



Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Blacket STEPHENS

[1902 – 1999]



Colonel Stephens is distinguished by being believed to be the longest serving Club Member with over 74 years of membership.

Thomas Blacket¹ Stephens was born in Brisbane on 3 June 1902 to William Stephens [1857-1925] and Pauline Anna Caroline Stephens (née Effey) [1875 – 1960]. He had one brother and three sisters. For the first three years of his life he lived at the family home “Cumbooquepa” in South Brisbane, now known as Somerville House, the independent girl’s school. In 1905 the family moved to a new home they named “Waldheim” in Annerley (some years ago best known as “The Clansman” restaurant). He lived there until 1935 when he married actress Babette Fergusson and built his new wife a home in Tarragindi.

Tom entered the Junction Park State School in Annerley in 1908, a short walk from his home. There he remained until 1916 when he commenced at the Brisbane Grammar School - a school long associated with the family. In 1920 he won the Grammar School’s *Lilley Medal* as dux of the school. By paternal decree he was destined for the law, but there was then no law school at the University of Queensland. He was articled for five years to the firm of Walker and Walker and was admitted by the Supreme Court of Queensland to practise as a solicitor in 1926. He practised in a number of firms before becoming a partner in Max Deacon - Stephens – McWhinney, later joining Morris Fletcher and Cross, which eventually became Minter Ellison.

¹ It is uncertain when or why the family name “Blacket” (T.B. Stephens’ mother’s maiden name) became “Blackett” in some records as noted on Colonel Tom Stephens’ records.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

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Having been unable to attend university in his younger years, upon retirement, he enrolled as a first-year Art's student in The University of Queensland. He obtained his BA in 1974, MA in 1978 and his PhD in 1986. He was at that time the oldest graduate to have received a PhD from The University of Queensland.

Colonel Stephens' military service commenced in the Senior Cadets from 1917 – 1921. He enlisted in the Australian Field Artillery, 1st Military District in July 1921 and rose through the ranks to Sergeant on 1 March 1924 - when he was also appointed a Lieutenant (provisional). His appointment as a Lieutenant was confirmed in 1925, and he was promoted Captain on 26 November 1926. From February to March 1928, he attended No.33 Course for Territorial Army Adjutants at The School of Artillery, Larkhill, England – the Commandant observing “Very keen, made good progress, has good knowledge”. In January 1931 he transferred to the Reserve of Officers, and three months later was re-activated on the strength of 11 Field Brigade. In May 1937 he again went to the Reserve of Officers.

After the outbreak of World War 2, he sought, as a qualified battery commander, reappointment into the Field Artillery. However, he was immediately required to join the Army Legal Corps and was appointed a Captain in the Legal Department, Northern Command in November 1939. In February 1941 he was promoted temporary Major and in October that year temporary Lieutenant Colonel. He retained that rank to the end of the war. After various appointments he became, at different times, legal advisor at both 1 and 2 Corps Headquarters and thus to a series of Corps Commanders, including Generals Morshead and Herring. He served both in Australia and in New Guinea. He was demobilised in 1945 and returned to private legal practice. He was placed on the retired list in 1957.

Tom's wife, Babette Stephens (née Fergusson) was born in England in 1910. They were married at All Saints Church, Spring Hill on 12 July 1935. Nationally, Babette was a prominent actress and director from the 1930s to the 1980s. In Brisbane, not only was she acting but she also taught drama and directed many theatre productions. She was instrumental in the creation of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre, now *La Boite* and was regarded as a leading theatrical pioneer in Queensland. She also appeared in film and television and hosted talk-back radio. Babette was awarded an MBE in 1972 for her services to the theatre, and an AM in 1994 for her services to the performing arts.

She was also an Associate Member of the Club – joining on 29 May 1967 (proposed by her husband and seconded by Lt Selwyn Shand) - and remained so until her death.

