

Remembrance Day 11th November 2012

Alison Halliday on Tom Scrivener and Tom Kirk

October 2012 marked the 70th anniversary of the battle of El Alamein (WWII). On returning to Egypt one of the small group of veterans remarked: 'I'm not important, I'm just an ordinary bloke – but I – represent all...'¹ Every year we meet and learn a little bit about two of the service men or women listed on our War Memorial; it is not only the personal and military histories of these people that is important for they too represent the lives of so many others. They represented their communities in the three tiny settlements of Mt Wilson, Mt Irvine and Bell but now they also represent, and may continue to do so, all those thousands of Australians who went to war. The comments of the El Alamein veteran reinforces the fact that for so many of those listed on war memorials all over Australia only a very little may still be known, or they may be virtually forgotten except for the engraved name. This ongoing project of talking about the people on our War Memorial is a small attempt to ensure that even though these were 'ordinary blokes' they will not be forgotten.

Today I am going to talk about two men who had very different war experiences but they are linked not only by their place on the Memorial but also by sharing a name, a life spent with wood, and by not seeing active service. As always I am indebted to their families, the local community, and the resources of the Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society, the National Archives and The Australian War Memorial.

THOMAS MINTO SCRIVENER was born in April 1900 at Minto (hence his middle name), near Camden NSW, and he was always known as Tom. As a Scrivener his family has been well documented² so some of what I say may be familiar to some of you. His parents were the surveyor, Charles Robert and Annie (nee Pike)³ an English woman who had migrated to Australia in 1877 aged 14. She was Robert Charles third wife. Annie was described as 'gorgeous'. Gentle but strong she 'demanded good manners'. She was very frugal, even making her husband's own suits⁴. She died in 1946.



Annie Margaret Scrivener

Tom was the fourth of five children, an older brother, Percy Pedder (1890-1974), a younger brother Hugh Ambrose (1901-1962) and two sisters, Ethel (b.1892) and Dora (b.1896)⁵. When he was 8 or 9 years old Tom went to Hayfield Preparatory school at Carlingford. This was a small private school and he may have been a boarder.⁶ He then went to Shore, but he was not academic and was not interested in learning things that had 'no purpose'. He would later comment 'what am I learning this for - it has no practical use and [I have] no interest in it'.⁷

It is not known what Tom did between leaving school and enlisting but it is likely that he spent time working at Mt Irvine. At some point Tom did an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner, possibly before the war, as he describes himself as a 'mechanic' on enlistment.⁸

He enlisted in the AIF on 15 April 1918. He was close to his older brother Pedder and his keenness to join up would have been intensified by hearing of Pedder's time overseas.⁹ The official war record contains letters by both his parents giving their permission. Tom was just 18 years old. He embarked on HMAT 'Medic' in November of 1918. He was a private in the 26th Reinforcements. It was too late for Tom to be part of the war and the ship was recalled at the Armistice. However he did return with a 'souvenir'. On his return he was desperately ill with influenza, most likely caught when the ship had landed in New Zealand. His brother Pedder commented in a letter (dated 27 February 1919) 'It was a scandal that people from Tom's boat landed in New Zealand after the warning, perhaps they did not realise its seriousness'.¹⁰ Pedder also realised how much it would have meant to Tom to miss out on seeing active service 'It was hard luck after being so close that he should have missed the trip to England'.¹¹ I suspect Tom's parents may have had different feelings! He was discharged in January 1919.

Tom met his first wife Marjorie Wallis in Sydney. She was English and had come to Australia as a girl, for her father's health. Family anecdote says they were introduced by Charles Ulm.¹²



They married and moved to Mt Irvine, living in a small cottage at Taihoa. On the lower side of the road Charles built the saw mill ¹³for Pedder and Tom to work, and three small houses. Tom managed the broom stick/handles section of the mill, which were made out of sassafras.¹⁴ There is a pencil sketch of this mill by J Barclay Godsons, inscribed 'To Tom and his wife with kindest regards'. [from back of image held by Coleman] The mill burnt down in 1928. It must have been a lonely life for Marjorie, she commented that she could see the city lights from Taihoa. Tom and Marjorie had three children: John Wallis (1925-2009), Judith (1927-) and Brian (1929-).

