



## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

This is one of a number of papers prepared by Very Wor. Bro. John Scascighini of West Wyalong had he kindly gave us permission to present them at our meetings for which we thank him. Accordingly this paper was presented by Jim Ruxton at the November 27, 2006 meeting and, for our records it was allocated the number 137.

### **SIR GEORGE FREDERICK WOOTTEN, KBE, DSO\*, ED. (1893-1970)**

Soldier, solicitor and administrator, was born on 1 May 1893 at Marrickville, Sydney, seventh child of London-born parents William Frederick Wootten, carpenter and later civil engineer, and his wife Louisa, (nee Old). He attended Fort Street Model School and, encouraged by his father, entered the Royal Military College, Duntroon, Federal Capital Territory, in 1911. He was No.14 on the foundation roll at Duntroon. His best friends at Duntroon were Cyril "Nippy" Clowes and George Vasey. Both these distinguished officers served in WW1 and WW2. In New Guinea Major General Clowes C.B., C.B.E., M.C. commanded the Australian forces who achieved the first land victories of the war at Milne Bay and (*Bro.*) Major General George Vasey C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.\* commanded the 7<sup>th</sup> Division on their famous battle along the Kokoda Track. Graduating in August 1914, Lieutenant Wootten was posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Australian Imperial Force.

He went ashore at Gallipoli on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915, in charge of a machine-gun platoon, became adjutant of his battalion next day and quickly won a reputation for courage. In May he was promoted captain. By the time of the evacuation in December he was a major (reputedly the youngest in British military history). His unit was the second last to leave the trenches and the last Anzacs to leave the beach.

A famous photograph entitled, "Captain George Wootten, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, N.S.W., shaving at the entrance to his dugout in rest gully in June 1915" (AWM CO1920) is held by the Australian War Museum Canberra.

When (Sir) John Monash was forming the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division in England in 1916, Wootten served briefly on his staff, but he made his name at the infantry brigade level in 1916-17. He was brigade major first to James Cannan of the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, then to (*Brother*) (Sir) Charles Rosenthal of the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade, both outstanding commanders. Wootten was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in October 1917 for excellent staff work. Two months later he was transferred to the headquarters of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division where he worked in the operations branch. In October 1918 he joined the General Staff at (*Brother*) Field Marshal Sir Douglas (Earl) Haig's headquarters. His six months there completed a remarkable wartime experience as a staff officer. He was five times mentioned in dispatches.

Only 25 years old, he was posted to the Staff College, Camberley, England in March 1919. George bought himself a copy of a British etiquette guide "Manners and Rules of Good Society" whose author discreetly called himself "a member of the aristocracy" and found himself a social life in that "good society", helped by his brilliant reputation as an officer. At St Joseph's Catholic Church, Roehampton, London, on 3 January 1920 he married Muriel Anna Frances Catherine Margaret Mary Bisgood, a nurse. It was a case of beautiful young English debutante meets dashing young Australian officer.

That month Wootten sailed home to an Australia tired of war and with little interest in its army which was about to be reorganised and sharply reduced. Junior staff appointments in Adelaide then Hobart had no allure for Wootten who, as a brevet major, was on captain's pay. In 1923 he resigned his commission. His father-in-law in England came to the rescue, obtaining for him the managership of a clothing factory. He went back to England where he made a success of his job and enjoyed Rugby Union football. His children did not flourish however; advised to move them to a warmer climate, he returned to Australia in 1926 with little prospect of work.

Perhaps Wootten recalled the advice of his headmaster at Fort Street that he should become a lawyer. As assistance was available from the Repatriation Commission, he opted for the law and was articled to (*Wor. Bro.*) Harcourt Justin (Sarkey) Englert at West Wyalong. It was at this time that he affiliated with Lodge Bland.(15/8/28). Very Wor. Bro. G.P. Evans (Lodge Bland's Foundation Master) was his Brother-in-Law. The depression years were a difficult period for the Woottens, whose fourth child, Bill, was born in 1930, although their vegetable garden and poultry enabled them to eat well.