The Stephens had two children – a daughter Wendy Ann (born 1938) and a son Christopher Effey Stephens (born 1945). Wendy lived overseas for 30 years and finally settled in Perth. Her eldest son is resident in Sydney and the younger in the United Kingdom. After leaving Brisbane Grammar School Chris joined the 2/14th Light Horse Regiment (QMI), then a CMF regiment, as a trooper and later graduated from the Officer Cadet Training Unit at Wacol as a Second Lieutenant (and joined the United Service Club). He subsequently transferred from the CMF to the Regular Army. Chris served as a Troop Commander in A Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment in South Vietnam in 1971-72. He returned to Brisbane in 1986/88 to command his old regiment. He later left the Regular Army at the rank of Brigadier and went on to serve in other government roles. He was awarded an AM (Military Division) in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 1996. Chris has two children by his wife Adrienne, a daughter Erica and a son, Mark Thomas Blacket Stephens.

Tom's father and grandfather were both notable persons in the colony of Queensland in the latter part of the 19th century. His father, William Stephens [1857 – 1925], was the eldest son of Thomas Blacket Stephens (1819 – 1877). William was described as a versatile man who owned a tannery, and a newspaper. William died when Tom was 23 and he was required to manage his father's considerable estate on behalf of his mother and siblings.

William was the Member for Woolloongabba [1888-1896] and the Member for Brisbane South [1896-1904 and 1907-08]. He was a member of the Legislative Council from 1912 until its abolition in

1922. William was Secretary for Public Instruction and Agriculture 1907-08. He was also an Alderman of South Brisbane for over 30 years, and he was elected as first Mayor of South Brisbane

[1888 – 1889] and twice again in 1899 and 1901. He was a Founding Member and the First President of the South Brisbane District Cricket Club in 1897.

Tom's grandfather was Thomas Blacket² Stephens [1819 – 1877]. He was born in Lancashire and came to Sydney in 1849. His uncle was the colonial architect Edmund Blacket. He continued his former English occupation as a wool scourer and broker. In 1853 he moved his business to Brisbane and established a wool scour, fell mongery and tannery at Ekibin. He married Anne (nee Connah³) in Sydney in 1856. They had (by various reports) up to 12 children. He had large landholdings at Norman Creek and established the large family home at South Brisbane which is now the site of Summerville House, an independent girl's school.

In 1858 the town of Brisbane was declared a municipality and in 1859 Stephens was one of the nine candidates elected to the Council. He later became the second Mayor in 1862 and was returned as an Alderman until 1864. In 1863 he was returned as member for South Brisbane in Queensland's Second Parliament and retained this seat until 1875. In 1867 he became Colonial Treasurer, was Colonial Secretary from 1868-69, and became Colonial Treasurer again until 1870. He was Secretary of Public Lands from 1874-75. In 1876 he was appointed a Member of the Legislative Council and held that position until a month before his death, from a cholera induced illness, in September 1877 – aged 58.

He was the owner of the *Moreton Bay Courier* in the 1860's and founded *The Queenslander* newspaper. He was involved in the foundation of the Brisbane Grammar School and was chairman of trustees from its inception in 1868 to 1871. His four sons attended the school as did many of his grandsons, including Colonel Tom and in turn his son Christopher.

Colonel Tom Stephens was elected to membership of the Club on 16 September 1924 (with the Club number of 310) and remained a member until his death. His continuous club membership of 74 years and 9 months (27,290 days) is believed to be the Club record. Tom passed away on 4 June 1999 aged 97 years and 1 day. And Babette followed him not long after passing away in February 2001 aged 91.

Sources included:

- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents
- *Never Upstaged: Babette Stephens, Her Life and Times* by Jay McKee [2004]
- Notes from Reg Roughan, December 2017
- *Australian Dictionary of Biography*
- Various web pages
- Brigadier C.E. Stephens AM

² It is uncertain when or why the family name "Blacket" (T.B. Stephens' mother's maiden name) became "Blackett" in some records, as noted on Colonel Tom Stephens' records.

³ Spelt "Conah" in some references