After the mill at Mt Irvine was destroyed Tom moved to Sydney and set up his own business; a plywood factory in Kenthurst. This factory invented a fire resistant plywood; they used soft timber which they got in for manufacturing. They also made a particle board. There are strong family links through general engineering interests.

The factory was burnt down in the early 1960s but the shed can still be seen near the junction of Annangrove Rd and Kenthurst Rd. Bill recalls that Tom was very helpful in the building of Kookatonga, getting the timber wholesale. The doors at Kookatonga have a coachwood veneer and were made at the factory at Kenthurst.

Tom left Marjorie after the war for his second wife, Dorothy. Marjorie got a job at the tax department. They remained friends and his two wives were also friendly. His children welcomed Dorothy into the family. Tom was tall, and when young he was attractive and charming. He was also determined, very sure of himself and did not suffer fools gladly.¹⁵

He was close to his daughter, Judith, but he did not get on with either of his sons, John and Brian.

When he retired Tom lived at Point Clare, near Gosford, with his second wife. Tom was a keen sailor, owning two yachts, 'Wendy' and then 'Four Winds'. He was also the treasurer of the Vaucluse sailing Club, at that time sailing a 'VS'.¹⁶ After moving to Point Clare he built a workshop and completely fitted out a Bluebird yacht which he sailed on Brisbane Waters.

Tom died of an aortic aneurism, going off to buy cigarettes. He was a 'man's man'¹⁷ and would have hated to be bed-ridden and demented; the situation he had seen Pedder in.

TOM KIRK was formally named Septimus¹⁸ Boyd Wilson Kirk. Many of you actually knew Tom, and I think I am fortunate to also have been in that position. For this reason what I have to say about him is rather more personal than some of the comments I have made about others on the War Memorial. Like the Scrivener family, there is a great deal of material about the Kirk family, and about Tom; a more complete Kirk family history has yet to be written. Tom was born in 1914, the youngest of the seven sons and two daughters of Sydney and Mary (nee Marceau, married in 1887)¹⁹ His father was a caretaker and then gardener for Jesse Gregson and the family lived in a little slab-sided hut on Yengo's grounds. Later they moved to a house they built on the corner of Queens Avenue and Wynnes Rocks Road.²⁰ I remember Tom saying that he used to sleep on the open verandah, waking up in winter, under a heavy tarpaulin with a frost over the top!

Tom was educated at the Mt Wilson School, but even as a boy he was expected to help out when needed at his older brother's mill. He completed a number of intermediate certificate²¹ subjects but there is no record of him being awarded the actual certificate. Between leaving school and WWII he worked as the leading 'benchman', responsible for milling the logs, for a timber mill in Lithgow. In 1941 an employer described him as 'strictly sober – honest, obliging and industrious'. Another described him as having a 'gentlemanly bearing'.²² He and his older brother Peter used to go to local dances on their motorbikes (the start of a long line of vehicles owned by the two brothers) and Tom, at a dance at Hampton, met his first wife Marie Joyce Lawler, known as Joy.²³ They had three children Jill²⁴, Robyn and Ken. They married in 1937 and Tom built them a home in Queens Avenue in about 1940, called 'EmohRuo'²⁵. Robyn has said that 'He was a tough father and his word was absolute law. He did not get cross or lose his temper – he didn't have to.'²⁶ Outside the family others described him as 'one of nature's gentlemen'.²⁷

Joy got sick soon after the end of WWII with multiple sclerosis. Once diagnosed Tom was told by the doctor to 'let her do what she wants while she can'.²⁸ At about the same time Tom built an extension onto the family home, and they established a tea room. It did quite well because it was used by the Katoomba tourist buses. His daughter Robyn said she got special dispensation to leave school at 14 and look after her mother and the tearoom²⁹. When Joy could no longer go out Tom would return home every day for lunch, feed her and put her into a wheel chair. Joy died in 1962. Tom married Dulcie, known as Tood in 1964, she was a cousin of Joy's but they were more like sisters. Tood first saw Tom when he was waiting for Joy at the station before they were married and she thought he was the 'biggest and most handsome man I had ever seen – Joy's got herself a lovely boyfriend'.³⁰