Like many former officers, Wootten joined one of the anti-communist organisations, the Old Guard; by 1931 he was employed as an organiser in Sydney. He refused to be part of a plot by de Groot (of the New Guard) to overthrow the Lang government. On 30 July that year, having completed his articles, he was admitted as a solicitor. He practised in a number of centres including Singleton, then he went back to West Wyalong in 1936 to join a firm which became known as G.P. Evans, Englert & Wootten, but there was not much work in so small a town. His army pension and parcels from England, kept the family going.

Developments in the army, made in response to events in Europe and East Asia, gave Wootten his chance. He was given command of the 21<sup>st</sup> Light Horse Regiment, Citizen Military Forces (C.M.F.), in 1937 and promoted Lieutenant Colonel. By this time he was, in one respect, a changed man. Having given up smoking in 1930, he had begun to put on weight; he was over fifteen stone (95kg) when he took command. By 1941 he would weigh twenty stone (127kg). He was 5ft 9ins (175cm) tall.

On 13 October 1939 Wootten was seconded to the A.I.F. and appointed to command the 2<sup>nd</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, despite doubts about his physical fitness for such a post. When the A.I.F. Reinforcement Depot was set up in Palestine late in 1940, he was promoted temporary brigadier and made its commander. In February 1941 he was given the well trained and equipped 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade.

It was during this period that an R.S.M. was outraged when a passing Australian Private called out "Sa-iada George" (G'Day George) to the Brigadier who stopped and had a good yarn to his friend and Brother Private Stan Moncrieff of Lodge Bland.

Quite a number of other Wyalong district soldiers served under Wootten in his various commands including Johnny Staniforth, Bill Evans (his batman & driver), Bluey Wilson, Keith Boal, Keith Clemson, Tom Ludlow, Jim Cements, Keith Scott, Allan Gagie Gordon Welsh and Reg Buttenshaw.

The West Wyalong connection was not limited to the Aussie troops. An Italian P.O.W. attracted his attention with much waving of arms and shouting. When brought before Wootten he proclaimed, "Major Wootten, Major Wootten, you remember me, Fred Brown the West Wyalong Fruiterer." Fred Brown was the nickname of an Italian who had owned the Paragon Cafe in West Wyalong between the wars. Wootten had won a case for him in West Wyalong before he had gone home for a holiday in 1936 and been drafted into the Italian Army. His request for a job in Wootten's officers' mess was denied.

As part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division which was earmarked for the expedition to Greece, Wootten was instructed in March 1941 to capture the minor Italian fortress at Giarabub, Libya. This was done by avoiding the North facing guns and initiating a surprise attack through the marshes to the South of the oasis. The 18<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Brigade was magnificent. This done, he was ordered to stop Rommel's advance to Egypt. An observation plane reported that Rommel was 24 hours away with three divisions of tanks. His assessment was that the divided AIF were vulnerable so he went to Tobruk and asked an English General for permission to enter the town, thus consolidating forces. Permission was denied for lack of orders. So he said: "Well, Sir I'm coming in and just you try and stop me." His men marched in and bolstered the defenses. Historians have pointed out that this

extra force of 3,000 battle hardened soldiers tipped the balance of the fight for Tobruk in favour of the defence. Two days later, (*Brother*) Major General (Sir) Leslie Morshead turned up and was surprised to find that Wootten was already in Tobruk and appointed him Head of the garrison's defence! After nearly 5 months besieged, Wootten's was the first brigade to be relieved. It joined the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, but only after the 7th's successful campaign in Syria. He was awarded a Bar to his D.S.O. for his leadership at Tobruk.

In March 1942 Wootten returned to Australia. When belatedly the 7<sup>th</sup> Division was sent to Papua to intervene in the crisis on the Kokoda Track in August 1942, his brigade, the 18<sup>th</sup> - veterans of Tobruk - was detached to bolster the defence of the Milne Bay airstrips. Here he was back with his old mates Nippy Clowes and George Vasey. They inflicted the first land defeat on the Japanese at Milne Bay.

