



## **Dr Norman Charles Talbot MC, MB ChB (Melbourne)**

**Prepared by Errol Payne**

Dr Norman Charles Talbot was one of a small group of medical practitioners who were instrumental in providing a very high level of care to Rockhampton and the broader Central Queensland Community in the first sixty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This brief account of his life and work is in no way the full story, but it will provide an excellent overview, and will also serve to highlight the wealth of historical information which is now available on the internet. The story is based largely on material on the public record, supplemented by an oral history interview by Dr Tom Dewar with one of Dr Talbot's sons, Campbell, and Ellie Dean and Pat Savage who worked with him in his surgery in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> The story also uses photographs and other items from the Country Hospital Museum Collection.

Norman Charles Talbot was born to George William Talbot, a teacher, and Isabella Mackay on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1886 in Campbells Forest, Victoria. He attended Scotch College in Melbourne and then worked there as a teacher until he was old enough to commence his study of medicine at the University of Melbourne in 1907.<sup>1</sup> The Council of the University admitted him to the degrees of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1912.<sup>2</sup>



***Photograph of Dr Norman Charles Talbot held in the Country Hospital Museum Collection.***

As was the case for so many young women and men at that time, Dr Talbot decided to join the war effort and enlisted in Britain with the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915.<sup>3,4</sup> The reason for his British enlistment was that the Australian army judged that it had enough medical practitioners at the time.<sup>1</sup> We do not have the full story of his war service since Great Britain is not as well advanced as Australia in transferring its archives to the web. However, the records which are available show that he was admitted into the Royal Army Medical Corp as a Lieutenant on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1915.<sup>5</sup> He was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. He was a Lieutenant at the

commencement of his service and was promoted to Captain during the war. A 1915 document states that his theatre of war was France. In 1919, The Argus in Melbourne announced that he had been awarded the Military Cross for Gallantry and the presentation was made on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1919 by the Governor-General in the grounds of the Federal Government House.<sup>6</sup> However, the award had actually been announced in The London Gazette on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1917.<sup>7</sup>

Our Association's collection includes two photographs of Dr Talbot in his World War 1 uniform.



***Dr Norman Charles Talbot in the uniform of the Royal Army Medical Corps during World War 1.***



***Dr Norman Charles Talbot (Right) and colleagues in the Royal Army Medical Corps during World War 1***

The first newspaper reference to the presence of Dr Talbot in Rockhampton appears in a list of the attendees at the Matron's Ball 29<sup>th</sup> September 1919.<sup>8</sup> The first of very many reports of injured and ill people being taken to his surgery for treatment appeared in The Morning Bulletin on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1919.<sup>9</sup> He advertised the location of his consulting rooms in mid-November 1919 thus:<sup>10</sup>

*"FROM SATURDAY MORNING, the 15th instant, and onward, Dr Talbot's Consulting Rooms will be at the Surgery formerly occupied by Dr Buchanan in East-street and until recently occupied by Mr Vesperman, Dentist next the Royal Hotel."*

In the 1919 Electoral Roll, his address was given as 124 Victoria Parade. However from then until the 1954 rolls his address was given as his surgery address 28 East St in 1922 and then 34 East St. The property was known as Richmond House.

During 1920 and 1921 there are numerous newspaper reports of ill and injured people being taken to Dr Talbot's surgery. He was appointed an Honorary Medical Officer at the Rockhampton Hospital on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1920 and had the same role at the Children's Hospital. The first reference to Dr Talbot setting up his own hospital came in the report of a death there in February 1922.<sup>11</sup> The Morning Bulletin reported a birth at Tannachy Private Hospital on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1922.<sup>12</sup>

Tannachy was on the site of Rockhampton's very first hospital on the banks of the Fitzroy River. When that hospital relocated to Canning St, Mr William Patterson, an original shareholder of Mt Morgan Mines, purchased the site and built his magnificent home of Oregon pine, which he named Tannachy, the name given by the Darumbal People to the rocks nearby in the Fitzroy River. After

William Patterson died in 1896, the home was rented as a guest house by the Misses Armstrong “for young men who did their own entertaining”. It remained a guest house until 1913 when it was purchased by Mrs W.G. Chapple. The Chapple family resided there for nine years with many balls being held in the grand ballroom during the 1914-1918 war. Dr Talbot then purchased the home as the basis for his private hospital. In later years a maternity section was added and a separate cottage was acquired for a nurses’ home. This photograph was taken in 1929. The original Tannachy is on the right.



