purchased Ticket No. 387 on the S.S. *Ballarat*, departing London for Melbourne on 18 September 1924<sup>13</sup>. They listed their calling as 'farming' on the passenger list.

When Fred and May Cotton became aware of their sons' plan, it prompted them to reconsider their own situation. May had lost her father in 1918 and mother in 1919. Although May's father had once been a wealthy quarry owner from Bath, he did not die a wealthy man<sup>14,15</sup> May probably received a small inheritance, and her only sibling was an unmarried sister, so there was little to hold her in England. Australia offered the possibility of a more stable life and, perhaps, a larger farm. For the other children, who must have become accustomed to regular changes of address, it was probably seen as a new adventure. Fred and May advertised the sale of their live and dead farming stock, grass feed etc. on 1 August 1924<sup>16</sup>. Fred sold his practice, resigned from his appointments as medical officer and public vaccinator for the Parish<sup>17</sup> and bought Ticket No. 3965 on the same voyage, but with destination Sydney<sup>18</sup>.



SS *Ballarat*, P&O liner, 1921

The SS *Ballarat* was a P&O liner launched in 1920. It was fitted out especially for emigrant transport with passenger capacity for 491 permanent third class, plus 758

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<sup>13</sup> U.K. and Ireland Outward Passenger Lists. Ancestry.com

<sup>14</sup> Western Daily Press 16 Aug 1918

<sup>15</sup> Payne, Alan. "Pictor and Sons: Notable Quarry owners" Dec 2018. in Box People and Places

<sup>16</sup> Western Gazette 11 Jul 1924

<sup>17</sup> Western Gazette 29 Aug 1924

<sup>18</sup> U.K. and Ireland Outward Passenger Lists. Ancestry.com

temporary berths in prefabricated dormitories on the outward voyage only. Conditions on board were probably cramped and uncomfortable.

### **WESTERN AUSTRALIA (1924 – 1939)**

The entire Cotton family, Frederick (50), May (46), Robert (21), Thomas (16), Rosemary (13) and Philip (4) arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1924<sup>19</sup> after a five-week voyage from Britain via the Cape of Good Hope.

According to the passenger list, the Cotton family was destined for Sydney, which would make sense as most of their Australian relatives were living in New South Wales and Victoria at that time. They were not listed as Group Settlers in W.A. and probably travelled unassisted. They had no relatives in Western Australia but, for some reason, they decided to leave the ship at Fremantle and settle in W.A. Perhaps the W.A. Government was (and still is) keen to attract medical practitioners to country frontier towns in Western Australia and they made Frederick an attractive offer to stay. Or perhaps they were persuaded to stay in W.A. by the many hopeful Group Settlement Scheme emigrants that they travelled with aboard the SS *Ballarat*.



Emigrants arriving in Melbourne aboard the SS *Ballarat*, 18 April 1925

After staying in Fremantle for a month, Frederick Cotton took over the duties of the Resident Medical Officer in Boyup Brook on 11 December 1924<sup>20</sup>. Boyup Brook was a small town of about 500 people within its 3200 sq. km. boundary, situated in farming, grazing and timber country about 270km by road south of Perth, on the Upper Blackwood River. It took a full day to drive there over very rough roads. It was formally declared a town in 1900 and grew progressively, with addition of a school (1900), railway from Donnybrook (1909), agricultural hall (1910), hotel (1911), police station (1911), and official post office (1914). Town land was opened for leasing in 1914, and the Soldiers Memorial Hospital (and mortuary) was opened on 10 November 1923. No doubt Fred had a growing number of patients from the newly-arrived migrant community.

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<sup>19</sup> Fremantle Western Australia Passenger Lists. Ancestry.com

<sup>20</sup> The West Australian 9 Dec 1924



Soldiers' Memorial Hospital, Boyup Brook, on completion in 1923



Frederick Cotton's shingle (Courtesy G. Calley, Boyup Brook)

In 1925, Frederick and May Cotton bought a 200-acre freehold property, *Rusmore*, from J.A. Moore<sup>21</sup>. It was close to the town and hospital, and they renamed it *Faraway*. In 1926, May Cotton sold a house to one G.N. Leslie of Perth, and was carrying on business in Boyup Brook, independently of Frederick. May alienated the Cotton family relatives back in England by writing several intemperate letters concerning the inheritance she believed should have been Fred's and hers following the death of Fred's brother Robert Worgan Cotton III in 1926. After this, the Cottons in England lost touch with Uncle Fred and his family.



Soon after arriving in Australia, Tom's brother Robert moved to Victoria, and then on to South Australia where he married and started a family. In March 1928, Fred and May Cotton separated. Frederick gave up the practice in Boyup Brook<sup>22</sup> and, at the age of 54, accepted a position as the ship's doctor aboard the MV *Centaur*. He rarely

<sup>21</sup> The West Australian 18 Aug 1925

<sup>22</sup> The West Australian 29 Mar 1928

returned to Boyup Brook, spending the rest of his working life in the remote north and west of the state and on various merchant ships. His family stayed on at *Faraway*, Boyup Brook, with Tom (21) becoming the man of the property. According to the local press,<sup>23</sup> Tom was working on the family farm on the morning of 30 June 1929 when he observed a bright meteor which left a smoke trail and created three loud booms. Other people at Bunbury also observed and heard the meteor.

It must have been difficult for the Cotton family to survive on income from the farm alone during the Great Depression. May was breeding and milking a dairy herd, but the price of butter fat, which averaged about 1s 8d per lb for the period 1923-29, fell to 1s per lb by 1932-33. Tom Cotton (23) decided to leave home in 1930, and tried his luck first as a dairy farmer at Kalgup, just south of Busselton<sup>24</sup> - he was a registered voter there in 1931. It seems that this venture was not to his liking and Tom moved around a bit during the 1930's. He spent Christmas 1932 with his father in Roebourne<sup>25</sup> where Fred was the District Medical Officer and the Resident Magistrate. Fred was on various committees in Roebourne so he knew many of the local pastoralists and it appears that he assisted Thomas to get a job as a jackeroo. Fred, then 60 years old, resigned from the Public Health Department and left Roebourne on 6 January 1935.

May Cotton died in December 1936 at the Bridgetown Hospital, aged 68. She left her farm, *Faraway*, to her daughter Rosemary, who had married Staunton 'Bill' Monger in November 1935. May's death was quite sudden and, given Tom's location at the time, I doubt that he would have been able to attend her funeral at Boyup Brook, even if he had wanted to.

Thomas worked for a while for B.H. Sharpe & Co as a jackeroo-cum-clerk at *Mardie* Station. At that time, the properties in the Pilbara District ran sheep and lived mainly from sale of wool and wethers. The owners were continually trying to improve their flock by bringing in rams from stations down south, such as Wooleen in the Murchison District. In 1934, a very good year on *Mardie* Station, they sheared 52,000 sheep. The wool bales were put on lighters at the Fortescue River mouth and barged out to anchored ships. Occasionally, they would round up horses for sale to the Indian Army. When not working with gangs of shearers and musterers, Tom would have spent his time mending fences and windmills, which were often damaged by tropical cyclones. (In 1945, an extremely violent cyclone destroyed the *Mardie* woolshed, 300 miles of fencing, 64 windmills and most of the flock.) It is likely that this is where Tom developed his man-management, bushcraft and survival skills that would prepare him for leadership during WWII. He learned to be self-sufficient, independent and use ingenuity to solve problems. Stockmans' and shearers' camps may also have been where he received scars over both eyes and over his right ear!<sup>26</sup> Tom was tall and rangy, and if necessary, could probably handle himself well in a fight, although he was described later by his army friends as a "gentleman jackeroo"<sup>27</sup>. Tom was still in the Pilbara, at Roebourne in 1936 and 1937<sup>28</sup>, where he was "engaged as a costing clerk and Assistant to the Engineers [re]building the [Point] Samson jetty"<sup>29</sup> which had been badly damaged in a cyclone in January 1925.

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<sup>23</sup> The West Australian 11 Jul 1929

<sup>24</sup> Boyup Brook Bulletin 31 Oct 1930

<sup>25</sup> The West Australian 11 Jan 1933

<sup>26</sup> Military Service and Enlistment Records, National Archives of Australia Item 6461448

<sup>27</sup> Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45", Printcraft Press 1971 p.44

<sup>28</sup> Australian Electoral Rolls 1936 and 1937. Ancestry.com

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, Gordon op.cit.

The reconstructed jetty was opened in February 1938<sup>30</sup>, and Tom had to find other employment. It seems that Tom’s career was moving more towards office work. By the time war was declared, he was an insurance agent in Perth, living in a boarding house at 99 Outram Street, West Perth. The house is still there - it is now a periodontal surgery.

### **WAR SERVICE, MIDDLE EAST, 1939-1942**

Tom Cotton’s war service history has been well documented in “The Footsoldiers” by William Crooks, “Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War” by Garth Pratten and the Australian Dictionary of Biography. I have drawn heavily from these sources, and from his Military Service Records in the National Archives of Australia.

Tom enlisted on 7 November 1939, aged 31, at Subiaco Drill Hall, W.A. He was described as being six feet tall with hazel eyes, dark complexion, black hair and scars over both eyes and one over his right ear. His enlistment photo shows that he had a full moustache which (as far as I know) he maintained for the rest of his life. It became his trademark during the war, and his men wondered if Tom grew the moustache, or the other way around.



Tom Cotton, enlistment photos, 1939.<sup>31</sup>

Tom was posted to the 2/11<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion, initially in Perth, but in December, the battalion sailed from Fremantle for further training at Greta and Ingleburn, N.S.W. Tom showed early leadership potential and rose rapidly through the ranks to Lance Corporal (Dec 1939), Temporary Corporal (Jan 1940) and Temporary Sergeant (Feb 1940). No doubt his experience with the Officer Training Unit of the Dorset Regiment gave him a head start, but Tom was also ambitious.

<sup>30</sup> Northern Times Wed 9 Feb 1938 p.2

<sup>31</sup> Military Service and Enlistment Records, National Archives of Australia Item 6461448

The battalion returned to Guildford W.A. in April 1940 to complete its training and Tom was promoted to Lieutenant (on probation) in May, just before the battalion embarked on the “big ship” convoy for transport to the U.K. Before he left, his Aunt Cissie from Melbourne (Eliza Eleanor Cotton) gave Tom a pocket bible, which he carried throughout the war, along with a pewter and silver hip flask. The convoy designated X1, which included the *Queen Mary*, *Mauretania* and *Empress of Canada*, carried 8,000 men and left Fremantle on 12 May 1940. Due to Italy’s entry on the side of the Germans, the convoy had to sail via Capetown and Freetown to avoid Italian airbases in Somalia and Libya. The troops had 24 hours shore leave in Capetown.

After being escorted by a Royal Navy flotilla for the last few days to the U.K., they disembarked at Al Gourock, Clyde, Scotland on 17 June 1940, the same day that France surrendered to the German invaders. The troops were transferred by train to the 72<sup>nd</sup> Battalion based at Tidworth, south-west of London and not far from Stockbridge where Tom’s great-great-grandfather was born. The base was ill-prepared to receive the troops and conditions were poor for a while, but it was summer and the tent camp was made bearable. Equipment was scarce. Tom was promoted to Captain in July, and bought himself a swagger sword stick at Swaine & Adeley, Piccadilly. He and the men saw first-hand what Britain was up against - they were in the U.K. during the Battle of Britain and experienced air raids and occasional strafing of their camp, during which they fired rifles at enemy aircraft.

In October 1940, 72<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was renamed the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion, part of the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and was transferred initially to the (winter) Cherry Tree Barracks and three weeks later, to the Sobraon Barracks (now demolished) at Colchester, north-east of London in Essex. This was one of only three A.I.F. battalions drawn from all the Australian States<sup>32</sup>. The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> trained at Colchester for three months before heading to the Middle East. While based at Colchester, Tom met Pamela Levett-Scrivener.



