

# *Gunner of Renown*



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

## **Captain Charles Robert MORTON**

**(1913-2003)**

Charles Morton was born at Foster, Victoria, on 9 January 1913, the eldest of four children to Charles James Clarke Morton and Daisy Cornish Morton (nee Maidment). His father was a Dairy Inspector stationed at Foster prior to WWI. Charles was educated at Sebastopol State School and in 1931 attended the Ballarat School of Mines.

His Militia artillery career began 1930 to 1932 at Melbourne and later on in 1938 he joined another unit then at the St. Kilda Training Depot. During this period he gained promotion to sergeant gun detachment commander. Charles was tall and well built, and when he gave a command it was easily understood and promptly obeyed. He transferred to 2/8th Field Regiment in Melbourne on 7 May 1940 and trained at Puckapunyal with the Victorian (15th) battery. He was dubbed 'Tex', after the well-known country/western singer of the same surname. He earned the respect of his detachment by treating them as individuals, being fair, firm and friendly and concerned for their welfare. Eventually, the regiment went to the Middle East and early in 1941 the CO, Lieutenant Colonel Alan Crisp, nominated him for officer training. He was commissioned and allocated to 16th Battery, composed of Tasmanians. Even though he came from the 'mainland', Charles found a way through their insularity and was accepted as one of them.

Morton's regiment was active in the Western Desert (with the 2/7th) in support of the 22nd Guards Brigade for five months before being withdrawn to garrison Syria and Lebanon as part of 9th Division until July 1942. When his division was ordered to El Alamein to stem Rommel's advance, Charles was one of the first into action. As an Observation Post Officer supporting 24th Brigade, he was severely wounded at Tel el Eisa on 10 July during a crucial battle for this key tactical feature, when the division stalled the Panzer Armee Afrika's advance to the Nile delta. He returned to the front after six weeks for the Second Battle of Alamein in October 1942, where he was once again in the thick of it.

The 2/8th returned to Australia in January 1943 and assembled in Queensland later in the year. At this juncture Charles met Mary Morton, who was then serving with the 2/7th Australian General Hospital, and whom he was later to wed in Cairns. His division was training in the hinterland at Ravenshoe at this time. Here he was promoted captain and troop commander and his regimental service concluded with 'Oboe' operations in Borneo in 1945 with his division. He was discharged on 9 November 1945.

He knew his men, their 'vital statistics' and foibles, and when to let sotto voce comments from the ranks pass. At Ravenshoe he had concluded a lecture when a voice muttered, 'He should talk. He couldn't change his wife's name'. On another occasion a young gunner turned 21 and Charles booked the man and his mates into the local hotel for 'a splendid

night'. When someone remarked 'officers don't do that', he was told 'well, Charles Morton does'.

Postwar Charles and Mary went farming at Warrigal and then Mardan working hard for six difficult years to restore run down properties. Nevertheless, Morton still had time for community activities in between raising three children. He said goodbye to farming in 1951 and moved to Leongatha, where he sold Ferguson tractors and Standard motor cars. In 1957, they moved to Warburton where they bought a newsagency. He was active in the Warburton community for 26 years in the Warburton Advancement League, RSL, tennis and golf clubs and as president and as a councillor for the Shire of Upper Yarra. He was instrumental in setting up the Upper Yarra Pony Club and the installation of the Warburton Olympic Swimming Pool and Arts complex.

Charles was the epitome of the committed family man and he was a very loyal and loving father, husband, friend and mate. A gregarious man behind the counter, he knew most of what was happening in the district before anyone else. In 1982 Charles and Mary retired and moved to Mitcham.

In 1992, Charles and Mary, with the help of others, began collecting historical material for the 2/8th regimental history, published in 1992. This is a unique record as unit histories go, the narrative often being in blank verse. He also provided assistance to the Australian War Memorial for their display and also lent some of his treasured souvenirs to the Shrine of Remembrance for their El Alamein display.

After his family, his greatest commitment over his adult lifetime was to his regimental colleagues. He attended many regimental reunions at Creswick, Melbourne and Tasmania. His troops from 16th Battery accorded him iconic status – the most popular officer of all - with the gift of command.

After his wife's death (Mary predeceased him by three years) he lived with his daughter Pam before residing at Dorset Lodge. He died on 9 October 2003 from heart failure and was cremated. His ashes were scattered over areas that he loved. Charles had a sister Kathleen who pre-deceased him in 2002, and brothers Oswald Percy (Billy) and Bruce. The latter died in infancy and Billy was reported missing in action with No. 466 (Bomber) Squadron, RAAF on 21 May 1943, with whom he was a Wireless/Air Gunner. He was survived by his three children, Patricia, Pam and Robert and their grandchildren.

Sources: *The Tannoy*, April 2004, p. 12; Eulogy by Bob Gill; Eulogy by and correspondence of the Morton Family; M. Gofton (letter 3 Jun 04); Alan H. Smith.