*Photograph of Tannachy Hospital as it was in 1929. The photograph is taken from the Graduation Certificate of Virginia D’Arcy, donated by her son John Miguel.*

The next major development occurred in early 1924 when Dr Frank Couper Wooster DSO, MB ChM (Sydney) FRACS joined Dr Talbot in his practice and in the running of the Tannachy Hospital.<sup>13</sup> Frank Wooster had been the Medical Superintendent at the Rockhampton Hospital since 1914 with the exception of a period of leave to allow him to serve in World War 1. He left military service with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and the award of the Distinguished Service Order. An overview of Dr Wooster’s life and service similar to this one about Dr Talbot is available on the ACHHA website (<http://www.achha.org.au/Frank-Wooster-2015.php>).

From this point on there are literally dozens of newspaper reports and family notices relating to births, deaths, accidents and illnesses involving Tannachy. Clearly, this hospital was a major resource benefitting Central Queensland.

Of the very many stories related in the newspapers, this one from 1931 stands out. A young man from Yeppoon, Fred Poelitz, had travelled to Emerald in May 1930 in a representative rugby league team. During the game he received a serious injury to his upper spine which rendered him an invalid. He was transferred to the Tannachy Hospital where he remained with no chance of recovery. Dr Talbot took a keen interest in the case, contacting a Sydney orthopaedic specialist, Dr N. D. Royle, who thought that he may be able successfully treat him if he could be brought to Sydney. Dr Talbot contacted Rockhampton Aerial Services Ltd who made available a DH50 four-seater plane, the Western Star. The Ambulance Brigade installed a stretcher for Mr Poelitz so placed that Dr Talbot could sit beside the patient on the trip to Sydney. Such was the nature of planes in 1931 that stops were planned Maryborough, Brisbane and Coffs Harbour to refuel. It was expected that the whole trip would take 14 hours.<sup>14</sup> To complicate matters, this was January in tropical Australia and the weather was very challenging. The planned 4:00 am departure did not occur until 5:00 am. After leaving Brisbane at 10:00 am they encountered strong head winds and when they reached Coffs Harbour they had to stay the night.<sup>15</sup> Mr Poelitz was kept on the plane overnight and was tended to by a matron and nurses from the local hospital.<sup>16</sup>

The return trip for Dr Talbot was challenging as well. They only managed to reach Brisbane on the first day due to rough weather. Conditions were so poor that they had to stay in Brisbane overnight.<sup>17</sup> In the event, they were actually delayed for another day before completing the flight through heavy rain. When Dr Royle examined the patient, he said that an operation would be necessary but he hoped that this would restore mobility for Mr Poelitz.<sup>16</sup> However, despite all of the effort, there was no happy ending. Though it is said that he was making good progress, he died from complications in a Sydney private hospital in January 1932.<sup>18</sup> He was 23 years of age.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s there are many newspaper articles which provide an insight into the broad role which Dr Talbot played in the community. Without attempting a complete search and providing full documentation, we know that at one time or another he was active, usually in an executive role, in the tennis club, the soccer club, the rifle club, the aero club and the various racing clubs. With Dr Wooster he also supported rugby league in the role of honorary medical officer. In 1929 both he and Dr Wooster were elected to Life Membership of the rugby league organisation. Also like Dr Wooster, he frequently donated trophies for competitions. A notable example was the Talbot Challenge Shield for competitions involving the 11<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance. He was also a racehorse owner, and on one particular occasion when he was President of the Rockhampton Jockey Club his horse Phyllite won the £25 cup which he had donated for the race.<sup>19</sup>



***Morning Bulletin photograph of Dr Talbot with the cup which he had donated. The caption read: "I did not give you away for long," probably thought Dr N. C. Talbot, donor of the cup and owner of Phyllite when the trophy was presented to him by the chairman of the club.***<sup>20</sup>

An important event in Dr Talbot's life was the death of his mother on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1936.<sup>21</sup> According to the electoral rolls, Mrs Talbot had been living at the same address as Dr Talbot since at least 1922. There is ample evidence that she also was a significant contributor to the community in her own right. Her two daughters visited Dr Talbot and his mother in Rockhampton from time to time. Her body was taken to Melbourne for burial.

Dr Talbot married in February 1938 when he was 52 years old.<sup>22</sup> His wife was Lillian Cantley Spence McKenzie, daughter of a Longreach grazing family who was 20 years his junior. They had two sons, MacKenzie and Campbell.