Capt. Thomas Cotton,  
Dec 1940, Colchester

## **PAM COTTON’S BACKGROUND**

Pam was the youngest child of Commander Egerton Bagot Byrd Levett-Scrivener R.N., and Mary Millicent Mirehouse, his second wife. On her father’s side, (the Levett family) Pam was descended from landed gentry, clergy and aristocracy in Staffordshire and Wales. On her mother’s side, Pam was descended from Somerset landholders and Irish clergy (with some overlap - see Appendix). In 1889, her father

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<sup>32</sup> Pratten, Garth. ‘Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War.’ p 283 Cambridge University Press 2009

inherited the Scrivener family lands (more than 20,000 acres), which included the manor house and ruins of the Cistercian Sibton Abbey in Suffolk, from a great aunt, with a condition that he carried on the Scrivener name<sup>33</sup>. Pam was born in Chelsea, London on 26 August 1905 and was brought up at Sibton on the family estate.

Pam had a fairly typical upper class English upbringing. As bursar of Keble College, Oxford University, Pam’s father was away often and her mother managed the house and domestic staff. By the time Pamela was born, her half-brothers aged 19 and 20, had left home; there were three full sisters still at home ranging from 9 to 12 years, so Pam really was the baby of the household. All the girls were educated at home by governesses. In 1911, there were three family members and four domestic servants in the Abbey. According to Pam, she was trained to be seen and not heard. She was briefly presented to ‘Papa and Mama’ each morning and evening, and for the rest of the day Pam interacted with the domestic staff. Pam was exposed to farm life from an early age, and learned to care for, and to ride horses.



Pamela Levett-Scrivener, ca. 1911<sup>34</sup>

In this portrait, I think the artist has captured Pam’s assuredness and determination, even at six years old (or thereabouts).

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<sup>33</sup> Army and Navy Gazette 6 Apr 1889.

<sup>34</sup> E. Adolphus Tear, Ipswich.

According to an interview in 1929, as soon as she turned fifteen, Pam persuaded her parents to let her go to London as an apprentice to a big milliner. Those that know about these things assure me that Pam's sewing skills were very impressive, but she needed more than that to succeed. *"At 17, I became a mannequin; at 18 a commercial traveller, and at 20 opened my first business at Aldeburgh which is still going strong. Everybody in the country, rallied round amazingly. I thoroughly enjoyed myself chiefly because I was doing something I thoroughly understand."*<sup>35</sup> Pam didn't mention that in 1923, she travelled for two months in North Africa and France with her mother (1<sup>st</sup> class of course), possibly as an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday present. The photograph below was taken in 1927 when Pam was running her business in Aldeburgh, Suffolk.



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In early 1928, Pamela again travelled to France for a month, this time with her much older half-brother, retired Cmdr Evelyn Harry Byrd Levett-Scrivener R.N. Perhaps it was during this trip that Pam decided to expand her business to London haute couture. In late 1928, Pam moved to London and found a small flat (No. 11) at 5 Shepherd Street, Mayfair, which she shared with her brother Evelyn. The flat was within walking distance of her new shop Pamela Levett (Ltd.), Court Dressmakers in Berkeley Street, Mayfair. Pam worked very hard to establish her business and, at one time, ended up in a nursing home as a result of overwork.<sup>37</sup> There was strong competition among the many high-class dressmakers in London. It was considered vulgar to advertise in the press. To be successful, a dressmaker had to develop a reputation for quality, style and service, and trust in word-of-mouth

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<sup>35</sup> Belfast Telegraph 18 Jan 1929

<sup>36</sup> The Tatler 9 Feb 1927

<sup>37</sup> Sporting Times, 13 July 1929.

recommendations, as well as the hats and dresses, to grow client numbers. Pam’s background and connections no doubt helped to get her started, and she gathered some royalty among her early clients. Pam told a story about seeing Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret playing sleds on a slippery floor at one residence that she visited. Unfortunately, in July 1929, her shop in Berkeley Street was burgled and she lost her entire stock of dresses, value about £1,000, including two dresses that were being made for members of the Royal Family.<sup>38</sup>

Pam recovered from this setback. Her shop was still listed in Berkeley Street in 1930, but in 1931, her shop had moved a short distance to 41 New Bond Street, Mayfair. Pam told us stories about making dresses for women attending the 1934 Royal wedding (Prince George and Princess Marina), costumes for West End plays, frocks for the Ascot Races, and having to waltz down a staircase. When she found the time, Pam went back to Sibton and was involved with local organizations and charities, such as the Peasehall and Sibton Women’s Conservative Branch.

By the 1930s, Pam was a confident, self-assured, well-connected and successful businesswoman. She had a penetrating gaze, and was not afraid to say what she thought. In this respect, she may have been like her paternal grandmother, who was described as *“downright and straightforward to a remarkable degree, she was wont to express her views without any reservation, and was admired and respected accordingly.”*<sup>39</sup> Pam was fond of using aphorisms, such as *“It never occurs to the managing director that the office boy is perfectly certain he can run the business”*, and *“It’s great fun getting on in the world. And some girls find it quite a business getting off.”*<sup>40</sup>

At age 34, Pam volunteered for the war effort, joining the No. 5 London Motor Driver Company, Women’s Transport Service (W.T.S.), First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.) of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.) on 2 September 1939. War was declared the following day and, on 19 September, Pam was posted to the Gibraltar Barracks (out Risbygate), Bury St Edmonds, Suffolk, the home of the Suffolk Regiment.<sup>41</sup> Many women from F.A.N.Y. served with the Special Operations Executive and trained in espionage activities, but Pam was trained to be a driver and a mechanic, and spent many days driving ambulances and helping people after air raids during the Blitz. Pam found this work very exciting and fulfilling. Given her background and character, Pam probably showed early leadership potential, but Army life was a far cry from Sibton Abbey and London’s West End. One wag put the following advertisement in the local paper; *“Gibraltar Barracks. For disposal, a daily supply of swill. For particulars, apply to the Messing Officer, Gibraltar Barracks, Bury St Edmonds.”*<sup>42</sup>

I don’t know how Tom and Pam first met; possibly at a Services dance; or perhaps Pam was assigned to drive Tom somewhere in her role as a W.T.S. driver. They shared many traits – independence, outspoken directness, and intolerance for fools. It’s clear that they quickly developed a strong relationship, which they maintained by correspondence throughout the war. I don’t think that Pam’s family would have approved of Tom as a husband, but they probably knew also that Pam would be stubborn once her mind was made up.

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<sup>38</sup> Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer 10 July 1929

<sup>39</sup> Staffordshire Advertiser 31 July 1915

<sup>40</sup> The Sporting Times 9 Feb 1929

<sup>41</sup> England and Wales Register 1939. Ancestry.com

<sup>42</sup> Bury Free Press 14 Oct 1939

## **The Syrian Campaign.**

On 5 January 1941, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion with Tom mobilized to Glasgow by train, embarked the *Nea Hellas* and *Pennland* and sailed for the Middle East on the 10<sup>th</sup>. Sailing through the Mediterranean was not safe, so the convoy circumnavigated Africa, travelling via Freetown, Sierra Leone and the Cape of Good Hope. They managed to get five days of leave in Durban along the way and disembarked in the Middle East on 8 March 1941 – a long voyage for such a short distance. Upon arrival, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> moved to Kilo 89 near Gaza in Palestine for training, where it was joined by a fourth rifle (D) company. They also received reinforcements on 26 March, which included my father Lt George B. Connor – the first time my father and Tom had met. On 11 April, the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, now part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, began to move to Egypt to bolster the defenses along the Libyan frontier against an expected German attack, and the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> occupied defensive positions at Mersa Matruh<sup>43</sup>. Here, the troops experienced the real desert – dust storms, sand fleas, extremes of heat and cold. They trained hard, remained alert and prepared for battle. Their defensive positions were about 80 miles east from the front, they were raided by bombers on a daily/nightly basis – and they waited expectantly, almost impatiently, for the ground action to begin; but it wasn't to be at Mersa Matruh.



Captain Tom Cotton (centre), lunchtime, North Africa 1941

In late May 1941, the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade was relieved at Mersa Matruh and returned to Palestine to take part in the invasion of Syria and Lebanon against Vichy French forces. The Vichy French had been given until 7 June to come over to the Allies, who were building up their forces in northern Palestine. The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> arrived at Er Rama, about 40 miles south of the Syria–Lebanon frontier which was being defended by Vichy French forces, and prepared for their first battle, although they were told not to expect much opposition. Tom was O.C. A Company. The Battalion's objective was to capture frontier posts along the Hasbani River valley. Zero hour was 0200 hours on 8 June 1941. Tom Cotton's A Company had the objectives to cross the frontier, after

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<sup>43</sup> Australian War Memorial. Unit War Diary 2/33 Bn. [AWM52 8/3/33/2 - November 1940 - February 1941](#) | [Australian War Memorial](#)

some smaller patrols had captured enemy posts, and be prepared to secure the Fort and village of Khiam later.

The deadline passed and the attack began. Not all went according to plan. The company was strung out, at night, over several square miles making communication difficult, and one of A Company's platoons became lost for 48 hours. And the French opposition was stronger and better organised than expected. Nevertheless, A Company secured the villages of Arab el Loueize and Rhadjar, and the bridge over the Hasbani River at Jisr, where the seven dispersed elements of A Company (minus one lost platoon) eventually regrouped at 1100hrs.

The next day, 9 June at 1100 hours, A Company was given the order to attack and capture Fort Khiam, a French flat-topped fortress with thick stone and concrete walls, built on high ground just south of the village of Khiam and capable of housing about 200 troops. On approaching the fort, A Company met heavy resistance and was pinned down. A group of four men (led by my father) managed to climb into the fort, inflict some damage and then create an opening in the wall, through which they escaped and rejoined the company at about 1700 hours. The following morning at 0900 hours, after giving the soldiers in the Fort an opportunity to surrender, Fort Khiam was heavily bombarded with artillery and mortar fire. When A Company entered the Fort at 1030 hours, it had been deserted. (In 1944, George Connor received a Russian decoration for his role in the capture of Fort Khiam).



“Entrance to Fort Khiam” by Harold Herbert, 1941.

This watercolour depicts the entrance to Fort Khiam (or Al Khiam), previously part of Syria, is now within the borders of Lebanon. It has been the site of so many occupying armies from different nations that its name means tents in Arabic. Before the allies took it, the fort was occupied by the Vichy French, and written on the gate is 'Khiam / 3<sup>EME</sup> Compagnie'.



Men of 9 Platoon, 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn with captured French machine gun, Fort Khiam, 9 Jun 1941. L to R: Cpl Ross Campbell, Sgt Murray Sweetapple, Lt George Connor, Pte Jack Wayte

On the afternoon of the 9 June, A Company advanced from the Fort into Khiam village, where they again met heavy resistance. They withdrew back to the Fort that night and then re-entered the village at 1000 hours on the 10 June. The French had set up a strong defensive position on the “Pimple”, just to the north of Khiam with views to the west towards Merdjayoun (Marjaayoun), east towards Ibeles Saki and south over Khiam. Capturing this hill became the battalion’s next objective, but they had to completely clear Khiam village first. A Company did this methodically on the morning of the 11 June, and then dug in at the northern end of the village, facing the “Pimple”. D Company attacked the “Pimple” from the east on 12 June and found it abandoned, as the French had assessed their position as precarious.

