

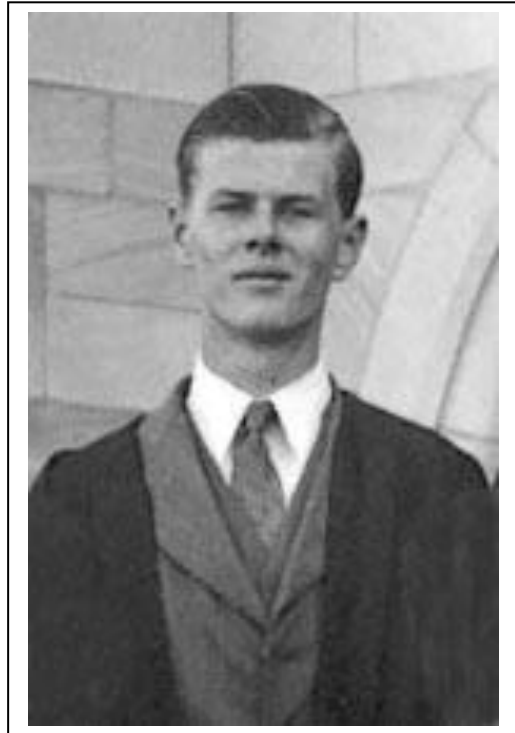


St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

## IAN KIMBER DARLING

13 NOVEMBER 1916 TO 15 AUGUST 1945



“Tom” Darling was born in Perth in 1916, the eldest son of Mr & Mrs Fergus D. Darling of Nedlands. He attended Perth Boys School and then won a scholarship to Perth Modern School, where he had the distinction of being promoted from first year to third year, and so only spent 1930 to 1933 at “Mod.”

He came to St George's College in 1936. Josh Reynolds noted that he was not physically strong but had *a particularly engaging personality... his mind was broad and tolerant in its swing. He was a keen student of*

*mankind and a lover of good literature. He did not hesitate to be critical, but there was a Puckish humour in his criticisms.*

Though he had never shown any interest in military affairs, it was not surprising to his friends when Tom enlisted at the very first opportunity on 7 November 1939 as a Private with 2/11<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF (City of Perth).

When the war broke out Australia still had an army that by law was not allowed to go overseas, so once again a force – the Australian Imperial Force – was raised from volunteers. To differentiate in from the AIF of the Great War it immediately, though unofficially, became known as the Second AIF. Popular sentiment also led to battalions being re-created, hence the Second Eleventh Battalion AIF was, like its predecessor, the City of Perth volunteer battalion.

The 2/11th was the first Western Australian battalion raised for service overseas. Its formation began with the appointment of its first commanding officer on 13 October 1939 and by 7 November it was assembling at the newly-built Northam Camp to begin training. On 30 November it left Northam for further training at another new camp at Greta in NSW. Tom returned to WA with his battalion in the middle of March and embarked at Fremantle for service overseas on 20 April, 1940.

After arriving in the Middle East the 2/11th trained in Palestine and Egypt. The battalion went into action for the first time at Bardia on 5 January 1941 and, as part of the Allied advance into Italian-occupied Libya, subsequently fought at Tobruk on 21–22 January, and to secure Derna airfield on 25 January. It was advancing to the south of Benghazi when the Italians surrendered on 7 February.

In early April 1941 the 2/11th was deployed to assist in the defence of Greece. The Allied forces, however, were unable to hold back the attacking Germans. The 2/11th fought and slowed the Germans at Brallos Pass on 24 April and then continued its withdrawal to Megara, where it was evacuated by sea on the night of 25 April. The battalion landed on Crete the next day. It was subsequently deployed with the 2/1st Battalion to defend Retimo airfield and prepared for the German assault that began on 20 May, spearheaded by the largest ever paratroop drop.

Tom was a Private in the Intelligence Corps and would have been involved in assessment of the enemy's strategy. Ralph Honner, at the time a company commander with the battalion, described the arrival of the Germans as seen from his vantage point under the olive trees east of Retimo:

*[It was] a spectacle that might have belonged to a war between the planets. Out of the unswerving flying fleet came tumbling lines of little dolls, sprouting silken mushrooms that stayed and steadied them, and lowered them in ordered ranks into our consuming fire. And still they came, till all the fantastic sky before us was filled with futuristic snowflakes floating beneath the low black thundercloud of the processional planes - occasionally flashing into fire as if struck by lightning from the earth.*

These "little dolls" – German paratroopers of General Kurt Student's XI Air Corps – were highly trained and motivated. For ten days they, and the elite mountain troops that were sent to reinforce them, hunted and were hunted by the Australian, New Zealand, British, and Greek soldiers, as well as Cretan farmers, townspeople, and police. Fighting was savage and bloody, with little quarter given. Men fought to the death in solitary duels or major engagements; their bodies cluttered the narrow streets of the towns or lay among the olive trees and creek beds of the countryside. The Retimo airfield was held tenaciously for ten days, despite shortages of food and ammunition, and German mastery of the skies.

The Australians used every tactic they could muster. By nightfall on the 20 May, the 2/11th had captured 84 prisoners and a mass of arms. Greatly to the Australians' advantage, battalion commander Major R.L. Sandover could speak German. He found out from the prisoners that no more paratroops would be landed, and translated a captured code of signals. The next day his men laid out on the ground the sign calling for more mortar bombs, and a German supply plane complied. In this way, numerous weapons and supplies were dropped by the Germans to the Australians during the battle.

German successes elsewhere on Crete, however, left the two battalions isolated and made surrender inevitable. Many 2/11th soldiers attempted to escape from Crete but only a relatively small number ultimately succeeded. Most, including Tom, were taken prisoner.

At the end of the war in Europe, Tom was repatriated to England and reunited with his brother. He had spent almost four years in captivity,

though it seems he improved the lot of his fellow prisoners of war by giving language lectures. Josh Reynolds wrote in *The Dragon*:

*He came back from Germany with all his old trust in his fellow men unimpaired and, in fact, deepened and broadened.*

On August 13, just two days before his death, Isabel Cuthbertson wrote to Josh Reynolds, noting that they had been very busy. *What with Tom Darling's coming home we have been in the thick of family reunions – Tom is very nervy still – he told us he'd enjoyed seeing you & is anxious to start work again.*

Tom had been home in Australia for three weeks when victory in the Pacific was achieved, the Japanese Government surrendered, and massive celebrations were held in Perth. Police estimated that on 15 August crowds of 25,000 to 30,000 swirled into the city, over-taxing public transport to the point that some drivers and conductors refused to work. At about 6.30pm Tom was on his way home with two female companions. They got off a trolley bus in Stirling Highway, at the corner of Meriwa Street and began to cross the highway. Tom was slightly ahead when he was struck by a car. He was taken by ambulance to the Hollywood Military Hospital, but died about 45 minutes after being admitted.

In what must count as one of the supreme ironies of the war, at the very moment of the victorious celebrations, Tom Darling's life had ended. The war, and the list of Georgian fatalities that had begun five years earlier, were over.

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"I would like to thank you for your unfailing & sympathetic kindness to Tom both as a student & as a soldier: it meant so much to him & helped & encouraged him more than perhaps you know. Each day I miss Tom more and more. One day I may become resigned to this dreadful loss."

**Margaret Darling, writing to Josh Reynolds.**