Later in 1938 the Queensland Government appointed him as Government Medical Officer to replace Dr Daniel Patrick O'Brien.<sup>23</sup> He held this position well into later life even after he had retired from normal medical practice. This was in itself a very busy position, responsible for many medical examinations of public-sector employees, workers compensation issues and conducting post-

mortems. The Government Medical Officer worked closely with the City Council overseeing the general health of the community, particularly as it related to the immunisation of children and the management of infectious diseases such as poliomyelitis, diphtheria and whooping cough. In this role the person is sometimes referred to as the Medical Officer of Health to the Council and reported regularly to the organisation.

When World War 2 commenced, Dr Talbot decided to serve once again. He enlisted on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1940, located with Northern Command Headquarters with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.<sup>24</sup> He served until 14<sup>th</sup> June 1944. Apparently he had hoped to serve overseas but was disappointed when the army decided that this was not possible due to his age (54 at the time of enlistment) and instead appointed him as Assistant Director of Medical Services, Northern Command.<sup>1,25</sup>

Dr Talbot had maintained his army links after World War 1. He joined the Australian Army Medical Corps in 1921 and was appointed to command the 11<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance in Rockhampton in 1927. He led that unit until 1936.<sup>25</sup> During these years of service he was promoted through the ranks to Lieutenant-Colonel.

The announcement that Dr Talbot had left Rockhampton to take up his military role triggered a community movement to recognise his service to Rockhampton since 1919. The Mayor convened a meeting to set the process underway. The Morning Bulletin of 11<sup>th</sup> March 1941 reported as follows:<sup>26</sup>

*“DR N. C. TALBOT TESTIMONIAL.*

*At a meeting convened by the Mayor (Mr R. W. Evans) in the Council Chambers for the purpose of raising a testimonial to Dr N. C Talbot in recognition of his services in this district, the following committee was elected to make the necessary arrangements: President, the Mayor; chairman, Mr P. Tardent; hon. treasurer and secretary, Mr N. Richardson; committee, Rev. C. E. Luton, Messrs P. T. Bolton, N. J. Bourke, D. P. Carey, H. Conaghan, D. L. Fraser, H. E. Crocker, H. S. Beaney, C. A. R. Luck, J. J. Macaulay, C. Sturgess, and G. Westacott. Speakers referred to the splendid public spirit of Dr Talbot and said that the time was opportune to arrange a testimonial, as the doctor had enlisted for military services. It was decided to open a testimonial fund to be known as the "Dr Talbot Testimonial," that subscription lists be printed, that donations of 5s. be solicited, and that amounts of more or less be accepted. Donations can be sent to any members of the committee.”*

Over the following months a number of meetings were held until 31<sup>st</sup> July when it was decided to close the fund and provide recognition to Dr Talbot in the form of an address of appreciation to the doctor and a gift to Mrs Talbot. Dr Talbot was to be asked to visit Rockhampton in order for the Mayor to make the presentation at a public event at the Town Hall.<sup>27</sup>

As it turned out, the high demands of the Northern Command mid-war meant that Dr and Mrs Talbot were unable to come to Rockhampton in a timely fashion. Hence the Committee organising the testimonial decided in March 1942 to send the commemorative address and gifts (travelling rug and motor gauntlets (gloves) for Dr Talbot and a “handsome ring with a rare sapphire stone” for Mrs Talbot to him in Brisbane.<sup>28</sup>

The address read as follows:

*“To Dr Norman C. Talbot, M.C., ED., M.D. et CH.B. (Melb.).*

*Sir.-In asking your acceptance of an address from the citizens of Rockhampton we are fully conscious of your reluctance to invite any recognition of your activities in public or professional life; but so sincere and widespread is the feeling that an opportunity should be sought to place on record the high regard in which you are held by the community that it was thought to be sufficient to over-ride any diffidence you may entertain in the matter.*

*It is desired by the presentation of this address to convey to you, and to place on record, the deep appreciation of the people of Rockhampton of the many humane and generous acts that can be attributed to you during the 20 odd years you have resided in the city.*

*Firstly, towards the sick and afflicted, especially those whose circumstances in life placed them under a handicap in commanding professional services. In this you have always observed the highest ethics of your profession. Your generosity towards all who have applied to you, in whatever cause, is widely known, and is inscribed in the grateful hearts of many.*

*In public matters you have always been ready to support any project for the advancement and improvement of the city, as your interest in and assistance to so many of its institutions bear witness.*

*Last, but not least, your patriotism in placing your professional skill and service at the disposal of your country is in keeping with the high principles that have been the guide to all your actions.*