Captain Tom Cotton was later awarded the Military Cross for the Khiam action. The citation reads *“On 9, 10 and 11 June 1941, he led his Coy in the attack on Fort Khiam, and by his personal example, physical endurance and courage combined with sound tactics, succeeded in capturing the Fort. He inspired his Coy in their first experience of severe shell and mortar bombardment, as well as intense M.G. fire on several occasions. After the capture of Fort Khiam, his subsequent action with regard to Khiam village, which was occupied by M.G.s., particularly sited, was at all times forceful, aggressive, sound and also resulted successfully.”*

After Khiam, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn was assigned the task to hold the Khiam – Merdjayoun area while other battalions advanced northwards. However, on 15 June, they were also ordered to move northwards. A Company’s task was to form a firm base at Ferdisse, which they established by 1500 hours that day. At 1800 hours, A Company came under heavy fire from the French forces, which had launched a major, armour-supported counter attack along a broad front. The battalion was pushed back to Khiam and beyond. In the confusion of the withdrawal, my father, George Connor, was captured near Merdjayoun on 16 June while trying to rejoin the rest of A Company.

The French recaptured Fort Khiam and, by 18 June, the position was the same as it had been on the 8 June. The Battalion took up defensive positions until 22 June and A Company had no enemy contact for a few days. With British reinforcements, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> again attacked and by nightfall on the 24 June, they had regained control of Khiam - Merdjayoun and surrounds, but the French were still strong and well dug in to their north and they remained in contact until the 29 June, when the battalion was relieved by British forces. It was the first time the battalion had regrouped since 6 June.

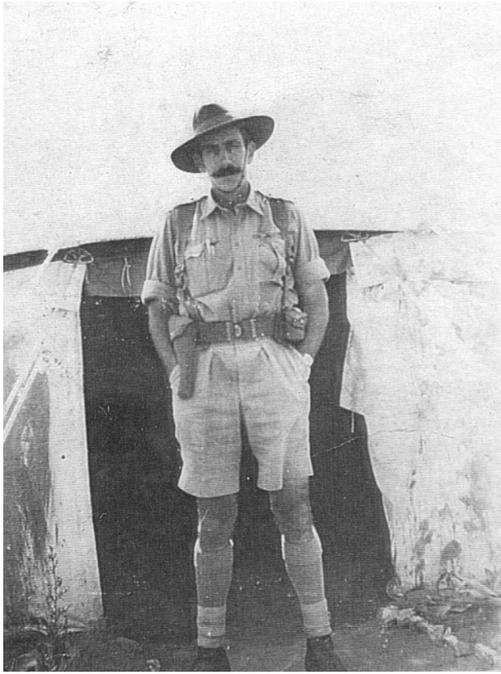
The battalion, now much depleted in strength, was transported north to the mountainous country around Jezzine to relieve the 2/14<sup>th</sup> Bn on 2 July. It was still holding defensive positions, being bombarded regularly by French artillery, in the rugged hills to the north and east of the town when the armistice in the Middle East with the Vichy French was declared on 12 July, much to the relief of the troops.

The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> remained in Lebanon as part of the Allied garrison, occupying Fidar on the Mediterranean coast 36 km north of Beirut, near Byblos. The battalion used their many opportunities for leave, some returning to the battlegrounds around Khiam on three-day passes. P.O.W.'s were returned as a condition of the armistice and Lt George Connor rejoined the battalion at Fidar on 17 August 1941.

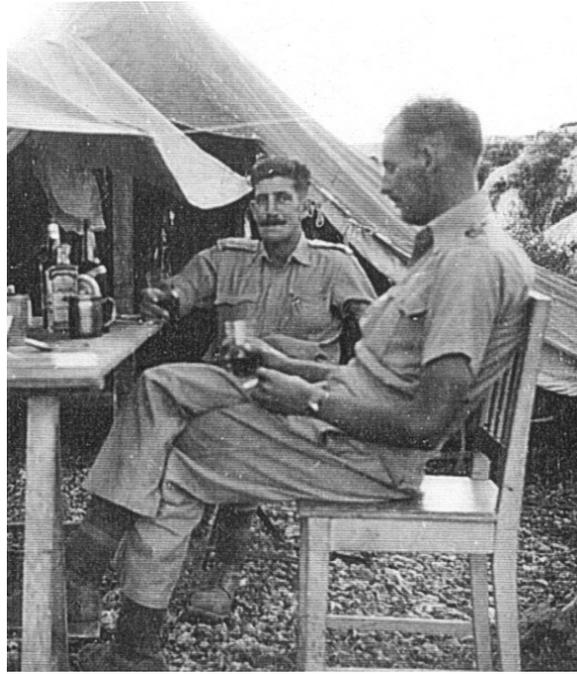
On 13 September, the battalion was moved north to the seaport of Tripoli, where they occupied the French Legault Barracks. It was back to “spit-and-polish” uniforms and “square-bashing” for a while. Tom Cotton contracted sandfly fever and was hospitalized for nine days in September 1941. When not training, taking leave to visit the many attractions of the Middle East or writing home, the battalion was employed in digging defenses on various features close to Tripoli in the Jabal Tourbal (Terbal) Mountains. It was a pleasant existence. Tom bought a locally made pocket knife with a goat's foot handle at a market in Tripoli, which I now have. While in Syria, Tom did manage to catch up with his elder brother Private Robert Cotton. The story goes that Robert walked up to Tom, clapped him on the shoulder and said ‘gooday’, to which Tom replied ‘if you do that again I’ll have you court-martialled!’ It’s hard to imagine that Tom was serious, but it obviously stuck in Robert’s mind so firmly and coloured his opinion of Tom so much that he told his children the story, and this is all they really know about their uncle Thomas. Irene Cotton observed that all the Cotton men could be pig-headed and stubborn.

Back in England, Pam was appointed Second Subaltern on 18 December 1941. Her leadership and organizational skills had been recognized. On 27 December, Pam was posted to the Auxiliary Army Motor Transport (A.A.M.T.) Corps Group, Glenthorn, Stanmore, Middlesex which was HQ Anti-Aircraft Command and next door to R.A.F. Fighter Command at Bentley Priory, so Pam became a driver for the ‘top brass’.

Meanwhile, in Tripoli, the troops had a white Christmas. For the first half of December, Tom was sent to the 18 HQ Australian Infantry Brigade and then to the 1 Corps Ski School above Becharre in the Lebanon Ranges for a month from 15 December 1941, where he was to learn about using skis, fighting and surviving above the snow line. Why the A.I.F. did this is a mystery, considering that on 14 January 1942, the unit (with Tom) commenced the first stage of its journey back to Australia and the war in the jungles of New Guinea. The battalion moved south to Khassa, near El Majdal, Palestine and began intensive training for desert warfare, expecting to go to the Western Desert front. They did not guess until 26 January that they would be returning to Australia.



Capt. Thomas Cotton, Syria, 1941



Capt. Cotton and Ferguson, Tourbal, Oct 1941

## **WAR SERVICE 1942-1946 THE PACIFIC**

### **The Owen Stanley Campaign**

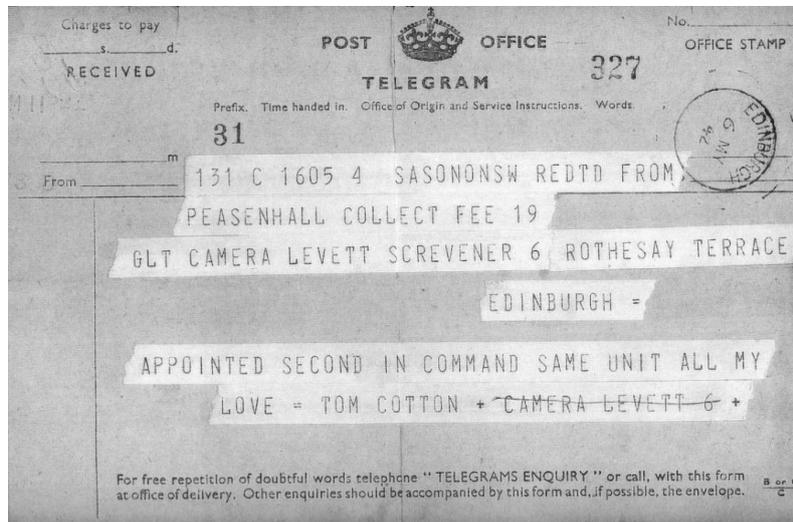
The battalion sailed from Port Tewfik (Taufiq, Suez) in Egypt on 9 February 1942 aboard the U.S.S. *Mt Vernon*, and berthed in Colombo on 18 February. They remained there while the Australian and British Prime Ministers and Chiefs of Staff discussed where the troops should be sent. Finally, they departed Colombo on 24 February and headed for Australia, arriving at Fremantle on 4 March for one day's shore leave. Tom Cotton no doubt caught up with friends – no-one was pre-warned of their arrival (even though it was the first A.I.F. troopship home) and his family was not in Perth at that time.

From Fremantle, the unit sailed to Adelaide, disembarked on 10 March and settled in to the Woodside Barracks in the Adelaide Hills. All the officers and some N.C.O.s were initially billeted out in Onkaparinga and Oakbank. After some local leave, they began training again.



Tom Cotton (left). Adelaide Hills, March 1942. Dogs were always part of his life.

On 25 April, the battalion was transferred by a long and uncomfortable train journey to Casino in northern N.S.W., to continue training; however the unit was depleted by the many men going on disembarkation leave back to their home States and some going A.W.L., so not much was achieved. Tom Cotton was promoted to Temporary Major and battalion 2 i/c in May and sent a telegram to Pam, who was in Edinburgh.



Towards the end of May the unit moved again, this time to another thickly-timbered bush camp four miles north of Caboolture in Queensland. Their objective was defense of Brisbane against any Japanese landing in the area. For three months, they received training in jungle warfare, river crossings and amphibious landings; spent time digging trenches along the seafront at Scarborough, Redcliffe and Margate; conducted battalion exercises; getting fit and in between times, generally enjoying the seaside atmosphere.

The battalion embarked M.V. *Katoomba* at New Farm, Brisbane on 1 September and, after an uneventful trip, disembarked at Port Moresby, New Guinea on 9 September 1942. The troops were immediately trucked up to Sogeri Plateau above Port Moresby where the roads stop and the walking track across the Owen Stanley Range, the Kokoda Trail, begins. They swapped their khaki uniforms for jungle greens and stripped down to battle order, all with urgency. As 2i/c, Tom Cotton was in charge of unloading stores and organizing ammunition and supplies, including finding native bearers for transport of heavy stores.

The A.I.F. situation in New Guinea was desperate, with Brigades withdrawing along the Kokoda Trail in the face of very determined Japanese attacks. With D Company leading and great trepidation, the battalion left McDonald's Corner at 0400 hours on 10 September 1942 and walked along the muddy vehicle track to Ower's Corner, passing wounded and exhausted troops coming in the other direction. They turned on to the Kokoda Trail and reached Uberi village that afternoon. At Uberi, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn was given orders to advance along the trail to Imita Ridge by 12 September, commence a right flanking march to Nauro village to the rear of the enemy, and to attack them there. This proved impossible due to the terrain so orders were changed to move to Ioribaiwa, further along the trail and defend this position, reinforcing 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 3 Bn and 2/25<sup>th</sup> Bn. From the 14-16 September, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> and three other battalions fought the Japanese advance at Ioribaiwa. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, they were ordered to withdraw back to Imita Ridge with 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn covering the withdrawal, laying ambushes for the following Japanese troops, and delaying them for four days. Tom Cotton was sent back to Imita to prepare positions for the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> arrival there. The

withdrawal was completed successfully and from 20-25 September, the battalion was able to rest at their Imita Ridge position. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the battalion again advanced towards Ioribaiwa Ridge, and attacked it on the 28<sup>th</sup>, with newly arrived artillery support. They arrived to find it deserted. The Japanese had withdrawn.

