

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Selwyn MORT

(1906-2002)

Dick Mort was born at Lithgow, NSW, on 26 March 1906 and educated at Leeton Public School, and Sydney and Newcastle Technical Colleges, where he took an Associate Diploma in Chemistry. He was employed as a Chemist at BHP Newcastle Steelworks, where he was to spend the first half of his working life.

In 1924, he joined the Militia, enlisting in 13th Battery, Australian Garrison Artillery, was promoted to warrant officer, was commissioned in 1929, and promoted to captain in 1934 and major in 1939. He trained at Forts Scratchley and Wallace, participated in many shoots and attended courses at the School of Gunnery.

When war broke out he became Battery Commander, Scratchley Battery. With the installation of the 9.2 inch gun battery at Fort Wallace nearing completion, he and a small team of officers, NCOs and men went to the 9.2 inch training program at North Head and Cape Banks. On his return, he became Battery Commander Wallace Battery.

The speed with which the battery was brought to operational readiness owed much to him. Apart from training the battery his ingenuity and technical flair helped overcome equipment deficiencies on the guns and in the plotting room. Mort also played a part in establishing the fortress system for Newcastle. After leaving Wallace, his appointments included Fire Commander Darwin, Deputy Commander Drummond Battery, Commander Fixed Defences and, towards the end of the war, Contact Officer POW Enquiry Unit.

After the war, he returned to the Steelworks, and after further study gained a Management Certificate and left BHP to become a full-time teacher of Supervision and Management at Sydney Technical College, and School of Management, Hobart Technical College. In another career change he became a Life Assurance Consultant gaining, by examination, a diploma of the Australian Insurance Institute. He later spent many years with the Australian Institute of Management (AIM), holding positions in Newcastle and Tasmania and, in 1976, was elected as an Honorary Fellow of the AIM.

Meanwhile, in 1952, he was recalled to the Active List, serving until 1955 as OC 13th Medium Coast Battery RAA, at Fort Scratchley, after which he was placed on the Retired List with the honorary rank of lieutenant colonel. Dick had a passion for the history of the Newcastle coast defences and devoted much time over 50 years to researching and writing about it. He had a remarkably prodigious memory on technical matters and became a focus for queries and visits and corresponded with enthusiasts in many parts of Australia and overseas.

Mort was a leading force in establishing the Fort Scratchley Military Museum and was at times Librarian/Researcher, Vice President and President and Treasurer. Together with a small team, mostly Wallace veterans, he formed the Fort Wallace Restoration Association, and they laboured for seven years until Defence policy brought an end to the project. He prepared a newsletter, 'The Wallacetrasian' and later, wrote a history of the restoration. He was also a long-term member and office holder of the RAA Association Newcastle Sub-Branch. During this time he built up a valuable collection which he donated to the National Artillery Museum Library at North Fort. Mort edited the 1914-18 wartime diary of Colonel Percy Dobson, (qv) a long-time RAA Association (Newcastle sub-branch) president and ex-Siege Brigade veteran, now held at the National Artillery Museum.

Dick Mort was active in community work until a few years before his death. He belonged to many organizations, and, typically, served long and held office in all. He had an enormous capacity for work, even in his eighties and early nineties and retained his enthusiasm and cheerfulness. He was one of those citizen soldiers who trained for years preparing for war, and when it came, provided much of the leadership and basis for the Army's rapid expansion. Thorough, calm, loyal and considerate, as a soldier and citizen he served his country well. He died on 9 September 2002 aged 96.

Source: A. D. Watt, 'Cannonball', *Journal of the RAA Historical Company*, No. 50, p. 23.