*It is for these reasons that the citizens of Rockhampton seek to honour you. To the foregoing sentiments may be added the wish that the time will soon come when you may again take up your residence in our midst and be spared to enjoy long life and happiness.*

*Signed on behalf of the citizens of Rockhampton.*

*R. W. EVANS, president.*

*P. TARDENT, chairman.*

*N. RICHARDSON, Secretary."*

Dr Talbot formally replied by letter to Mr Richardson in June, stating:<sup>29</sup>

*"I would like you to express to the citizens of Rockhampton, through your committee, my deep appreciation of their address and presentations to myself and Mrs Talbot, and to thank them for the great honour they have done me.*

*There are some things in life which cannot be measured in dollars and to have gained the respect and esteem of one's fellow citizens comes first and foremost. This knowledge I will always cherish, but it leaves me feeling that I could have done more to deserve it.*

*On behalf of Mrs Talbot and myself I would ask the citizens of Rockhampton to accept these lines as evidence of our gratitude and sincere appreciation."*

Participants in the oral history interview who had worked for Dr Talbot in his surgery spoke in detail about his compassion and the fact that he regularly made judgements about whether or not patients could afford to pay and waived all or part of his fees as he thought necessary. The most notable case discussed was of a woman for whom he had attended nine pregnancies without charge.

Dr Talbot completed his military service in mid-1944 and returned to his former practice in early July of that year.

When Dr Wooster died on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1950 Dr Talbot decided that, after almost 30 years sharing the workload, he would be unable to continue to operate Tannachy by himself and announced that he would be closing the hospital. This occurred in October or November of 1950.

Great concern was expressed in the city about the major impact of the loss of this hospital with its 40 beds, including maternity beds, operating and X-ray facilities and other invaluable assets.<sup>30</sup> The local branch of the British Medical Association was at the forefront of raising the concerns. Public meetings were soon organised and a number of local businessmen were able to quite quickly establish a new company Tannachy Private Hospital Pty Ltd and negotiate the purchase of the asset. With the support of former hospital staff including many nurses, the company was able to reopen

the hospital in mid-January 1951 and gradually bring it back into operation.<sup>31</sup> Several private doctors provided their services to support the continuing operation of the hospital which was later purchased by the Anglican Diocese of Rockhampton in 1961 and renamed St John's Hospital.

Around this time, the hospital was extensively remodelled with a brick frontage along the full length of the hospital. Dr Talbot was given the honour of opening the remodelled hospital. Wards in the hospital were named after both Dr Talbot and Dr Wooster.



*Dr N. C. Talbot with hospital Matron Betty Shera cutting the ribbon at the opening of the remodelled Tannachy Hospital (Courtesy ACHHA Collection)*

We are fortunate to have in our Country Hospital Museum Collection three plaques which remind us of Dr Talbot's service as a medical practitioner in Rockhampton.



*Collection of brass and timber plaques bearing inscriptions for Dr Norman Talbot during his medical career in Rockhampton. (Courtesy Country Hospital Museum).*

According to newspaper reports, Dr Talbot sold the surgery which he had shared with Dr Wooster in April 1954. He had purchased flats in Victoria Parade in July 1953 which he planned to demolish in order to build a new home for himself, his wife and their two sons Mac and Cam.<sup>32</sup> This was presumably at 84 Victoria Parade since that was his address in the 1958 Electoral Rolls. There are also reports that he refurbished a replacement surgery somewhere in the city area.

During these later years, he continued to provide service to the community. As an example, he was elected to the role of President of the Rockhampton Agricultural Society in 1952.

We do not know exactly when Dr Talbot ceased practice, though it is stated in the oral history that he continued as Government Medical Officer after he ceased seeing private patients.<sup>1</sup> However, in the 1963 electoral rolls, he and his wife are registered as living in Brunswick St, New Farm with their two sons who are described in the roll as students. By then he would have been 77.

He returned to Rockhampton at some stage because he died aged 81 in the Talbot Ward at St John's Hospital, formerly Tannachy, on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1968. He was cremated on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1968 at the Rockhampton Crematorium.

Enduring physical symbols of Dr Talbot's service to Rockhampton are a street named after him in North Rockhampton and the Talbot Estate in South Rockhampton. The latter is a complex with 79 units and cottages run under a non-profit trustee system which provides affordable independent housing for more than 100 older citizens. It was established in 1957 by the then Mayor of Rockhampton Ald. R. B. J. Pilbeam and continues as a very valuable facility for elderly citizens fortunate enough to gain a place.

**E. J. Payne**  
**25 July 2015**

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