The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn advanced again on 3 October behind the 2/25<sup>th</sup> and 2/31<sup>st</sup> Bn. Tom Cotton had arranged resupply airdrops and had a system in place to keep the troops supplied with rations and ammunition, and evacuate the wounded – not an easy task in the mountainous country, using native bearers and with the troops strung out along a narrow track. They passed Nauro, crossed the Brown River, passed Menari and reached what is now known as Brigade Hill on the 7 October, where they found the gruesome evidence of a major battle between 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade and the Japanese one month earlier. By last light on the 8 October, they had found and buried 99 bodies. The experience would have given them a better appreciation of their enemy.

The Brigade regrouped at Myola and was resupplied before tackling their next objective – to clear the crest of the mountains, allowing advance to Kokoda. The leading patrols ran into enemy resistance while descending from Myola towards Templeton’s Crossing on Eora Creek. 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn was ordered to clear Templeton’s Crossing. From 12-14 October, 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn attacked a Japanese force that was well dug in along the Kokoda Trail south of Templeton’s Crossing. In the dense jungle, fighting was often at close quarters. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the Japanese positions had been deserted and the battalion followed their withdrawal, chasing the few remaining enemy groups beyond Templeton Crossing, and then securing the crossing at nightfall on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Other units then took over the fighting, advancing as far as Eora Creek. On 24<sup>th</sup> October, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn battalion, which had moved back to Myola, was ordered to advance once again, bypass Eora Creek and clear Alola, but by the time they got there on 1 November after traversing steep jungle slopes, Alola had been cleared by others and the 2/31<sup>st</sup> Bn was in Kokoda (with its airstrip), having found no Japanese resistance. The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> arrived at Kokoda two days later and had their first fresh food in almost two months, plus new clothes.

On 7<sup>th</sup> November after four days’ rest, the brigade turned eastwards with the objective of taking known Japanese positions at Gorari, on the road to the coast. The battlefield had changed dramatically with kunai-grass plains, use of mortars and artillery, air support and good maps, aerial photos and radio communications. On 9 November, the battalion found strong resistance at Gorari and during the first battle, my father Lt George Connor, then 2i/c of D Company, was wounded by tree burst shrapnel. The Japanese were becoming desperate as their lines of withdrawal and of supply were cut, and they threw everything at the Australians, including 3-inch artillery at point blank range. For three days there was fierce fighting, with heavy losses on both sides. On the 11 November, the remaining Japanese withdrew east towards the coast at Gona and Buna, and were pursued by the 2/25<sup>th</sup> and 2/31<sup>st</sup> battalions, while the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> cleaned up around Gorari.

The battalion moved out again towards Gona on the 13<sup>th</sup> and was held up crossing the Kumusi River. They got within striking distance of Gona, a small coastal village and mission, by nightfall on 18 November without any significant enemy contact. First contact was made the following day just short of Gona, where the Japanese had dug in well and had nowhere else to go. Over the next 16 days until 4 December, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> and 2/31<sup>st</sup> battalions attacked the enemy positions, on foot, with mortars, artillery and on 24 November, with air strike support, but the Japanese were defiant. During this battle, Major Tom Cotton continued to take supplies to forward troops and to evacuate the wounded. He was described as “indefatigable” and “unflagging”. On 4 December, they were relieved by the 39<sup>th</sup> Bn, but Gona did not fall until 9

December. In the end, the Australians were victorious by a process of attrition, but at a high cost also. In this first campaign, 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn had 47 dead and 122 wounded with 267 evacuated for medical help.



The track to Gona under air attack, 24 November 1942. Tom Cotton (centre) looking back.

On 10 December, the remains of the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade at Gona, about 400 men, were flown back to Port Moresby from Popondetta and then trucked to a tent camp above Port Moresby on the Sogeri Plateau, where they were joined by reinforcements and some of their wounded from convalescent camps. Tom was very unhappy to find that a cache of whiskey he had stored there in September under lock and key had been “ratted”. On 30 December 1942, those who had been in battle (including Tom Cotton) were trucked back to Port Moresby and on 31<sup>st</sup> embarked the S.S. *Cremer* for the voyage to Brisbane, arriving on the 8 January to a very warm welcome home, and 14 days leave. According to Crooks<sup>44</sup>, Tom Cotton was Mentioned in Dispatches for his role in the Owen Stanley campaign, but there is no record of it in his Officer’s Record of Service<sup>45</sup>. Tom hated the role of 2i/c, describing it as “*a most unsatisfactory and invidious position to occupy when in action. You are neither flesh nor fowl and collect most of the unpleasantness*”.<sup>46</sup>

It took four months to get all the battalion back together, this time in a training camp near Ravenshoe in north Queensland, which has terrain and vegetation similar to Papua New Guinea. Tom was promoted to Temporary Lieutenant Colonel because the serving C.O. was ill. Tom attended a six-week L.H.Q. Tactical School in Feb-March. The course assessor commented that Tom “*is very determined and sound and works VERY HARD.*” Not long after returning to the unit, he was hospitalized with trauma, fibrositis and malaria until the end of April. In June 1943, Tom’s promotion was confirmed and he was appointed C.O. of the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn. He sent a telegram from Ravenshoe post office to Pam in Suffolk to let her know. They seemed to be carrying on a solid, long distance relationship, having not seen each other for 2½ years.

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<sup>44</sup> Crooks, William. “The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45”, Printcraft Press 1971 pp 252

<sup>45</sup> National Archives of Australia, Military Records. Cotton, Thomas Richard Worgan

<sup>46</sup> Letter to W Crooks 13 Feb 1967

Printed in England.  
Sept. 1942 (2,000,000)

**CABLE AND WIRELESS**  
LIMITED

2234 "Via Imperial"

The first line of this telegram shows:—Number, office of origin, date.  
(NOTE: "Oversea" is used to denote that the office of origin has been suppressed.)

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HAVE BEEN PROMOTED  
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L & P (R) ANY ENQUIRY RESPECTING THIS TELEGRAM SHOULD BE ACCOMPANIED BY THIS FORM AND MAY BE MADE AT ANY OF THE COMPANY'S OFFICES

The army learnt a lot from the first Owen Stanley campaign and set about implementing those lessons at Ravenshoe. The training regime increased, new and better equipment was issued and the battalion was reorganized. Morale reached a peak when 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn won the Divisional rugby league competition in July. Tom gave a congratulatory speech at the dinner afterwards, and was obviously very pleased with the win, and the battalion's progress.



General Blamey inspecting D Coy 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn with Lt Col Cotton, Port Moresby, 4 Sep 1943.

### **The Lae Offensive**

In July, the battalion took the train to Townsville and on 22 - 23 July embarked the M.V. *Canberra*, M.V. *Duntroon* and M.V. *Katoomba* for Port Moresby, arriving 26 July

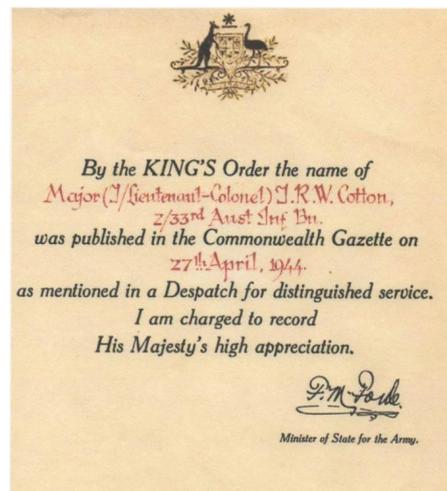
and setting up camp southeast of the town, near Bootless Inlet. They stayed there, training under local conditions and in transport aircraft operations for the next month. Lt Col Tom Cotton had 31 officers and 779 other ranks under his command.

The battalion was to be part of the great Lae offensive. By this time, the Allies had air and sea superiority in the region. They were to be airlifted into the area and, after one delay due to bad weather, were ready to emplane at Jackson Field, Port Moresby on 7 September. While waiting in their trucks at the end of the airfield, a fully armed and laden Liberator bomber crashed on take-off, hitting the convoy and decimating D Company. The rest of the battalion emplaned for the offensive and left six officers and 140 other ranks, almost 20% of the unit, at the crash site. Sixty men died in this incident, which forever remained one of Tom’s nightmares.<sup>47</sup>

The battalion landed at Tsili Tsili, on the Watut River, about 80km inland from Lae and waited there for two days before emplaning again and flying to Nadzab on the Markham River, 20km inland from Lae. The task was to clear the Nadzab-Lae road, from the north bank of the Markham River to the Atzera range, a front of up to 5km wide. With the rest of the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, the battalion advanced along the road leading to Lae and contacted Japanese resistance on 10 September at Jensen’s and Jenyn’s plantations. Other defensive positions along the road were known at Heath’s, Lane’s and Edward’s plantations closer to Lae. On 14 September, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn relieved the 2/25<sup>th</sup> Bn at the point.

Until the 15 September, the battalion fought small, well defended pockets of Japanese around Lane’s and Edward’s plantation and slowly pushed them back towards Lae. Tom Cotton was *“constantly striding around the battle areas, apparently oblivious of fire. It was during these two days – 14/15<sup>th</sup> September 1943 – that Lt-Col Cotton earned the undying respect of his men.”*<sup>48</sup> He was under orders to “bash on” to Lae as quickly as possible. They arrived there by mid-afternoon on the 16 September to find Lae almost deserted.

Tom Cotton was Mentioned In Despatches for the Lae campaign, according to his Officers Record of Service *“for gallant and distinguished service”* in the South West Pacific Area 1/4/43 to 30/9/43, but the formal letter accompanying the certificate (right) used the words *“for bravery in the field”*.



## **The Ramu Valley Offensive**

After two days’ rest, the battalion moved back to Nadzab in preparation for the offensive north-westward along the Ramu River valley. On the 28 September, the

<sup>47</sup> Letter to W. Crooks 7 July 1969

<sup>48</sup> Crooks, William. “The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45”, Printcraft Press 1971 pp 298

battalion emplaned for the short flight to Kaiapit, near the watershed between the Ramu and Markham River valleys. They immediately began walking north-west to the head of the Ramu Valley and then down the river, clearing villages along the way. My father, Capt. George Connor rejoined the battalion on 8 October and became O.C. D Company.

The battalion's patrols found several strong Japanese defensive positions high in the hills above the Surinam River (a tributary of the Ramu) and on the 10 September, began their attack. The first feature was captured after a rare night attack, but the other Japanese positions at the "Knoll" held out against attacks until the 14 September, when the Japanese withdrew. The battalion, particularly D Company, suffered many dead and wounded. Tom described it as coming very close to being a shemozzle.

The battalion set up base at the Mene River near its junction with the Ramu and from then until they were relieved on 1 January 1944, used this as a secure and relatively comfortable base for long patrols into the mountains to the north-east and down the Ramu River, and for continued training. The Japanese had established strong defensive positions at Shaggy Ridge and Mt Prothero in the mountainous country to the northeast, and the battalion reconnoitered these but they did not receive orders to attack. For most of November, the battalion occupied defensive positions on Shaggy Ridge where, from the highest point, they could see Madang harbour. From 9-17 December, the Japanese reinforced their positions along the range and began a series of attacks along the Ramu valley. The battalion established a new brigade defensive position astride the Mene River in the hills overlooking the Ramu valley. On 17 December, the battalion was ordered to capture a defensive Japanese position (5800' feature) above Kesawai. After a long night march, the battalion encountered some minor Japanese resistance which, after artillery bombardment, withdrew and the feature was secured. This was the unit's last action in New Guinea. They were flown back to Port Moresby on the 1 January and boarded the *Kanimbla* on the 8 February, disembarking in Townsville on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

### **Training in Australia**

On return to Australia, most of the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn went on 24 days leave to their home States where they participated in 'welcome home' marches. Tom Cotton was not present at the march in Perth on 31 March but joined the 220 men of the battalion who marched in Sydney on 14 April, so it is unlikely that he returned to Western Australia for leave. Most of his family were still away; Frederick and Philip at sea and Robert in North Queensland.

