

THE MIGHTY QUINN

Bob Quinn is a legend of South Australian football, but his greatest deeds might have been serving his country and showing incredible courage under fire – in every sense of the term.

BEN COLLINS



Bob Quinn never asked anyone to do something he wasn't prepared to do himself. In fact, he did things others weren't prepared to do.

That's how Quinn operated as captain-coach of SANFL club Port Adelaide, and he took the same attitude into various theatres of war.

And, on what became known as one of the most famous battlefields in Australian history, Quinn took his selfless leadership style to the extreme.

It was August 3, 1941, and Warrant Officer Quinn was stationed at the Libyan port of Tobruk, as part of a garrison of predominantly Australian soldiers who would heroically repel the Germans and prevent them from sweeping through Egypt and seizing control of the Suez Canal.

One morning, when the Australian Diggers came under heavy attack in the pre-dawn hours, Quinn was set a perilous mission.

He was to take charge of the 10th platoon and lead an attack on a heavily manned German machine gun post that was cutting a swathe through the Aussies.

In a later letter to his family, Quinn observed that a battle plan was "like a football lecture on a blackboard – everything is quite easy until the other team runs on to the field".

But in this case, it appeared a mission impossible.

Then 26, Quinn gathered his men in a trench. As Port Adelaide's brilliant leader, he'd delivered speeches that made players want to run through brick walls for him; now he needed to inspire battle-weary soldiers to virtually sacrifice their lives.

"Fellas, we're probably going to die doing this," Quinn told them. "But if we don't do it, we'll probably die anyway."

Quinn explained that their first objective was to use a pipe bomb to blow up the barbed-wire fence surrounding the German bunker.

LEGENDARY LEADER: Whether on the battlefield or the football field, Port Adelaide's Bob Quinn (sitting far left in his final season in 1947) was a true hero.

One at a time, seven of them were to break cover to lay a section of pipe, each one bringing them closer to the machine gun.

"And I'll lay the last one," Quinn said, accepting what seemed a suicide mission.

Four members of Quinn's wrecking squad didn't return, and he couldn't find any volunteers to take their place.

It was now up to him.

As a footballer, Quinn had a gift for lifting in big moments. He faced no bigger moment than this.

One of Australian Football's greatest and most fearless rovers summoned all the courage he could muster.

He sprang from the trench and almost immediately copped a serious shrapnel wound high up on the inside of his right thigh.

But he pushed on, laid the last pipe, exploded the barbed wire and led the charge into the enemy post.

Hand grenades and gunfire flew back and forth from close range, resulting in many casualties on both sides.

After an hour of intense fighting, Quinn's platoon was reduced to just eight men, so he wisely retreated.

His leg was bleeding profusely, but he refused treatment until he helped other wounded men to relative safety.

Quinn's face was also a mess after shrapnel opened up his right cheek, near his eye.

"Bloody hell, Bob, half your face is missing," one of his men exclaimed.

Quinn quipped: "It might be a bloody improvement."

One of the legendary 'Rats of Tobruk', Quinn was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry after leading his men with "great determination and dash" and showing "coolness and judgment" in withdrawing them.

"His courage, leadership and devotion to duty were outstanding, under the most trying circumstances," Quinn's citation declared.

In the meantime, though, the more pressing issue was his shredded thigh – on his dominant kicking leg. He was sent to a military hospital.

"Doc, will I ever play football again?" Quinn asked. The overworked surgeon replied: "Play

FACT FILE

ROBERT BERRIMA 'BOB' QUINN

Born: April 9, 1915
Died: September 12, 2008
Recruited from: Semaphore Centrals (which later merged with Exeter to form Port District)
Port Adelaide 1933-47: 186 games, 386 goals
Honours: Australian Football Hall of Fame (1996); Port Adelaide's Greatest Team (2001); Magarey Medal 1938, 1945; Port Adelaide best and fairest 1937, 1938, 1945, 1947; *Sporting Life* Team of the Year 1947; Port Adelaide leading goalkicker 1937, 1945; Port Adelaide premierships 1936, 1937, 1939; South Australia (15 games, 27 goals); SA captain 1945-1947; SA coach 1953 (3 wins, 1 loss); Port Adelaide captain-coach 1939-40, 1945-47.



CAPTAIN COURAGEOUS:

Quinn is chaired off Adelaide Oval after leading Port Adelaide to the 1939 premiership.

