



Match ball signed by Diggers in Palestinian desert 'a sacred relic'

ANDREW FAULKNER

THIS was one football match where the combatants were just that — a game played by genuine heroes.

Here, on a dusty foreign field in 1942, a team of Tobruk Rats squared up against hard-bitten veterans of the Greece and Crete campaigns in a game of Australian football.

An oval was pegged out on the flinty Palestinian desert.

Dangerous ground, for the dirt was sowed with Turkish bullets leftover from World War I.

The footballers wore army boots, khaki shorts and socks supplied by the good ladies of the Comfort Fund. A bell was found, presumably seconded from the mess tent. The football, however, was the real thing.

Now, 70 years later, that same

ball has surfaced in Adelaide. Signed by gunners of 2/3rd Field Regiment that formed one of the teams that day, the Sherrin has been donated to the Army Museum of South Australia by a man whose father was a friend of one of the players.

The museum's manager, Major Barry Willoughby, says the footy is a sacred relic.

"Like the Ashes urn, it's a one-off," Major Willoughby told *The Australian*.

"There's certainly nothing like it in the army museum network."

Not much smells better than a new Sherrin, but nothing beats caressing one of this age and significance. It's a privilege," Major Willoughby says of being the ball's custodian.

"To me it's a significant thing, and I'm honoured to have the privilege of being able to pick it up and look at it as part of my job."



PICTURES: JAMES ELSBY

Major Barry Willoughby with the ball, left, and Bill Hermanson

The ball is under lock and key, but the museum, at Keswick in Adelaide, hopes to have it on public display by August.

A cursory glance at the signatures etched into its sallow leather suggests this was a match where no one shirked a contest.

Sergeant Doug Russell, of Darwin, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal — second in precedence to the Victoria Cross — for his heroism in Greece the year before.

With the German panzers rumbling towards the Australians, Sergeant Russell coolly covered his comrades' withdrawal by directing his 25-pounder gun's fire on to the enemy until the very last minute.

A few days later, Lieutenant Alwyn Colman was recommended for a DCM for "great gallantry" in an action when German dive bombers scored a direct hit on an ammunition truck, setting off a chain reaction of explosions that killed six Australians and wrecked nine guns.

The 2/3rd was one of the last Australian units evacuated from Greece and was subsequently badly mauled when the Germans

stormed Crete. The unit, mostly comprised of "39ers" — so named because they joined up in the early months of the war — lost 27 killed and 128 captured in Greece and Crete.

Their opponents on the football field at Julis in Palestine were hardened Diggers of the 2/10th AIF Battalion, whose fathers and uncles of the "Fighting Tenth" were at the spearpoint of the Gallipoli landings.

The sons and nephews proved their mettle in the siege of Tobruk, where they lost 40 men killed in action or died of wounds.

Many battalion histories weave accounts of their sporting contests through their narratives, incongruously placing match reports alongside accounts of bloody battles and lost mates.

The 2/10th, however, devotes a whole chapter of its history to sport.

"The hard ground did not prevent a first-class exhibition of football, with our boys winning by 19 points," the battalion's historian reports of the first of two games played by the 2/10th and 2/3rd (the gunners won the return match by 14 points).

Little wonder it was of such a high standard — the gunners fielded three players who had represented Western Australia.

The ball is signed by Charlie Cocks, who played alongside the great Jack Oatey at Norwood in South Australia.

The 2/10th was best served by Bill (Froggy) Hermanson, whose display on the wing was described by the battalion diarist as "one of the best individual exhibitions of football that I witnessed in the army". This is some statement, as its author, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Allchin MM, was among the first ashore at Gallipoli.

Hermanson, 95, and living in an Adelaide retirement village, is possibly the game's sole survivor.

"Yeah, I got a kick that day," a modest Hermanson conceded to *The Australian* yesterday, after being pressed.

"I was a lucky player, put it that way. I just enjoyed playing the game; it's a great game."

A Vickers machinegunner, Hermanson "did the full tour" of the 2/10th's war, seeing action in Tobruk, New Guinea and Borneo.

Herecalled teammate Sergeant Harry Madigan booting nine goals that day in Palestine and Corporal Jack O'Brien dominating the ruck.

Later that year, O'Brien earned the DCM at the Battle of Milne Bay in New Guinea for single-handedly engaging two Japanese tanks as they raked the Australians with machinegun fire.

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