The unit began to reform at Strathpine and Petrie, just north of Brisbane, but did not reach the minimum complement until April 1944, when training resumed. This included ten-day health and body building programmes at Redcliffe and Burleigh Heads. The photo at right was taken at Petrie on 11 April 1944. Tom is holding the Swaine & Adeney swagger stick which I now have. Tom looks as if he is sick of posing and if the photographer doesn't get on with it, he might wear the stick!



Tom had some two weeks in hospital during May with malarial fever and then in June with bleeding haemorrhoids. In July, he went to Cairns for two weeks to an Amphibious Training and Command Course, returning on 1 August, just in time to prepare for a 7<sup>th</sup> Divisional parade through Brisbane on the 8 August. The parade was a great success, although Tom was disappointed that his pride and joy, the Battalion Band, did not lead them in the parade despite his strenuous protests.<sup>49</sup> On the 11 August, Tom was interviewed by Gavin Long, the official WWII historian.



Lt Col Tom Cotton leading 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion, Brisbane, 8 August 1944

By 29 August, the unit had moved to its camp at Kairi on the Atherton Tableland for platoon, company, battalion and brigade exercises in preparation for their next mobilization into battle. These exercises continued for months and included working with tanks, amphibious landing craft (at Trinity Beach and Mossman) and all in very realistic conditions. They also had time for football, and there were numerous parades for various occasions, including the award of a Russian decoration to George Connor.

The troops guessed that they were training for the assault on the Philippines but on 20 December, the men were told that the operation they were training for had been cancelled, and everyone could take leave after Christmas. The delays were a result of international jostling about which Allied forces should occupy which parts of south-east Asia post-war. The 7<sup>th</sup> Division sports day was held at Kairi on 1 January 1945 – a great event. On 28 January 1945, Tom (then aged 37) advised the Army that he was engaged to Pamela Levett-Scrivener and he named Pam his next of kin. All this must have been arranged by correspondence as neither Pam nor Tom had an opportunity to meet since December 1940. Perhaps, with the war almost at an end in Europe and the Japanese retreating in the Pacific, they felt their chances of a future together were more secure, and they weren't getting any younger!

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<sup>49</sup> Letter to W Crooks, 10 May 1970



Officers, 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn, late 1944. (Tom Cotton seated 4<sup>th</sup> from left, George Connor 7<sup>th</sup> from left). Many of these officers were released from the army shortly after this photograph was taken.

On 9 March 1945, His Majesty the King approved “of the Award of the Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) for gallant and distinguished services in the Southwest Pacific Area” to WX299 Lt-Col Cotton T.R.W. (MC) 2/33 Aust. Inf Bn.<sup>50</sup> The citation reads, “Lt/Col. COTTON commanded the 2/33 Aust Inf Bn during operations against the Japanese forces in the Ramu Valley between Sept and Dec 1943. The energy and judgment which this officer displayed in the employment of his battalion was largely responsible for the successful part played by the unit throughout the campaign. His solid leadership, his coolness under fire, and the constant personal reconnaissance he made, served as an inspiration to his men, operating as they did, under adverse weather conditions and over extremely difficult country.

*The splendid example he set, and the vigour and ability which he applied to the tasks allotted to him, contributed greatly to the success of the operations in the Ramu Valley.”* General Blamey also wrote to congratulate him on the award.<sup>51</sup> This must have been a proud moment for Tom and for the Battalion as a whole. Tom sometimes complained that the officers of the 2/33 Battalion were rather lazy in making recommendations and representations for awards.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Borneo campaign**

Training continued from January to the end of May 1945. The troops were introduced to flame throwers and white phosphorus grenades, and took part in live firing exercises using air support and artillery cover. It must have been difficult keeping everyone motivated for so long with just training exercises, but on 29 May the word came that the Division was mobilizing. On 9 June, the battalion boarded the U.S. troopship *Howell-Lykes* and knew that they were heading for Borneo.

The troopship anchored off Morotai Island, in the midst of a huge fleet of assault craft. For the next week, everyone in the battalion was briefed, in detail, about the

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<sup>50</sup> Extract from the Military Secretary Memorandum No. 33243 dated 9 March 1945

<sup>51</sup> Letter from General TA Blamey, Commander-in-Chief Australian Military Forces, to Lieut-Colonel TRW Cotton DSO MC, 31 March 1945.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to W Crooks 1 June 1969

coming operation *Oboe II* at Balikpapan, a major oil refining port on the east coast of Borneo. The troops were issued with the most modern equipment available, they felt very well prepared and morale was high. On 25 June, the battalion boarded their landing craft and made headway towards Borneo. After a rough crossing, escorted by a naval task force, they arrived off Balikpapan on 1 July and watched the awe-inspiring air and naval bombardment of enemy positions. One of the ships participating in the bombardment was H.M.A.S. *Shropshire*, with Tom’s brother Philip Cotton aboard.

The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn landed at ‘Green’ Beach on the morning of 2 July 1945, and then marched north to establish a base on high ground 1.6km inland. They suffered casualties from sniper and artillery flak attacks almost immediately. The next day the battalion advanced north, with mortar and artillery fire support, to clear out an enemy defensive complex. The attack was successful, not without casualties, but the enemy fared worse. The Battalion continued to advance north along the ‘Milford’ Highway the main road to Samarinda, clearing high features and enemy defensive positions along the east side of the highway as they went, and always using artillery, mortar and sometimes air bombardment before the final assault. This meant that many of the features were easily overrun, but there were others where the enemy defenses were deep and strong, requiring close quarter fighting to clear them.

The battalion approached what they believed to be the main enemy defensive line (features ‘Joint’, ‘Judge’ and ‘Muffle’) on the 6 July. They bombarded these enemy positions with naval fire from H.M.A.S. *Hobart* and H.M.A.S. *Shropshire*, and then with bombs and strafing, but the positions withstood this attack and continued retaliating with artillery and heavy machine-gun fire. Tom Cotton was on a hill (‘Metal’) about 1000 yards from this line, trying to direct twenty Mitchell bombers to attack the enemy defenses, when an artillery shell exploded in his slit trench, killing four, wounding Tom Cotton in the head and wounding three others. Tom’s head was quickly bandaged and he recovered consciousness soon afterwards, “quickly pulled himself together and ordered everybody back down the hill, whilst in his usual brusque way – a manner he adopted to avoid anyone fussing, and to cover his natural shyness – was refusing attention for his head wound saying to Dinny O’Sullivan: “Christ man, can’t you see I’m trying to light a cigarette.””<sup>53</sup>

With communications cut, the advance stopped and for the next two days, the enemy positions were the target of massive naval and air bombardment. Tom Cotton was evacuated to the 2/2 Australian Casualty Clearing Station (in Balikpapan’s Government House) and treated for a shrapnel wound above his right eye and shock. Apparently, a metal plate was inserted into Tom’s head, which occasionally caused him pain throughout the rest of his life. Major Bennett, the battalion 2i/c who had been held in reserve, then took over the battalion. On the night of the 8 July, the Japanese launched suicide raids against the battalion HQ positions, strapping explosives to their bodies. On the 9 July, after another heavy air, naval, artillery and mortar bombardment of the enemy positions, the Japanese withdrew and the positions were occupied by the 2/33<sup>rd</sup>. Here they stayed while other battalions took up the chase.

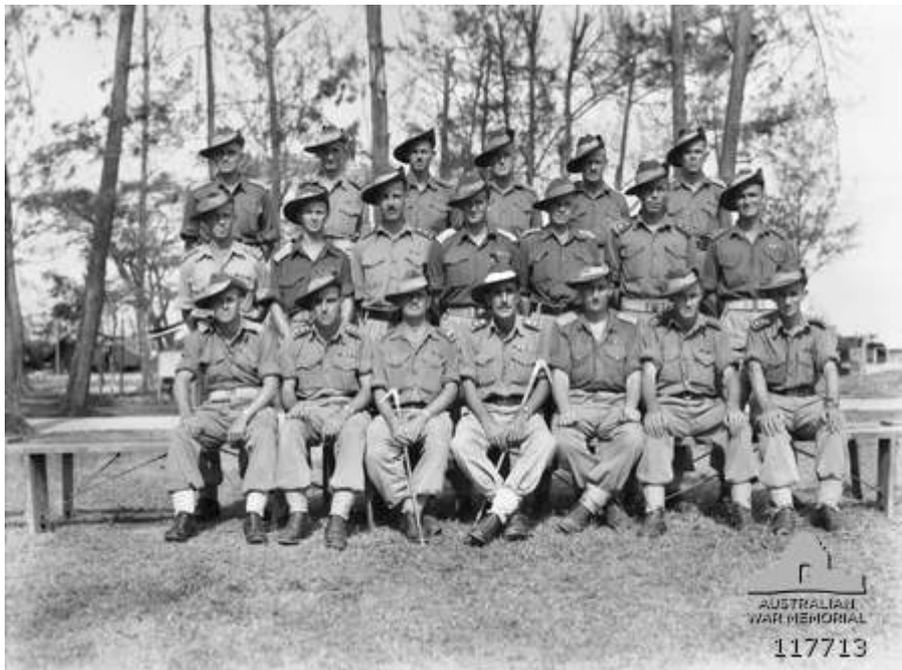
Tom Cotton returned to the battalion on the 15 July. By that time, the battalion had been ordered forward again along the Samarinda road, relieving the 2/25<sup>th</sup> Bn. They found many enemy positions and, using the same tactics, steadily made progress northwards, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, but also subject to nighttime

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<sup>53</sup> Crooks, William. “The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45”, Printcraft Press 1971 pp 406

raids by small Japanese patrols. By the 24 July, they had reached Pope’s Track (features ‘Abode, ‘Along’ and ‘Acid’) and the enemy had withdrawn, leaving the mutilated bodies of murdered Indonesians behind. The 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn was relieved and retreated back down the Samarinda road to establish a permanent defensive base. From the 26 July, long-servers with five years in the army and two overseas began going home. On 10 August, news of the atomic bombing of Japan spread and there was much celebration. Tom Cotton formally announced the Japanese surrender to the troops on 16 August and, aboard H.M.A.S. *Burdekin* in Balikpapan Bay on 8 September, the senior Japanese officer in Dutch Borneo, Vice Admiral Kamada, formally surrendered to Major General Milford, G.O.C. 7<sup>th</sup> Division. Tom’s memento of the occasion was a set of cut-glass wine goblets (which I inherited) etched with the anchor and cherry blossom symbol of the Japanese Navy.

