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OBITUARY

Brigadier Sir Frederick Chilton ***CBE, DSO* (Retd)***

Frederick Oliver Chilton¹, lawyer, citizen-soldier, war hero and esteemed public administrator, died in Sydney on 1 October 2007 aged 102. A long-serving member of the Institution², in 1995, he presented to us the portrait of Major-General George Vasey, which now hangs in the Ursula Davidson Library. A thanksgiving service was held at St Swithun's Anglican Church, Pymble, on 8 October 2007, at which the Institution was well-represented.

Fred Chilton was born at Woollahra, New South Wales, in 1905, and was subsequently raised on the family orchard at Turramurra. He was educated at North Sydney Boys' High School and the University of Sydney, from which he graduated with first-class honours in both arts and law, and was admitted as a solicitor in 1929. He enlisted in the Sydney University Regiment³ as a private soldier in 1923, when military training was compulsory, and, after commissioning in 1926, rose to the rank of major before transferring out in 1937.

After the declaration of war in 1939, Fred was invited to join the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (NX 231) as one of the foundation officers of the 2/2nd Australian Infantry Battalion, 16th Brigade, 6th Division. By the time the battalion saw service in North Africa in late 1940, Fred was the commanding officer, having already completed the war course at the Middle East Staff College in Haifa. For his conspicuously gallant leadership of the battalion – characterised by coolness, courage and initiative – in its first action, the 6th Division's capture of Bardia on 3-4 January 1941, he was made a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Later, on 21-22 January, he led the battalion with equal distinction during the capture of Tobruk.

The battalion was then transferred to Greece, where it conducted a gallant delaying defence down the Greek peninsula in April 1941, before being cut off by the Germans at the Tempe (Pinios) Gorge on the south-eastern flank of Mt Olympus on 16-18 April. It was during this battle that the New Zealand General, Bernard Freyberg, VC, after speaking to Chilton by telephone, said to Chilton's brigade commander: "You've a fine man up there. He's as cool as a cucumber." Chilton was later to say of this action: "No fighting unit could have had a severer test of its quality – training, efficiency and above all, morale – nor passed the test so magnificently ... I think Pinios will go down as one of the battalion's greatest efforts. Though weary from their previous withdrawals, lacking any armoured support or adequate guns, and faced with greatly superior force, it held on grimly and achieved its assigned task of holding off an armoured battalion and three battalions of infantry long enough to cover the withdrawal of the Allied forces through Larissa..." Fred and his protection party, the last of the battalion to withdraw, staged a daring escape, island-hopping across the Aegean Sea and finally reaching neutral Turkey in May. Fred made it back to Palestine and, noted for his detailed planning as a battalion commander, was appointed to the operations staff of

Headquarters 1st Australian Corps, before returning to Australia in early 1942.

Promoted to Colonel, he was first appointed GSO1 (Operations) Headquarters 1st Australian Army, and then commandant of the Army Tactical School, before becoming chief of staff of Milne Force which, at Milne Bay, Papua, in August-September 1942, defeated an assault by Japanese naval landing troops, thereby inflicting on the Japanese their first decisive defeat on land.

For the campaign to re-capture Australian New Guinea beginning in late 1943, he was promoted to Brigadier and given command of 18th Brigade, 7th Division (Major-General Vasey). He led it through the Ramu Valley campaign, beginning with the capture of Shaggy Ridge on 20 January – 4 February 1944, a very difficult four-phase attack followed by exploitation for which he was awarded a Bar to his DSO. For a period, he was acting commander of 7th Division while Vasey was ill. Finally, he led the brigade through the Balikpapan (Borneo) campaign in 1945 and at the end of hostilities was appointed military governor of the Celebes (now Sulawesi), where he accepted the Japanese surrender and successfully led the peacekeeping operation maintaining order between thousands of Japanese prisoners, the returning Dutch and Indonesian separatists.

Following the war, he was invited to lead Australia's fledgling joint intelligence service. He helped uncover a Soviet spy ring operating in the Department of External Affairs in 1948 and established the Defence Signals Inspectorate, before becoming Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defence in 1950. His service to Defence was recognised by appointment as an Officer in the General Division of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1957, before he was appointed Secretary of the Repatriation Department⁴ in 1958. He regarded this appointment as "perhaps the most useful, productive and satisfying years of my working life" and his outstanding service to veterans and their families was recognised by appointment as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1963 and a Knight Bachelor in 1969. He retired in 1970.

He provided significant support to many organisations, including the Returned and Services League, the Scouting Association and the Outward Bound Movement. In his 100th year, he commanded the Anzac Day march in Sydney and in 2006 attended the unveiling of memorial plaques to 2/2nd Australian Infantry Battalion and 18th Brigade at the Australian War Memorial.

David Leece⁵

¹Portrait of Brigadier Chilton: the Chilton family.

²He joined in 1938, nominated by his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel W J V Windeyer (later Major-General The Right Honourable Sir Victor Windeyer, KBE, CB, DSO, ED).

³Then known as the Sydney University Scouts – the current name was adopted in 1927.

⁴Now Department of Veterans' Affairs

⁵Much of the material in this obituary was sourced from Ian Chapman (1996) *Sydney University Regiment: the first 80 years* (Nebenzahl: Sydney) 861 pp.; E G Keogh (1965) *South West Pacific 1941-45* (Grayflower Productions: Melbourne) 479 pp.; and Chilton family notes.