Tom enlisted in the RAAF in 1942, he was 27 years old. In his initial application he said that his skills were log hauler, sawyer and tractor driver. The RAAF record notes that he was 'good type, reliable, solid build, quiet spoken'; in a later interview he is described as 'tall, massive build' and his personality as 'impressive, studious, very active for size'. On his first application, though told he would be 'useful', he was informed in January 1942 that 'all the musterings are full'; a month later he was called for a trade test, medical and interview and in March 1942 he was admitted to the Reservists of the RAAF; almost immediately he was told to report to the recruiting centre in Sydney for enlistment as a 'aircraftman Class 1'³¹. His training was at Parkes, a photo³² shows the whole group with only Tom in summer uniform; apparently they did not have a standard winter one big enough for him. By August 1942 he had completed training as a 'flight mechanic' with a 'distinguished pass' and in December he was posted to Thirty Two Squadron.³³ Tom was promoted to Aircraftman and then Leading Aircraftman, serving in various locations throughout Australia. In

August 1945 he was transferred to the Reserve. Throughout the war his general conduct sheet had no entries³⁴. He returned home to 'civil duties' and set up his own mill in 1946. The timber from this mill was used almost exclusively in the coal mines in Lithgow, in everything from pit stops to machinery parts. His mechanical skill meant that he could strip down, mend or start any cranky engine from pump to helicopter.



Tom Kirk, champion axeman, Sydney Easter Show, 1965
Part of Jeff Carter collection of photographs held by National Library of Australia.

Tom first won a chopping competition in 1929 aged 15. He went on to be Western Districts Champion in both underhand and standing block, from 1931 to his retirement in 1965. He first went to the Sydney Royal in 1931 winning the under 21 championship. During his competitive years he won 22 world championships in woodchopping and sawing, making the standing block competition his own. In 1951 his record for the 15 inch standing block was 39 seconds. His brother Peter paired with him in the double handed sawing. Tom and Peter held the record for the double handed saw which was never broken due to the introduction of metric measurement. Tom also successfully competed at the Brisbane Royal show and at country woodchops all over New South Wales. He travelled to the United States in 1963, entering and winning 18 events. They did no special training³⁵, however Tom did prepare his own axes with great care. He made his own circular sharpening stone from a large lump of local sandstone³⁶.

After the war he built his own sawmill, and later Peter joined him there. Tom worked at the mill until he was 70, and Peter was 77. His children loved to visit him at work, and later, Jill's husband Barry commented that he could watch Tom and Peter at work all day, mostly in silence. He continued to do tree work for locals. He was inducted into the NSW Hall of Champions in the early 1980s, as one

of only two wood choppers; the collection of items³⁷ includes five medals, three trophies and a sash.³⁸

I have given a brief outline of Tom's life and I want to finish with a few anecdotes about Tom; I think they reveal a great deal about the man; and I know that many of you have your own memories and stories ...

From my father: Tom and my father happened to enlist at the same time. Apparently Tom had been warned by his older brothers to be careful in the big city as there might be con men who would try to get money from him. Standing in the queue they needed money for some reason and my father didn't have enough so he turned to the large man behind him and asked for a loan of a quid or two... It was the start of a long and strong friendship.

From his grandson (Jill's son) Greg Stevenson: There was a saying that he told my mother, my mother told me, and I passed onto my kids: 'If you wish in one hand, and spit in the other hand, at the end of the day you can guarantee which one will be the fullest'. In other words, you need to work for everything you have, and nothing is handed to you on a plate.

From Libby Raines: Peter and Tom Kirk used to dig the graves [in the Mt Wilson churchyard] by hand; seven feet deep, seven feet long and two feet wide with some massive rocks in the way which had to be removed - a very difficult job. Tom worried about his own and his remaining brothers' graves, so in 1990 he asked if he could dig ten graves 'in advance'. He organised for a back hoe to come and dig ten holes. The soil was taken away and replaced with sand; much easier to dig by hand than the hard, rocky ground. You can imagine the reaction of visitors to this while the work was in progress, with ten new mounds of earth and ten deep holes. It looked as if we had suffered a plague, with many deaths from it.³⁹