In the 22 days of fighting at Balikpapan, the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn had 25 men killed and 57 wounded. The battalion stayed on in Borneo, building a compound to hold and guard +6000 Japanese P.O.W.s and helping to reinstate civilian rule. The latter was not an easy task, as the Australians were caught between the Dutch desire to continue colonial rule through Netherlands Indies Civil Affairs (N.I.C.A.), and the local desire for independence from Dutch rule. On the 15 September, Tom flew south to Bandjermasin to accept the Japanese surrender there. He probably met Major Terence Whiting (a doctor and also my uncle) who was the first allied officer into Bandjermasin after the surrender, having gone there to tend to some Dutch and British civilians. On 12 October, Tom flew by Catalina to Pontianak (via Kuching) on the west coast of Borneo to reconnoiter the situation, closely followed by C Company in H.M.A.S. *Barcoo*. The Japanese commander who surrendered in Balikpapan was fearful that the local and Chinese people there would take reprisals against the Japanese. There were days of tense negotiations and, eventually, a ceremonial handover to the N.I.C.A. officials after dealing firmly with the spokesman for Indonesian independence. Tom was recommended for a Dutch award for “his tolerance and fair and firm handling in the handover at Pontianak.”<sup>54</sup>



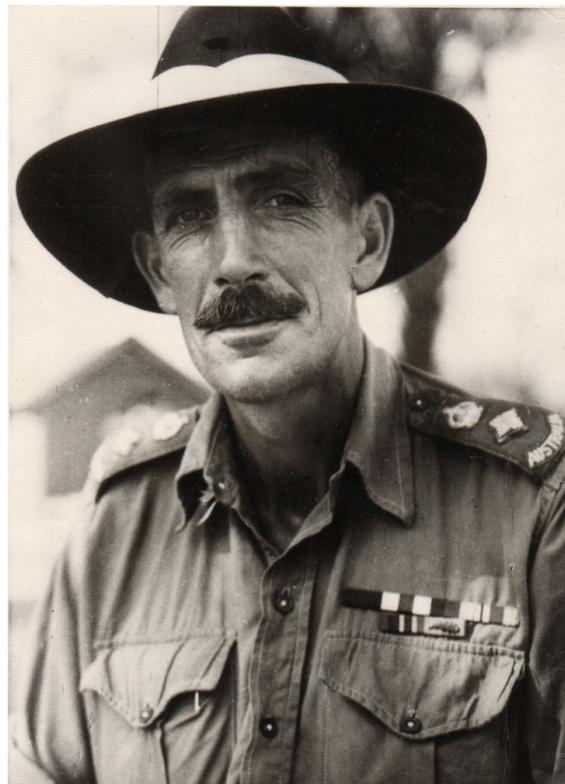
Officers of 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn, Balikpapan 4 October 1945

<sup>54</sup> Crooks, William. “The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45”, Printcraft Press 1971 pp 423



Marching in to Pontianak, Borneo, 16 October 1945

On 3 December, Tom Cotton took administrative command of the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The last remaining 102 members of 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Bn left Balikpapan by ship on 10 February and Tom Cotton watched them leave. He said later: *“After the ship had gone I felt like a lost dog”*. Tom stayed on in Balikpapan as part of HQ 7<sup>th</sup> Division until 9 May 1946 when he was moved out to HQ Southern Command for re-posting. He left Morotai on 10 May and arrived in Brisbane on the 12<sup>th</sup>, where he ceased command and was put on the Regimental Supernumerary List.



Lt Col Tom Cotton, Balikpapan, 4 October 1945

Tom earned a reputation as a great Australian wartime leader. In the words of W. Crooks, *“Tom Cotton was to become the battalion’s most outstanding leader.” “This pre-war gentleman jackeroo was a tough, dour, decisive and inspiring leader, given to the quick riposte, and able to recite the apt classic when wanted. Tom Cotton gained the admiration and respect of all who ever served in the battalion.” “Tom Cotton was one of the five officers of 1939-45 who, enlisting as a private, rose to the rank of Lt-Col commanding. There was no doubt that the battalion was at its best when Col Cotton commanded it. Ruthless in dealing with inefficiency, inspiring in action he was meticulous in planning and kept all informed. All who served with him knew that they ‘must be worth the price of their tucker’.”*<sup>55</sup> He was also described as being firm and fair, straight talking and forceful, and capable of giving wise guidance, counsel and encouragement. In his own words, Tom *“enjoyed a good argument”,* and was *“an intolerant sort of a B\_\_\_\_\_”*. He had no hesitation in removing from the Unit any men who lost his trust, and he struggled to assimilate and accommodate reinforcements whom he did not know, preferring to promote from the Unit’s ranks.<sup>56</sup>

In March 1947, Tom was again Mentioned in Despatches in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the South West Pacific.

On 11 August 1944, Tom Cotton was asked about a future career in the Army. He replied *‘Yes, I’d remain in the army after the war, but I won’t be given a chance. They’d say I was too old. Or else I’d be asked to drop to a Captain and serve under some Staff Corps bloke who’d never seen any fighting and I wouldn’t do that.’*<sup>57</sup> Later, Tom wrote *“the Battalion was my whole life, wife, mistress and task master and took the whole of my energies. Whilst I earned a reputation for scrapping with the various superior bodies I had to deal with during that period, I was mostly forgiven because it was realised I was fighting for the men and not for my own personal advantage. Thank God I was not a staff officer, partly because I abominated them as a whole and partly because such an appointment could have been misery and drudgery for me.”*<sup>58</sup> On 1 June 1946, soon after returning from Balikpapan, he was appointed GSO2 Training Team (Temporary) for HQ Southern Command and 3<sup>rd</sup> Military District, based in Melbourne, but Tom was heading for retirement from the Army.

It must have been very difficult for men like Tom to adjust to civilian life again, after six years of camaraderie, and the challenges of leadership and battle. As Tom said in his farewell message to the unit in December 1945 *“For many years, in fact since the battalion was formed, it has been my great pride and pleasure to serve in it, first as a company officer and later as its commander. During those years we have been to many places, seen many strange sights and endured some pretty terrific conditions. And during all those years I have received such friendship and loyalty which is seldom the luck of any man to get. I do not regret the coming of peace, but I do regret the demobilisation of the battalion which brings to an end the happiest years of my life.”*<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Crooks, William. *“The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45”*, Printcraft Press 1971 pp 44

<sup>56</sup> Letter to W. Crooks 1 June 1969

<sup>57</sup> Cotton, interview with Gavin Long, 11 Aug 1944, AWM 67, item 2/58

<sup>58</sup> Letter to W. Crooks 1 June 1969

<sup>59</sup> Cotton, TRW. *A Farewell Message from the C.O.* The Griffin. December 1945

## **MARRIAGE AND CIVVY STREET 1946-1949**

Pam had been demobilized in July 1945 and had been following Tom’s movements through correspondence and the newspapers. With a week’s notice, Pam made the trip out to Australia by flying boat, arriving in Sydney on 20 August 1946. After having waited so long, Tom (38) and Pam (40) wanted to get married straight away, so as soon as Tom heard that Pam was coming to Sydney, he contacted my father George Connor, who was living in Sydney, asked him to be best man and to arrange a reception and the wedding. George had never met Pam before. George co-opted his sisters Emily and Kate to help, and Emily was Pam’s bridesmaid. The reception was held at the Gloucester Room of the Hotel Australia at 5:30pm the day after Pam arrived. They were married two days later, on Friday 23 August, at St Philip’s Church, Sydney. Pam was given away by Mr. J. Mephan Ferguson, the father of Capt. J.B. Ferguson of the 2/33<sup>rd</sup> battalion who was killed in the Liberator crash at Port Moresby in 1943. None of Tom’s or Pam’s family attended the wedding. Pam’s wedding present to Tom was a fine William Powell & Sons shotgun (No 9777), and a gold cigarette case, which she had brought with her from England.

The next week, Tom and Pam took the train to Melbourne and held another reception at the Hotel Windsor so that Pam could meet Tom’s Melbourne friends and family. Pam was quite short at 5 feet 4½ inches but like Tom, she had an imposing presence and could be very direct, quite terse when necessary and did not stand for nonsense – a good foil for Tom I think.



Tom and Pam Cotton, wedding day, 23 August 1946

Tom stayed in the Army, and in November 1946, he volunteered for the full-time Interim Army, but it is doubtful that he was fully committed to this after his wartime

experiences. The Interim Army of only 19,000 (down from 383,000 in wartime) was created in May 1946. Personnel were progressively enlisted or transferred into it, and by 1 February 1947 all 'non-volunteers for further service' had been discharged from the Army. The A.I.F. was disbanded on 30 June 1947, and anyone still on full-time duty, and who had somehow been missed out, was transferred to the Interim Army with effect 1 July 1947<sup>60</sup>. Tom, however, was hospitalised for most of March 1947 (illness unknown) and after his discharge from hospital, on 8 April 1947 aged 39, he was also discharged from the Army. He remained on the Reserve of Officers list and was active in the Citizen Military Forces.

By this time, Tom and Pam had bought themselves a dairy farm at Stanhope, a small, pub-less Victorian town in the Goulburn Valley about 230km north of Melbourne. Their address on Tom's discharge form was c/o Post Office, Stanhope. He clearly had fond memories of his country life on dairy farms in England, at 'Faraway' at Boyup Brook and on sheep stations in the Pilbara. Perhaps Tom was encouraged by his Austin cousins who ran successful grazing properties at Lake Bolac. Although starting rather late in life, the couple tried to begin a family and Pam became pregnant but, sadly, miscarried. Tom bought 100 shares in the local Stanhope and District Dairy Co-operative and they tried to make a go of dairy farming but, after the war, many other servicemen also went back to farming which encouraged over-production and forced down the price of milk products. Competition really started to bite in 1948. On the 1949 electoral roll, Tom was still listed as a farmer in Stanhope but he must have been seeking alternatives by then.

#### **AUSTRALIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE ORGANISATION 1949-1967**

In 1949, Tom and Pam sold the dairy farm at Stanhope and moved back to Melbourne. Tom had been offered and accepted a position with the newly established Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. A.S.I.O. was formed in March 1949 following evidence from Britain's M.I.5 that Russian intelligence agencies were being provided with intelligence by members of key Australian Government departments and the Public Service. The British and American intelligence agencies had lost confidence in Australia's security and would no longer share intelligence with Australia.

In August 1949, A.S.I.O.'s first director, Justice Geoffrey Reed, appointed Tom Cotton as "an officer with the sole task of liaison with the Long Range Weapons Establishment (L.R.W.E.) near Adelaide" – a joint Australian-British project.<sup>61</sup> A.S.I.O. had less than 100 staff at the time. Tom was based in A.S.I.O.'s office at 147 Collins Street, Melbourne. He and Pam initially rented a house at 519 St Kilda Road, Prahran and were living there when Tom's father died in Fremantle, but in March 1950, they moved to 16a Albany Road, Malvern. The liaison role meant that Tom travelled to and from South Australia occasionally, because the L.R.W.E. was based at Salisbury on the northern outskirts of Adelaide. It had its own large department for security within the boundaries of L.R.W.E. and the Woomera Rocket Range, but they occasionally covertly strayed outside their boundaries.<sup>62</sup>

Given the tension between the British and Australian intelligence agencies, Tom's role was important. So, in October 1950 when A.S.I.O. intercepted a note from the

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<sup>60</sup> Sligo, Major Graeme. "THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN REGULAR ARMY, 1944-1952" [http://www.army.gov.au/ahu/docs/The\\_Second\\_Fifty\\_Years\\_Sligo.pdf](http://www.army.gov.au/ahu/docs/The_Second_Fifty_Years_Sligo.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Horner, David. *The Spy Catchers. The Official History of ASIO 1949-1963*. Volume 1. 2014 Allen & Unwin. p110

<sup>62</sup> Horner *ibid.* pp 116 and 170

Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.) member at Adelaide University saying that a scientist named Harry Medlin, then employed at L.R.W.E. and in post-graduate study at Cambridge University, would probably have joined the C.P.A. if he hadn't wanted to take up Atomic Physics, Tom Cotton passed this information on to L.R.W.E., which passed it on to the British. It was a small step towards rebuilding Anglo-Australian trust, but Medlin's early career was ruined as a result of the subsequent investigations, and it took many years for him to clear his name.<sup>63</sup>

### **Move to Western Australia**

Following the federal election in December 1949, the new Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies appointed Brigadier Sir Charles Spry (formerly Head of Australian Military Intelligence) as Director-General of A.S.I.O. Sir Charles favoured staffing the new organisation with ex-military officers; Tom Cotton and Charles Spry had met during their war service, and Tom fitted the organisation that Spry wanted to create. In the subsequent reshuffling of chairs, Tom was posted to the Perth Office and became Regional Director Western Australia. He transferred to the Reserve of Officers in 5<sup>th</sup> Military District (W.A.) on 19 March 1951.<sup>64</sup> Tom and Pam found a house at 34 Tyrell Street, Nedlands. It was the closest (physically) that the Cotton family had been for some time, with Tom, Rosemary and Philip in Perth and Robert at Deanmill, near Manjimup. Tom would have had the chance to meet his nieces and nephews, but it seems that there was no contact. They did not know he was in Perth and it seems that Tom had disowned his family, although as an A.S.I.O. officer, Tom was expected to maintain a low profile. His nephews Fred and Barrie Cotton never met him<sup>65</sup>.