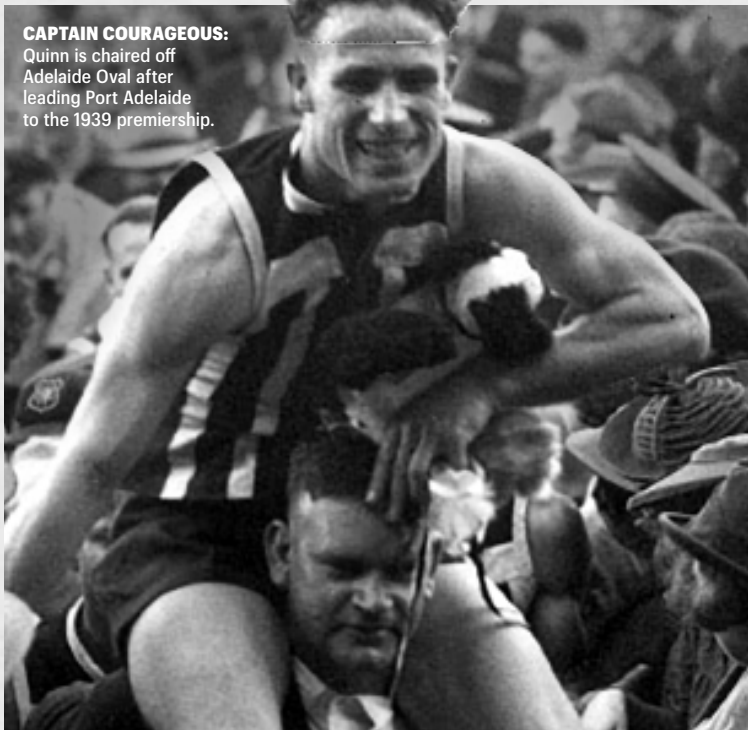


PHOTO: VIRTUAL WAR MEMORIAL AUSTRALIA (VWMA.ORG.AU)

football? You'll be lucky if I can save your leg."

Quinn pleaded with him not to amputate the limb, and indeed felt lucky post-surgery when he awoke and realised the leg was still attached.

Quinn's youngest son Greg also sighed with relief as he told the *AFL Record*: "Lucky Dad didn't get hit a little bit higher, otherwise me and my two sisters (Pam and Margaret) and my brother (Robert jnr) and our families wouldn't be here!"

It took Quinn until 1988 to share his Military Medal story with Adelaide football writer Ashley Porter.

And, even then, Quinn asked Porter to delay publishing it until all his 10th Platoon mates had died, so it wouldn't humiliate those who'd refused to enter the fray with him.

"They were brave men, all of them. They had done things like this before, knowing that death faced them, but on this night their bodies froze," Quinn told Porter, in a terrific piece published in Adelaide's *Independent Weekly* in 2008.

"Imagine what it's like for (them) every time there is a story about Bob Quinn and his Military Medal. It has

been an incredible burden for them to carry for all these years.

"They saw themselves as cowards, but I tell you they weren't.

"They had no idea where they were and what they were doing. The noise was deafening.

"But no matter what you say, they still feel that sense of guilt for not jumping the line.

"Son, war is not made up of feel-good stories."

Quinn was part of a feel-good family footy story.

His father John 'Jack' Quinn was a premiership rover and forward for Port Adelaide, captaining the club in 1904-05, leading the league goalkicking in 1907 and representing South Australia.

Each of his four sons – John jnr, Tom, Bob and George – also played for Port Adelaide.

The Quinns lived at Birkenhead on the Port River, which they'd row across to attend training and games at Alberton Oval.

Born on April 9, 1915, Robert Berrima 'Bob' Quinn owed his middle name to a World War I troop ship. On the footy field, the 169cm rover was a pocket battleship.

After winning the Magarey Medal in 1938, Quinn considered offers from Victorian clubs – and even trained

with Geelong, where his older brother Tom had won two best and fairests and two premierships after the Cats gave him a job during the Depression – before accepting the job of captain-coach at Port Adelaide.

In his first season in charge, Quinn guided Port to a flag – its third in four years.

Early the next season, 1940, at 25, he enlisted for service in the infantry's 2/43rd Battalion.

His younger brother George had been so determined to serve his country that he lied about his age, and Bob vouched for him. It was a fateful decision.

The pair were close, being teammates at Port Adelaide and working together on the wharves, as their father had before them, before becoming leather workers.

Alas, they saw precious little of each other again.

Corporal George Urban Quinn was killed in action in El Alamein, Egypt, on July 22, 1942.

"Dad reflected on Georgie a bit," Greg Quinn recalled. "He'd say, 'Your Uncle George was one of the bravest people I ever met, because he was so young when he went.'

"Dad couldn't have talked George out of enlisting, but Dad still would've carried some guilt with him over that."

Five months later, there was another family tragedy.

Quinn had been courting state netballer May Walker, whose brother Charlie or 'Chilla' – the reserve wicketkeeper for Australia on the 1930 and 1938 Ashes cricket tours – was a RAAF flying officer who was killed in action over Germany in December 1942.

Three months later, Quinn married his 'Maysie', before being shipped back to the frontline.

Now a lieutenant, Quinn had recovered well from his severe leg injury, spending just eight weeks in hospital.

In a letter to Port Adelaide around that time, he'd expressed confidence that, with the benefit of considerable fitness work and massage, he'd still give a good account of himself with the club.

But first Quinn had to overcome more obstacles.

In August 1943, he joined the resistance against the invading

Japanese in New Guinea and soon had a couple of seriously close shaves.

During a night-time firefight, Quinn was shoulder-to-shoulder with a mate who was shot and started screaming in agony.

