

OPENING OF SIR LESLIE MORSHEAD WAR VETERAN  
HOMES, CANBERRA, A.C.T.

26TH APRIL, 1964

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

Mr. President, Lady Morshead and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I rather think that the President made a slight understatement when he said that without the women this organisation could not exist, because the simple truth, of course, is that without women, none of us would be here. (Laughter) This is a truth of universal application.

Now, I regard this as a singular honour to be allowed to declare open this building and to declare it open in the name of one of the great Australians of our time - Leslie Morshead. I knew him for a great number of years. He was, a few years before myself, born in Ballarat and as all Ballarat people will admit, that is no bad thing. (Laughter) He went to school in Ballarat and then became for a time a schoolmaster. I always used to say to him: "Where did you get this gleam in the eye? Where did you acquire this habit of command?" and he admitted to me that he had been a schoolmaster for a few years. It must have been terrific.

Then, of course, as you have heard, he had a remarkable record in the First World War and between the two wars, a very remarkable record in business administration. All the time he kept up his contact with the citizen forces whatever they might be called from time to time, and in the Second World War, he became one of the immortal figures of that war. I just want to say something about him, if I may, in one or two of these capacities.

First of all, he was a great citizen soldier. This is something almost peculiar to Australia - no regular army until quite recently, men accustomed to responsibility and command in their business affairs, devoting some of their time - sometimes a great deal of their time, to the art of war. It is sometimes forgotten that whereas many of the great men in military history in other countries or most of them, sometimes all of them, were highly trained professional soldiers of immense distinction, in Australia so many of the people we think of from Monash to Morshead were great citizen soldiers - some might have said amateur soldiers - but enriched by the whole of their civil experience and greatly gifted in the command of men.

Early in 1941, I was in the Middle East and I went out to Bardier and Tobruk and Benghazi, and at this time, these places had just fallen by attack upon the Italians. I very well remember with some trepidation that the day that I was at Benghazi there was a little counter-attack by the Italians; it was fairly near to the event. Leslie Morshead had taken his brigade to England and had brought it back to the Middle East and it was the nucleus of what became the Ninth Division. Now that was an extraordinary piece of country. It must have been a problem for any military commander, because although there was a defined coastline, an indented coastline, particularly at Tobruk, the country itself looked to the superficial eye to be a mere desert. You would wonder how anybody could find cover in it until you discovered that there were little depressions and waddies, dongas, in the territory; but I would have thought terribly hard places to defend. Well, at the time I was there

which was sometime in January of 1941, there was no problem of defence because the whole movement was westward to Benghazi and down towards the bottom of the gulf and it was only then that it was discovered that the Germans under Rommel had landed, coming across by the short cut from Pantelaria and that they were massing themselves for an attack with a Panzer Division hitherto unknown in the fighting that had gone on. Well, anybody looking at Tobruk from the ground, looking at Tobruk from the air, would have said, well this would be a tremendously difficult place to defend, tremendously difficult, against armour, but there were two great things. One was that there was a tremendous spirit in the men who ultimately withstood the siege of Tobruk when Rommel swept eastward and the other was that they had as their commanding officer one of the very great soldiers of the war, Leslie Morshead.

He could look you in the eye and appear to be fierce but he was fundamentally a modest man. He had the most enormous qualities, building up the morale of people who were with him. And so, in the long run, we all know what happened. Rommel came along, Benghazi fell, Tobruk first of all fell and then didn't and then was isolated on the flank and so the Fourth rolled eastward till the day came when the defence of Tobruk had at long last to be altered. But - what - from April of 1941 to October of 1941, Tobruk held out as an isolated post on the side of the whole German advance to the East in country to a lay eye, as I have said, would appear to present every conceivable problem of defence, in which defence had to be active and in which defence had to harry the other man and not get bogged down within a narrow perimeter, and for those months it held and I will always believe that one of the dominating reasons - I know there were great men there, marvellous people, we honour them every year in Australia, but you know someplace in the centre there has to be a great man and this was a great man, Leslie Morshead. He can never be done sufficient honour in his memory for what he did at that time in that place.

It may interest some of you to know that in March, April and into May of that year I was in London, sitting in the War Cabinet with the great Winston Churchill and staying with him each weekend down at Chequers. Hardly three days would ever go by without him saying something about the defence of Tobruk. This captured his imagination. You know, with that rich vocabulary of his, he would look at me and say, "This is not a matter merely of defending something. This is a sally-fort from which to attack the foe". I had the great honour once of sending Leslie Morshead a message about this which I know he kept because he referred to it years and years after the war.

And then, of course, don't let us forget that that was an episode of defence against siege, but it wasn't so long thereafter when at Alamein, Morshead commanded the Ninth Division and that was the crucial turning battle of the war. Let me emphasise that fact. There were people, when I was in Egypt early in 1941, who thought that if the enemy once got near the delta, there was no defence possible. Alamein was designed to prevent them from getting into the delta and Alamein, this crucial battle, meant that the Rommel forces rolled back, that the whole position in North Africa became clear, that an attack on Italy became feasible, that a strike into the heart of the enemy from the Mediterranean became possible. I really believe that if you had to determine what were the crucial battles of the war, Alamein would be at least one of them and I would think possibly the crucial battle.

Somebody wrote a book which I read as a boy called "Seven Decisive Battles of History" or something of the kind. I've forgotten. This, I believe, was a decisive battle in the war and therefore we must not think of these matters without thinking back to the man who played so great a part in them - Leslie Morshead. I have told you a lot of things, all of which you know better than I do. I thought I would rather like to tell them in the presence of his widow because it is important that she should know that she wears a name that is not a great name just because somebody said it is but a great name because he made it one, and I think it is a marvellous thing that in this city his name should be commemorated in this fashion. I hope that all over Australia it will never be forgotten.

It is a very particular honesty for one who was his admirer and, I am happy to say, his friend, to be able to stand here and declare this building open.

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