34 Tyrell St, Nedlands W.A.

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<sup>63</sup> Horner *ibid.* p228-233

<sup>64</sup> Military Service and Enlistment Records, National Archives of Australia Item 6461448

<sup>65</sup> Pers. Comm.

It was in 1951 that I became Tom’s godson. He seemed to take this role quite seriously (not that I needed to call on him at all for advice or guidance), certainly because of the relationship with my father and possibly because he had no children of his own. I don’t think he (or Pam) ever missed one of my birthdays, but that is what was expected of a godparent in those days. One of the gifts, a pewter mug (right) has the inscription;



A.G.C.  
-- from --  
T.R.W.C.  
*Hands off George*  
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The A.S.I.O. office in Perth was a backwater, compared to the intrigues of the Sydney-Melbourne-Canberra hub. At the end of April 1951, Perth Office had 4 officers (including Tom), 3 clerks/typists, and 4 investigators.<sup>66</sup> Because they could not discuss their work with anyone except colleagues, and could not disclose to outsiders that they were A.S.I.O. agents, they would have developed a small, close-knit team, almost a family. Each Regional Office had people assigned to the main roles of A.S.I.O., namely counter-subversion, counter-espionage and protective security although, in such a small office, there would have been some overlap in roles.

Australia and its allies were concerned about the spread of communism in the 1950s and 1960s and it was A.S.I.O.’s role to identify potential threats in Australia and advise the Federal Government of them. A.S.I.O. had no executive power, and had to rely on the police forces for that. Its main tasks were to identify and monitor members and sympathizers of the Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.), carry out security checks of senior government employees and of immigrants and visitors to Australia. Among the latter group, A.S.I.O.’s targets were ex-Nazis and members of fascist Croatian anti-Yugoslavia separatist movements. In Perth, Tom had a small team of agents who gathered, analysed, filtered and stored information about potential threats, but there were probably very few strong threats and high-level counter-espionage concerns in such a small (300,000) and isolated capital city. The storage, retrieval and management of large amounts of non-numerical information would have been a major challenge in a pre-computing world. Tom’s reporting line was to A.S.I.O. H.Q. (then in Melbourne) but he had to maintain links with the State and Federal police, the local armed forces and their intelligence sections, and they sometimes mounted joint operations. No doubt the 1954 Royal Commission on Espionage would have kept him busy for a while, but it must have been a lonely and often routine job and, for the most part, thankless. Probably 95% of the information they collected was valueless.

There were two major events in Western Australia during Tom’s tenure as Regional Director. The first was the British nuclear test at the Monte Bello Islands off the north-west coast of W.A. on 3 October 1952, codenamed *Operation Hurricane*. A.S.I.O. considered that “*six key matters needed to be protected; the ‘content of the bomb’; the exact time and date of the explosion; the form of the blast (such as could be determined by a photograph); where the device was located (above or below the*

<sup>66</sup> Horner, David. op. cit. p151

water); the outcome of the explosion, and finally, documents containing data about the explosion.”<sup>67</sup> An A.S.I.O. agent was sent to Onslow to monitor all local visitors, and another agent was the only Australian aboard the H.M.S. *Zeebrugge*, the Royal Navy ship that was controlling the operation.<sup>68</sup>

As it happened, there was so much British naval activity in Perth during this time that keeping the test a complete secret was impossible, and the West Australian newspaper made it a front-page story the day afterwards, complete with photographs. However, A.S.I.O. identified tourist yachts and coastal steamers near the Monte Bello islands, which were intercepted by Federal Police at Fremantle and their films confiscated. Tom was unaware that his younger brother Philip was aboard H.M.A.S. *Sydney* and had observed the test from a distance of 60 miles, saw an orange flash and five minutes later, felt the ship give a distinct tremor. The resulting cloud reached a height of 25,000 feet and was 70 miles wide and about 10 miles in depth three hours after the explosion<sup>69</sup>. Two more atomic tests were conducted at the Monte Bello Islands on 16 May and 19 June 1956, the last being the largest device ever detonated in Australia.



The other major event was the 1954 Royal Tour. Some anonymous threats against the monarchy were received before the tour, so A.S.I.O. decided that they needed to assess the risks of an attack and develop a list of persons in the “crank” category.<sup>70</sup> The C.P.A. however, made it clear they would not threaten the tour. The tour in W.A. was from 26 March to 1 April 1954 and the Royal couple visited Kalgoorlie, Perth, Fremantle Busselton, Albany, Northam, and York. Of most concern was a poliomyelitis epidemic in W.A. at the time, which meant keeping the Royals distant from children. The tour proceeded safely; those were the days before domestic terrorism and political extremism.

Securing Ivan Petrov’s defection in April 1954 was a coup for A.S.I.O. which restored the Allies’ confidence in Australia’s security. It led to the Royal Commission on Espionage (1954-55), a higher profile generally for A.S.I.O., stronger support from Government and, in 1956, the A.S.I.O. Act, which brought increased resources and budgets. The Perth Office grew commensurately, but it came with increased pressure from A.S.I.O. headquarters to infiltrate the local C.P.A. branches (Operation *Sparrow*).<sup>71</sup> Regional Directors were also “*required to identify and report on elections and office bearers in all the important unions in the key industries; on unions which are communist dominated at the Federal and State level; or Branch level where this is obviously significant e.g. Waterside Workers’ Federation branches in major ports; on other unions in which the C.P.A. was showing special interest; and on trades and labour councils.*”<sup>72</sup> The real and perceived communist influence within the trade union movement was the primary reason that the Democratic Labor Party split from the Australian Labour Party in 1955, a split which kept conservatives in power until 1972.

<sup>67</sup> Horner, David op. cit. pp246-248

<sup>68</sup> Horner, David *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> The West Australian 16 October 1952 pp 1 and 6

<sup>70</sup> Horner, David op. cit. p248

<sup>71</sup> Horner, David op. cit. p407

<sup>72</sup> Horner, David op. cit. p445

The C.P.A. began to retaliate. In July 1958, A.S.I.O. identified a possible leak in the Perth Office, a secretary who copied classified documents with the intention of removing them from the office during lunch hour. The secretary resigned soon afterwards, but no connection with the C.P.A. or other foreign intelligence agency could be established.<sup>73</sup> The Soviet Embassy in Canberra re-opened in 1959, five years after the Petrov affair.

## **Back to Victoria**

In early 1959, Tom and Pam returned to Melbourne where Tom was appointed Regional Director (R.D.) – Victoria.<sup>74</sup> They joined the Peninsula Country Golf Club at Frankston, the Naval and Military Club in the city, and moved to a flat at 6 Landen Place, Toorak. This most prestigious and conservative suburb of Melbourne, home of Prime Ministers, diplomats, businessmen and socialites, with its fashionable shops and restaurants of Toorak Village, would have suited Pam perfectly. Her polished accent and ‘old-country’ network of acquaintances probably assured her acceptance into Toorak society, whereas Tom probably avoided it like the plague.

One of Tom’s first tasks as R.D. Victoria was to penetrate the Victorian C.P.A., whose aim was to establish a ‘People’s Government in Australia’ by infiltrating the Australian Labor Party, winning over members of the A.L.P. to the C.P.A., establishing a unity ticket with the A.L.P. and influencing Labor policy.<sup>75</sup> A.S.I.O. needed to collect hard evidence of this and, by early 1960, had successfully planted four agents inside the Victorian C.P.A. Although A.S.I.O. was at pains to investigate C.P.A. infiltration of any political party, the A.L.P. felt victimized, possibly with cause, and its relationship with A.S.I.O. was tense.

Keeping agents in place, however, was not easy and, between 1958 and 1960, the C.P.A. in Victoria managed to uncover about twelve A.S.I.O. agents. As R.D. Victoria, it was Tom’s task to investigate these losses. He concluded that many were due to poor selection and training of agents and carelessness by agents. None were believed to be due to agent disloyalty, but they could not ignore the possibility of a C.P.A. mole within A.S.I.O.<sup>76</sup>

Changes to Federal laws during 1960 made it easier for A.S.I.O. to raid offices of suspected subversives and foreign agents, and to intercept their telephone messages. Armed with these powers, A.S.I.O. widened its activities to monitor extremist organizations, particularly various pro-Croatia and anti-Yugoslav ones, which were prone to using violence.<sup>77</sup> Tom reported on “Resurgence of Nazism and Anti-Semitism in Melbourne.” but concluded that, in March 1960, these groups did not appear to be well organized and did not pose a major threat. In fact, for a while A.S.I.O. used suspected war criminals, who were anti-communist, as agents.<sup>78</sup>

Australia, and indeed the World, underwent significant change in the 1960s. The Sino-Soviet communist split translated to a split of the C.P.A. in Australia. Australia’s first aeroplane hijack happened in Brisbane in 1960. But the most important change for Australia was its involvement in the Vietnam war, initially in 1962 with a small

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<sup>73</sup> Horner, David op. cit. p426

<sup>74</sup> Lee, David, 'Cotton, Thomas Richard Worgan (1907 - 1970)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 13, Melbourne University Press, 1993, pp 510-511.

<sup>75</sup> Horner, David op. cit. p432

<sup>76</sup> Horner, David op. cit. p426

<sup>77</sup> Horner, David op. cit. pp447-450

<sup>78</sup> Horner, David op. cit. pp277

force of jungle warfare specialists. This slowly escalated until, in 1964, Australia committed aircraft to Vietnam, introduced compulsory National Service and offered to send ground troops to Vietnam. This started almost a decade of protests at home by a broad section of the population, but particularly university students. In 1965, as the first battalion of Australian infantrymen left for Vietnam, the pro-China C.P.A. (Marxist-Leninist) organization, which had split from the established pro-Soviet C.P.A. a year earlier, declared that anti-Vietnam War protests were its highest priority.

This, in turn, helped A.S.I.O. to set its own priorities. In addition to its work with people who were university students, A.S.I.O. Victoria remained focused on three tasks during 1964; mass penetration of C.P.A. branches; keep abreast of C.P.A. activity within trade unions and recruit members of the C.P.A.'s youth arm, the Eureka Youth League; and continue penetration of the C.P.A.'s front organizations. By November 1964, A.S.I.O.'s Victorian office alone had nearly 100 sources, with twenty C.P.A. branches penetrated. This produced '4000 photographs of target personalities and 3250 documents and other material' in ten months.<sup>79</sup> Analyzing, filtering and filing all this information was a major task, considering that A.S.I.O. did not start to use computers until after 1971.

In parallel, A.S.I.O. was monitoring activities of Croatian and Yugoslav extremists. Although these groups were not attempting to subvert the Australian government, their activities were sometimes violent, and they were potential fronts for more serious Communist subversive organizations.<sup>80</sup> In 1966, a parcel bomb exploded in the Melbourne G.P.O. - apparently the intended target was a pro-Yugoslav man; and there were several disruptions within the Victorian Yugoslav community from bomb threats and the use of stink bombs at social gatherings. These acts of politically motivated violence (or terrorism) became more daring in the late 1960s and 1970s. They were really the problem of the State and Federal police forces, which occasionally raided the premises of known Croatian extremists, based on intelligence from A.S.I.O. and their own sources. In some cases, the subjects of raids were also informants for A.S.I.O., which led to inter-departmental tension.<sup>81</sup> People from other communist bloc countries were also routinely monitored by A.S.I.O.