In the darkness, a crawling Quinn dragged him for what seemed like an eternity to safety, before realising his mate was dead.

“Dad didn’t tell me those things to boast – it was to reinforce how important it is to look after your mates and help people,” Greg Quinn said.

“And I can’t help but think that if that bullet had been half-a-metre to the side, none of our family would be here.”

On another occasion, Quinn was hit by a bullet that caused a compound fracture in his right forearm, which became complicated by a bout of the rare, serious bone infection osteomyelitis.

It was Quinn’s last act on a battlefield.

He returned to Adelaide in March 1944, and within two months resumed his SANFL career in a reduced competition, kicking 28 goals in 12 games with the combined Port-Torrens team.

The 30-year-old war hero displayed extraordinary toughness in a semi-final, playing virtually the entire second half with a break in his right arm, just below the spot where he was wounded in New Guinea less than a year earlier.

When the SANFL returned to normal programming in 1945, Quinn regained the captain-coaching role at Port Adelaide.

He also regained full fitness, completing extra work with professional boxer Mason Clarke, a mate with whom he’d served.

Quinn had understandably lost some pace, which convinced him to handball more, but, remarkably, he still produced his greatest individual season, winning another Magarey Medal in a canter, captaining South Australia to victory over Victoria and kicking five goals in a narrow Grand Final loss.

It was a stunning sequence of events given that only three years earlier there had been fears he’d never again grace a football field and would live out his days with a disability.



LAST HURRAH: Quinn (right) is pictured in *The Advertiser* after his final game in 1947 (above); and (left) the Military Medal he won for gallantry in 1941.

The next year, 1946, Quinn led his state in a wildly fluctuating game against the Vics at Carlton.

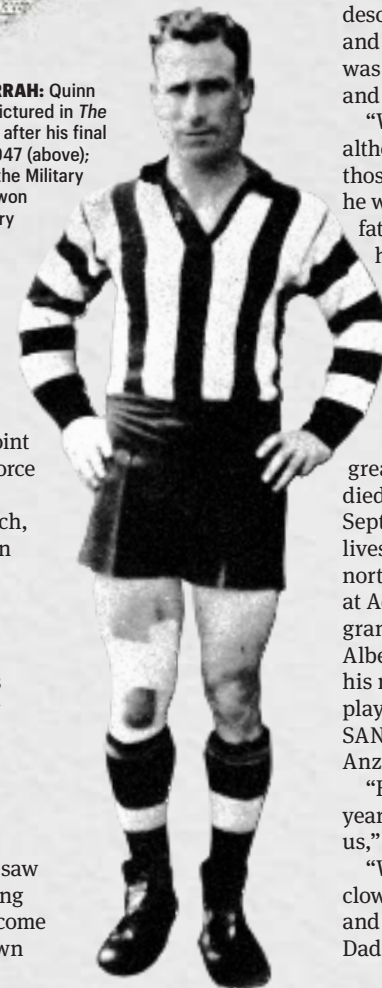
After trailing by 39 points at half-time, SA stormed to a 21-point lead, only for the home side to force a draw.

In the changerooms post-match, Quinn was ruing the result when he was told someone wanted to see him.

It wasn’t great timing, but Quinn’s demeanour changed when he realised his visitor was the surgeon who’d saved his leg at Tobruk.

The two men shook hands in mutual admiration. Quinn thanked him.

“Well, Quinn, I don’t like Australian Rules Football, but I saw in the paper that you were leading South Australia so I just had to come down here and see it with my own eyes,” the surgeon explained.



“Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a look at my handiwork.”

Quinn climbed on a rubdown table and dropped his shorts.

“I did a bloody good job, didn’t I?” the surgeon said.

Quinn played until 1947, leading both Port and SA in each of his last three seasons.

In his final season he won the club best and fairest, starred for his state and was named rover in *Sporting Life* magazine’s Team of the Year (a precursor to the All-Australian team).

By then his thigh injury, which he’d almost always bandaged, was taking its toll so he hung up his boots at 32.

Quinn became a publican and, for a time, the local footy coach in the small country town of Kadina, 144km north-west of Adelaide, where he and his wife raised their four children.

An emotional Greg Quinn described his father as a man’s man and an old-school gentleman who was also compassionate, humble and family focused.

“We’re just so thankful that, although Dad went through all those horrible things at the war, he was still such a gentle, loving father and a wonderful man,” he said.

“I lived with my parents until I was 31, so I had the privilege of living with a legend for 31 years.

“He was my dad and he was my hero.”

Arguably Port Adelaide’s greatest player, Bob Quinn died after a long illness at 93 in September 2008, but his legacy lives on – and not simply in the northern gate named after him at Adelaide Oval, or the 1964 grandstand that honours him at Alberton Oval, or the medal bearing his name that is awarded to the player adjudged best-afield in the SANFL’s Grand Final rematch each Anzac Day.

“He’s been gone for more than 10 years now, but he just keeps giving to us,” Greg Quinn said.

“We haven’t got a single clown or peanut in our family, and it’s because of the standards Dad set.”