Having helped Milne Force to crush the Japanese, he took the 2/9<sup>th</sup>, 2/10<sup>th</sup> and 2/12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalions to take part in the worst fighting of the Pacific war – Buna and Sanananda. It was only after Brigadier Wootten took command of the Americans on December 11<sup>th</sup> that the battle for Buna began to go well for the Allies, despite pressure from (*Brother*) General Douglas MacArthur's ignorant General Headquarters for quick results in impossible situations causing unnecessary casualties.

An anecdote of this period relates that Wootten was unimpressed with a continued lack of activity by U.S. Forces supposed to be supporting his unit's right flank. His report to MacArthur on the action detailed the gains made by the Australian forces in centre and left but failed to mention the Americans. When questioned as to what the U.S. Units were achieving his celebrated reply was "Refer to Hebrews Chapter 13 Verse 8" (*"Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today and forever."*)

In March 1943, as temporary major general, Wootten succeeded Morshead as commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, which was training on the Atherton Tableland, Queensland. He was appointed C.B.E. in May.

Wootten's massive frame attracted irreverent nicknames, the most common of which was "Mud Guts", but he won the respect of his division. He had astonishing energy for so big a man. If he was not as close to his soldiers as Morshead, he left lasting impressions of his mental power and tactical skill on officers of great distinction. MacArthur rated him as "the best soldier in the Australian army who had it in him to reach the highest position" and Lieutenant General Robert Eichelberger, who commanded the Americans at Buna and Sanananda, called him "the most remarkable soldier I have ever met.". Brigadier Sir Frederick Chilton saw him as "a formidable man indeed – I have never met another man of stronger will and personality". One of his Battalion commanders, Colonel Clem Cummings observed, "You had to fight Wootten, if he said something outrageous it was to see if you'd come back at him. He had a terrific bloody brain." Wootten used to sit through American conferences with his eyes closed. "You'd swear he was asleep" said Cummings, "and all of a sudden he'd bark out, "I don't think that's any good."

Although his anger could be frightening, it was usually brief; his sense of humour extended even to himself. To the officer discreetly watching him test a wooden bench he remarked: "When you are my size, Hill, you sit with circumspection". It was probably his bulk that accounted for the rarity of his visits to forward troops during battle.

His children were to remember him for his gentleness and they had fun with him. He bred and trained Airedales, grew hollyhocks and was fascinated by willy wagtails. His son Bill tells of an occasion when as a young boy his father took him to the West Wyalong cemetery to anonymously lay flowers on an unmarked grave. Bill surmises that it was the resting place of a W.W.1 digger or a brother mason (or both). Bill also tells of the time his father took him up the stairs of the Masonic Hall where he showed him a picture of men fighting on Gallipoli and said: "Son, that's the greatest

thing that ever happened in the history of the world.” This was also the man who was to dismiss (*Bro.*) Brigadier Bernard Evans at Finschhafen, New Guinea.

The task of training his division for jungle warfare and amphibious operations was not lightened for Wootten by the death of his elder son George in an aircraft accident in May 1943 while he was on active service with the Royal Australian Air Force in the Western desert. George was an outstanding cricketer.

From September that year to January 1944 Wootten led his division to victories in New Guinea at Lae, Finschhafen and Sattelberg. A year of rest and training in Australia was followed by the strategically pointless but successful operations of June-July 1945 in Borneo around Brunei and Labuan. He accepted the surrender of Lt. General Maso Baba Commander of the Japanese 37<sup>th</sup> Army in Borneo whose sword he sent to the A.W.M. Wootten worked to establish civil order in the former British territories, supporting the British Borneo Civil Affairs Unit attached to his headquarters. He was appointed C.B. (1945); General Sir Thomas Blamey twice recommended him and other generals in vain for appointment as K.B.E. In 1944 he received the United States of America's Distinguished Service Cross. One of his brigadiers, Selwyn Porter remembered him as the shrewdest Divisional Commander whom I have encountered... He was sound, sure and careful”.