The other main targets A.S.I.O. monitored were university-based radical organizations, which were being used by the C.P.A. (both branches) to protest Australia's involvement in Vietnam. Photographing and identifying people at anti-Vietnam war rallies was common, especially the more violent protests involving paint bombing of politicians and visiting dignitaries such as U.S. President Lyndon B Johnson. Possibly the last operation that Tom had to report on was A.S.I.O.'s surveillance of Monash University students collecting funds in Melbourne to support the Communist National Liberation Front (C.N.L.F.) in South Vietnam<sup>82</sup>, Australia's active enemy.

It must have been difficult for A.S.I.O. to distinguish between legitimate protest as part of the democratic process (dissent), and true attempts to subvert Australia's democracy (disloyalty), but they tried. I have no doubt that officers of A.S.I.O. like Tom Cotton believed that they were doing the right thing to protect Australia, just as

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<sup>79</sup> Blaxland, John. *“The Protest Years. The Official History of ASIO 1963-1975”* 2015 Allen & Unwin. pp79-80

<sup>80</sup> Blaxland, John. op. cit. pp129-130

<sup>81</sup> Blaxland, John. op. cit. p133

<sup>82</sup> Blaxland, John op. cit. p140

they had done during World War II. And they did it selflessly, with dedication, little reward and no recognition.

My most vivid recollection of Tom was when I went to Melbourne in 1964 (aged 14) for the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Scout Jamboree at Dandenong. Tom must have been working – probably much longer than the regulation eight hours per day, and was permanently on call. Pam looked after me during the days and took me to lunch at the Peninsula Golf Club where she and Tom were members, the Carousel Restaurant at Albert Park, Pelligrini’s and “The Sword in the Stone”. During the day, Pam kept warning me not to upset Tom too much so, by the time we got to their place, I was fairly anxious about meeting him and was on my best behaviour. Perhaps she knew that Tom could be rather dour and terse and was trying to protect me, or perhaps she was protecting Tom from too much stress. I was ushered into Tom’s small study, with 15’ ceiling-high bookshelves, a desk and one tall window with sunlight coming through. Tom looked much like the portrait on the front page of this story – grey haired with a large moustache stained with tobacco, twinkling, piercing eyes and a quizzical half smile. I don’t remember much of what we talked about – fishing was one subject. Tom was a very keen fly fisherman who used hand-made split cane rods and tied his own flies. He and a friend or two would go to Tasmania every year to fish for trout in the mountain streams and lakes. Tom and Pam had a pet bulldog named Satan, but I don’t recall meeting Satan when I visited them. Tom was a heavy smoker and the study smelled of it. Tom was also a golfer and in 1963 and 1964 with his partner W.H. Stimson, won the Knockout Foursomes Trophy at the Peninsula Country Golf Club.



Tom Cotton, captured in a Melbourne Street,  
June 1970



Tom on a fishing trip in Tas

## **RETIREMENT**

That was the last time I saw Tom. He remained Regional Director - Victoria of A.S.I.O. until his official retirement on 15 November 1967, aged 60. He and Pam moved about three kilometers to another flat at 26 Kensington Road, South Yarra. Tom continued playing golf and fishing, and took up photography in retirement, which he found “*quite absorbing*”, but Tom missed the intellectual challenge of A.S.I.O.

work and “*could imagine it would be very easy to reach monumental boredom if one did nothing.*”<sup>83</sup> Although he “*abominated writing*”, Tom was pushed to recall and record his war experiences by Bill Crooks, who was in the process of researching and writing “The Footsoldiers” at the time. As Tom confided to Bill, it kept him “*thinking and doing, a great asset when one could easily turn into a vegetable*”.<sup>84</sup>

Tom made himself available for some 2/33 Battalion reunions, and attended Anzac Day celebrations, but after a few years he began to dread all the backslapping and heavy drinking. In 1970, Tom’s health began to fail. He had suffered from chronic bronchitis and emphysema throughout the 1960s (not helped by smoking) and seemed to catch whatever influenza strain was around each winter. Along with other minor ailments, he still suffered terribly from migraine headaches, for which he took strong, ergot-based painkillers, which in turn increased his blood pressure.<sup>85</sup> He became more lethargic and possibly depressed. He wrote “*I cannot determine whether it is or is not fortunate that I have enough to live on and do not have to supplement my income. It is probably unfortunate because all my life I have constantly had to work to live. And again since 1939 I have been carrying responsibilities which constantly kept me mentally alert and up to the mark. Now it is vacuum and there is no ambition left*”.<sup>86</sup>

Tom died aged 62 of bronchopneumonia on 26 September 1970 at his home at 1/26 Kensington Road, South Yarra, Victoria and was cremated at Springvale Crematorium.<sup>87</sup> Tom’s brother Robert in W.A. was eventually informed of Tom’s death by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. Clearly, neither Pam nor his executor had any knowledge of Tom’s family there, although Tom did leave an old oak abbey chest to his cousin Derek Austin in Lake Bolac, Victoria. Tom’s service medals and decorations were bequeathed to the Naval and Military Club, Melbourne, where he was a member.



Tom Cotton’s medals<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Letter Tom Cotton to Bill Crooks 3 November 1967

<sup>84</sup> Letter to W. Crooks 7 July 1969

<sup>85</sup> Letter to W. Crooks 17 July 1970

<sup>86</sup> Letter to W. Crooks 9 March 1970

<sup>87</sup> Victoria Death Certificate No 23138/70

<sup>88</sup> Now held by the Pipeclay Club, Melbourne. [The Medal Collection \(pipeclay.com.au\)](http://The Medal Collection (pipeclay.com.au))

## **PAM'S WIDOWHOOD 1970-1981**

After Tom's death, my family stayed in regular contact with Pam Cotton. Pam really wanted to return to Suffolk to live with her family, and she renewed her British passport to that end, but her nephew who lived at Sibton Abbey actively discouraged that course of action. Pam moved from the flat at South Yarra to a smaller one at 6 Mathoura Road, Toorak.



Pam represented Tom at various 2/33 Battalion re-unions after Tom's death. A few members of the unit looked out for her and helped Pam if she needed it, in particular Ian Buttrose and 'Darkie' Dwyer.



Pam Cotton with 2/33 Bn members (L to R) Nev Breakwell, Jim Gowing, Maurie Reeve, Les Rodwell and Doug Corner, Melbourne, Anzac Day 1981.

Pam visited our family most Christmases and occasionally she would call on my father for financial advice and assistance in dealing with Tom’s estate. Pam visited my family in Port Augusta, S.A. in 1978, and we drove around the Eyre Peninsula and the Flinders Ranges together. Pam got to meet my daughter Judy but unfortunately did not meet my son Tom who was born exactly one year after her death, although she knew that ‘Thomas’ was our preferred name for a boy.

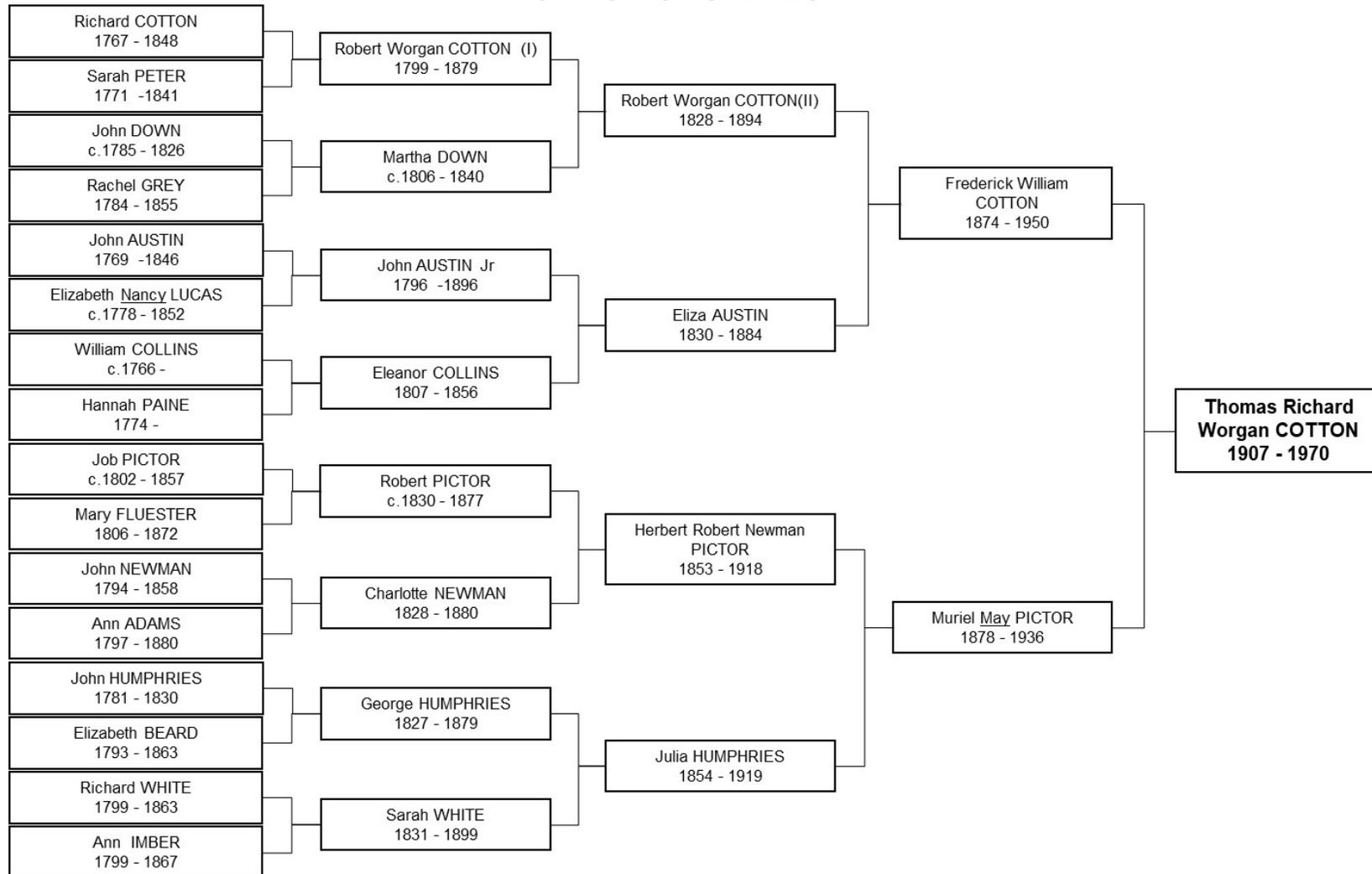


Connor family with Pam Cotton, Broken Hill N.S.W., January 1980  
(L to R: George, Sybil, Jan, Andy, Pam Cotton, Richard)

I visited Pam in a Melbourne hospital in 1981. She was suffering from stomach cancer. In typical fashion, Pam had spent ages beforehand making herself presentable, although she was very ill. Just before her death, Pam rang my father to say that she had “*received her marching orders*” and that he should come to Melbourne. Pam Cotton waited until he arrived and, soon afterwards, died of liver failure on 1 September 1981, aged 76. Pam was cremated at the Springvale Crematorium.

Pam left her antique furniture to her family in the UK, but one of her prized possessions, her sewing machine, Pam left to my sister Catherine, whom Pam thought was “not domesticated enough”.

### TOM COTTON'S ANCESTRY



### PAM COTTON'S ANCESTRY