From his niece, Milba Mewburn: Milba's father Peter worked with Tom at the mill from the early 1950s. She remembers that he [Tom] 'filled the doorway'⁴⁰ when he came into the house to collect Peter every morning in the old Vanguard. Every day they took 2 cups, 4 biscuits and a little bottle of milk to have for morning tea. Milba remembers him as being 'always the same'. He was an excellent listener and she loved him dearly

From Peter Piggott (and others)⁴¹: Peter had bought a second hand helicopter and was having problems starting it. He spent ages on the phone to an engineer in Sydney but couldn't get it going. Tom told him to go back to Tom's house and get another battery. When he got back with the battery the helicopter was stripped down into a thousand pieces, and Pete nearly had a heart attack. Tom put it all back together and put the new battery in and it started. He told Pete it was customary for a pilot to take the mechanic up for a ride!

And finally, again from Milba: Once when doing some work at Yengo a group of politicians including Bob Carr came to visit Peter Piggott and Carr had great trouble opening the gate. He heard a voice from above saying: 'if you can't open the gate how do you expect to run the state?'

Tom died in Lithgow hospital in 2001, on his headstone is the simple epitaph: 'champion axeman'

Bibliography and Notes

Birtles, Terry *Robert Charles Scrivener: a biography* Arcadia/Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd 2012–

¹ ABC TV news 12 November 2012

² exhibition from the Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society, monograph by Terry Birtles, unpublished family history by Philip Coleman

³ she is recorded as both Margaret Annie and Annie Margaret

⁴ Judith Coleman

⁵ dates from NSW Registry of births deaths and marriages

⁶ there are records of a Hayfield school at Homebush, Prospect, Carlingford and Parramatta, from Australian National Dictionary of Biography

⁷ grandson Philip Coleman in interview October 2012

⁸ official war service record

⁹ Pedder has been described by Arthur Delbridge in Occasional Paper/HistSoc DATE

¹⁰ quoted by Coleman

¹¹ letter from England dated 16 November 1919, quoted by Coleman

¹² Judith Coleman

¹³ mill located near present day Willowbank, on the southern side of Mt Irvine road

¹⁴ from conversation with Bill Scrivener. Bill Scrivener's father and Tom were half-brothers, Bill's father, Charles Passefield being a son of the first wife, Eugenie

¹⁵ Philip Coleman

¹⁶ The 'VS' is essentially a one-design craft of 15 feet (4.6 metres). The class has undergone considerable enhancement since the original design by Charles Sparrow in 1936

¹⁷ as described by Philip Coleman

¹⁸ because he was the seventh son

¹⁹ Sydney's parents were Robert and Athalia Kirk. Robert is named on the stone seat at Founder's Corner

²⁰ now owned by Ron and Moira Green

²¹ awarded at the end of one's 3rd year of high school education, prior to the establishment of the Higher School Certificate there were five years of high school.

²² Official war service record

²³ in conversation with daughter, Robyn, November 2012

²⁴ now deceased

²⁵ now Holly Ridge

²⁶ in conversation with daughter, Robyn, November 2012

²⁷ Letter from Tood Kirk, 2012

²⁸ Conversation with Robyn, November 2012

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ in conversation with Tood Kirk, November 2012

³¹ Official war service record

³² in possession of Alison Halliday

³³ Official war service record

³⁴ Received his final discharge in 1947, Official war service record

³⁵ recollection of Milba Milburn

³⁶ recollection of Alison Halliday

³⁷ Items are:

medal Gold Sydney Royal Show, World Championship Standing Block Wood Chop 1941

medal Royal Easter Show Champion Double Hand Sawing, 1947

medal Royal Easter Show Champion Woodchopping Contest, Standing Cut, 1950

medal Royal Easter Show World Championship Under Hand, 1952

medal Royal Sydney Show World Championship Standing Chop, 1952

trophy World Championship Timber Carnival, Albany, Oregon, Standing Block Chopping, 1963

trophy Britstand Trophy for Axemen, 1948, 1949, 1953 (replica)

trophy World Champion All-Around Lumberjack, Hayward, Wisconsin, 1963

sash World Championship Woodchopping 1940

³⁸ curator of NSW Hall of Champions

³⁹ Hist. Soc Newsletter, Feb 2007

⁴⁰ from conversation with Milba Mewburn, November 2012

⁴¹ heard at Tom's funeral as part of eulogy by Peter Piggott and also remembered by others.