Wootten left Labuan for Sydney on 22 September 1945 and transferred to the Reserve of Officers on 14 October, but Blamey appointed him to the military court of inquiry into (*Rt. Wor. Brother*) Major General Gordon Bennett's escape from Singapore. A meeting of three Generals, Wootten, Morshead and (*Brother*) Major General Victor Stantke met in the legal chambers in West Wyalong prior to the court of inquiry. (*Wor. Bro.*) Englert advised Wootten against participating. Wootten probably later regretted not following his senior partner's advice. Another task, more to his liking, was the chairmanship (1945-58) of the Repatriation Commission in Melbourne; he devoted himself strenuously to the welfare of veterans. Yet the army still called: he commanded the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, C.M.F. in 1947-50 and was the C.M.F. member of the Military Board in 1948-50.

Elevated to K.B.E. in 1958, Wootten returned to Sydney on his retirement that year from the Repatriation Commission. He was exhausted by the intensity of the work, after two world wars and the difficult years between them. “Even the zest for sailing had gone”, but he watched tennis and Test cricket. Although Sir George lived for a time in nursing homes, his wife and family cared for him. He died at the Repatriation General Hospital, Concord, on 31 March 1970 and was buried with full military honours and Anglican rites in Northern Suburbs cemetery; his wife, Muriel, and their two daughters, Estelle and Felicity and younger son Bill survived him. A portrait (1956) by (*Bro.*) (Sir) William Dargie is held by the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

George Wootten was initiated in Melbourne in Lodge Combermere No.752 E.C. On 18/8/21 he affiliated with Lodge Bland No. 337 U.G.L of N.S.W. on 15/08/28.

George Wootten lived and fought by four basic principles:

- The leader stays with his men.
- The strong help the weak.
- Surprise is the greatest of the principles of warfare.
- Personal reconnaissance is seldom wasted.

#### **Honours & Awards:**

- 5/11/15: Mention in Dispatches.
- 1/06/17: Mention in Dispatches.
- 4/06/17: Distinguished Service Order.
- 28/05/18: Mention in Dispatches.
- 31/12/18: Mention in Dispatches.
- 1918: Mention in Dispatches (British).
- 22/12/19: Passed Staff Course.

30/12/41: Bar to Distinguished Service Order.  
28/05/43: Commander of the Order of the British Empire.  
23/11/44: U.S. Distinguished Service Cross.  
8/03/45: Companion of the Bath.  
1958: Knight Commander of the British Empire.  
Wootten St. West Wyalong was named in his honour.

MASONIC INFORMATION:

Affiliated with Lodge Bland No. 337 on 19 September 1928 from Lodge Combermere No. 752, English Constitution.

Called Off 19 February 1935

Affiliated again with Lodge Bland No. 337 on 18 December 1935.

Called off on 19 April 1939 when left the district.

**References:**

*"Australian Dictionary of Biography"*, pp 586-588.

*"Kokoda"* Paul Ham.

*Recollections of his Children, Estelle Clancy (Cremorne), Felicity Joseph (Wagga Wagga) and Bill Wootten (Wingham).*

*An essay by his great grand daughter Margaret Joseph (Canberra)* ([www.dicksonc.act.edu.au](http://www.dicksonc.act.edu.au))

[www.anzacsite.gov.au](http://www.anzacsite.gov.au)

[www.battleforaustralia.org.au](http://www.battleforaustralia.org.au)

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) (*Australian War Memorial*)

*Brother Geoffrey Hui. Secretary Lodge Cobermere No.752 E.C.*

**Lecture Prepared by V.Wor. Bro. John Scascighini.**

**First delivered in Lodge Bland No. 337; 19/05/05.**