

Robert (Bob) J.K. Semple O.A.M, B.E.M.

4/5/1920-16/1/2020

For decades, the most instantly recognisable member of the Australian Pipe Band community was its Chieftain, R.J.K (Bob) Semple O.A.M, B.E.M. who died, after a short illness, just a few months short of his 100th birthday.

A Life Member of the Hawthorn Pipe Band, Bob had been involved in the world of pipe bands since 1936, when he joined the Victorian Scottish Regiment — 5th Battalion.

At the outbreak of World War II, he put aside his pipes and joined 2/12th Australian Field Regiment - 9th Australian Division as an original member of the unit.

Although Bob never focussed on it, the 9th Division saw more front-line combat action than any other Australian division. Allied Generals and the German Field Marshall, Erwin Rommel, are often quoted for their fulsome praise of this highly decorated unit. They were best known as “the Rats of Tobruk” but saw action, not only there but at the first and second battles of El Alamein, Papua New Guinea and in the beach landings in the Pacific with American troops.

Bob spent 1245 days in active combat service overseas. The siege of Tobruk, at 241 days, is often described as the longest siege in British history. The Pacific war against the Japanese was notable for its ferocity. Bob contended, not only with such a long and arduous war but suffered several bouts of malaria in the Pacific campaigns.

Apart from his love of Pipe Bands, Bob's life was a continual service of remembrance for those who had fought alongside him. He was far too humble to ever make himself the focus of his recollections. Bob never made a point of telling people that he had been mentioned in despatches. As he would say, “there are more Victoria crosses lying under the sands of the desert than have ever been awarded”.

As his old mates passed away, Bob took up the task of keeping their memory alive. In 2019, at the age of 98, he delivered the address at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra for ANZAC day.

Until that date, he marched the full length of the annual parade when so many others of his generation had either passed or were too frail to do so. At the conclusion of the parade, Bob led the massed bands across the forecourt of the Shrine of Remembrance. Many dignitaries have commented it was the sight of Bob leading the Bands that has stayed with them.

He was recently asked by a journalist if he felt he needed to march after almost 75 years. Bob looked straight at him and said, “Yes, and I’m never embarrassed to say so”.

The same month Bob returned to Australia in 1946, he joined the Hawthorn City Pipe Band, after listening to the Band playing in a local park. So began one of the great success stories of the Australian pipe band scene.

Between 1946 and 1960 Bob served as a piper with the Band when the foundations were laid

for the great success of the future decades.

At the conclusion of his piping career, Bob assumed the position of Drum Major of the Band, a position he has continued to hold until his death.

As Drum Major, Bob Semple has made an indelible stamp on the character of the Hawthorn City Pipe Band and on the pipe band fraternity as a whole.

He has won the Victorian Champions Drum Majors' Title on 24 out of a possible 28 occasions up to 1987. At the national level he has won the Australian Title no fewer than seven times.

In 1977 Bob Semple was elected principal of the Dress & Drill Panel of the Australian Federation of Pipe Band Associations. He continued to be re-elected until his retirement in 1987. When not competing, he was regularly called upon as a most highly regarded Dress & Drill Judge.

In 1983 Bob was awarded the B.E.M. for his services to pipe bands, and in June 2016 Bob was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia. The following was posted on the Pipe Bands Victoria website where Bob was described as a living legend.

"As posted on our Facebook page yesterday, we congratulate VHPBA and PBA Vic Branch life member and Hawthorn Pipe Band drum major RJK (Bob) Semple BEM on being awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours for his service to pipe bands and the veterans' community. An honour very much deserved for our 96-year-old living legend."

In October 2018, it was Bob, because of his war service, who featured on a commemorative stamp to celebrate 100 years of Government support for Veterans.

In 1990 Bob was the inaugural winner of the Sir Rupert Hamer Perpetual Trophy for outstanding service to the pipe band community.

In 1993 Bob was made a Life Member of what is now Pipe Bands Australia. Bob is so highly regarded in the broader Pipe Band world that in 1998 he was appointed as Honorary Chieftain of Pipe Bands Australia.

In 1997, Bob was invited by the members of the Rats of Tobruk Pipe Band to parade with them at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. It took very little time for the Tattoo's producer, Brigadier Melville Jameson, to discover he had a genuine "Rat of Tobruk" on parade. The then Pipe Major of the Black Watch, Stevie Small, who is now the Tattoo's producer also made a point of introducing Bob to his band. He had met Bob years before in Jakarta when both Hawthorn and the Black Watch had come to compete. It is a testament to Bobs amazing ability to engage people that the Tattoos letter of condolence was read at Bob's funeral.

In 2005, Bob again performed at the Tattoo. At 85, he was the oldest performer. The youngest cast member was a 6-year-old on a pee wee bike. He and Bob swapped roles. Bob rode the bike whilst the youngster attempted to play Bob's pipes.

In 2007, Bob again performed in a Tattoo. This time in the inaugural Moscow Military Tattoo. He was only 87.

Bob has contributed astonishingly over a lifetime of pipe band involvement. There are a mountain of reports, documents, photos, and other material that place him at the centre of the

Pipe Band movement in Australia for most of the twentieth century.

What all of us will miss is his genuine warmth and interest. His love of life and regard for others set Bob apart and above the rest of us. His life was genuinely one of service; to Pipe Bands and the community in general.

At their own request, a former Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, and a former Victorian Premier, Ted Baillieu, delivered readings and personal comments at Bobs funeral. Two Pipe Bands played, the army sent a troop of soldiers and Scots church in the Melbourne CBD was filled to overflowing. The police closed part of Russel St to allow for the mourners. This was not a State funeral, just a private service for a humble man who touched us all.

They all came for one reason. To say goodbye to Bob.

For decades, Bob stood as the perfect example of what people imagine Pipe Bands are about. In his last few years and at his funeral he showed us all that it is really friendship that matters.

We will miss him.