

YOUR VIRTUAL VISIT - 71

TO THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY MUSEUM OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Throughout 2021, the Virtual Visit series will be continuing to present interesting features from the collection and their background stories.

The Australian Army Museum of Western Australia is now open four days per week, Wednesday through Friday plus Sunday. Current COVID19 protocols including contact tracing will apply.

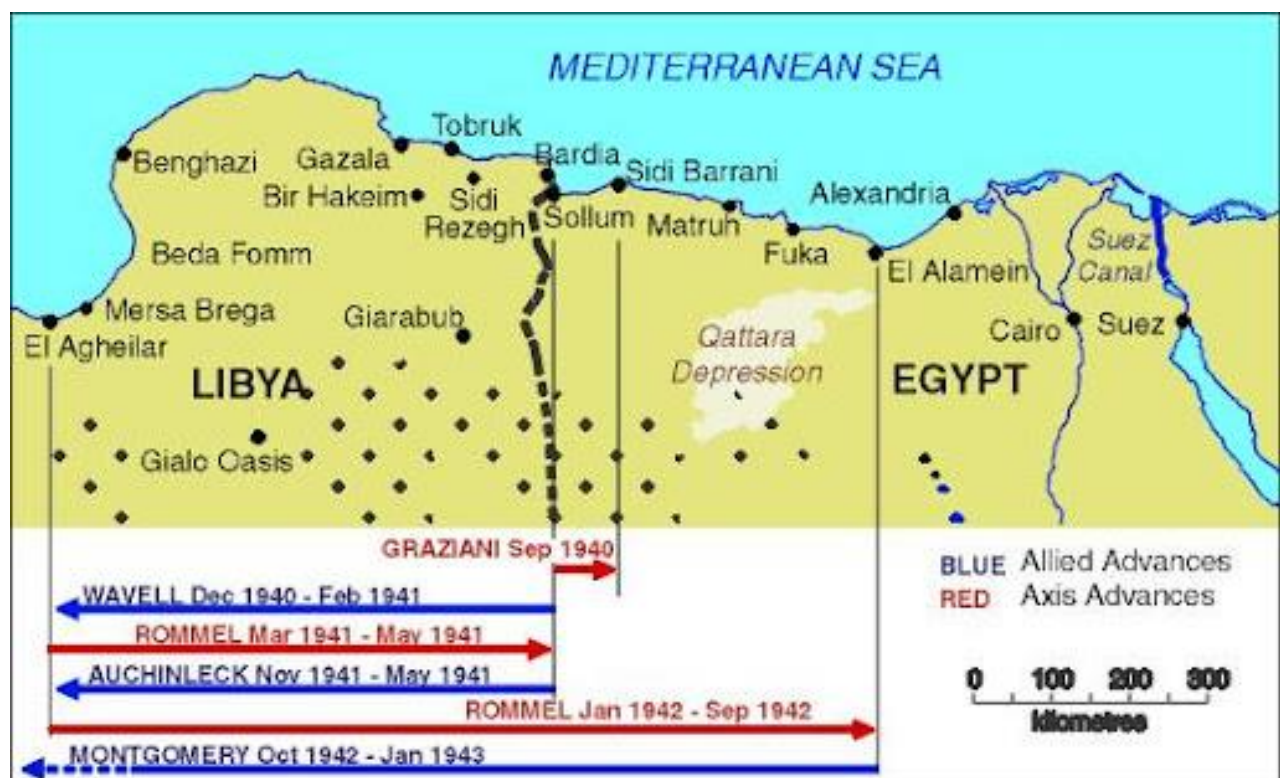
Australians in Tobruk

Overview

Tobruk is a Mediterranean port with an excellent deep-water harbour. During World War 2, as a supply hub, it was important to both Allied and Axis forces. In January 1941, it was captured from the Italians by General Wavell's forces which included the Australian 6 Division.

When Rommel drove across Cyrenaica towards Suez in April 1941, it was essential that Tobruk be held. The main infantry component of the defending force was the Australian 9th Division and 18 Brigade from 7th Division. Tobruk was surrounded and besieged from 11 April to 10 December 1941, when the Axis forces were driven back. Many of the Australian defenders had been relieved during August and September 1941 but 2/13 Battalion remained throughout the siege.

The Germans regrouped far more quickly than was expected and by early February 1942, it was the Allies turn to fall back towards a line running southwards from Gazala to Bir Hakeim. Again, orders were given to hold Tobruk, but it fell to Rommel on 21 June. It was retaken five months later by the Eighth Army in their final sweep along the North African coast into Tunisia.



January 1941 – 6 Division

Following the capture of Bardia, the 6th Australian Division advanced west along the Libyan coast to the Italian defended port town of Tobruk. At dawn on 21 January 1941, after air and artillery support, the 6th Division broke through the Italian lines in the south and by 8 am the entire division was within the Italian perimeter and fanning out into the enemy enclave. The stiff fighting on the opening day was not repeated on 22 January when 25,000 Italians surrendered, and hundreds of artillery pieces and vehicles were captured.



The soldiers of 2/11 Battalion in this well known photograph by Frank Hurley are all named and identified. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/005392>

The Rats of Tobruk April – August – December 1941



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Between April and August 1941 around 14,000 Australian soldiers were besieged in Tobruk by a German-Italian army commanded by General Erwin Rommel. The garrison, commanded by Lieutenant General Leslie Morshead, consisted of the 9th Division (20th, 24th, and 26th Brigades), the 18th Brigade of the 7th Division, along with four regiments of British artillery and initially some Indian troops.

Soldiers from each of five different allied armies fighting together against the Germans and Italians in Tobruk, Libya. From the left they are Polish, British, Indian, Australian and Czech.



Holding Tobruk and its harbour was vital for the Allies' defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal, as this forced the enemy to bring most of their supplies overland from the port of Tripoli, across 1500 km of desert, as well as diverting troops from their advance. Tobruk was subject to repeated ground assaults and almost constant shelling and bombing. The Nazi propagandist Lord Haw Haw (William Joyce) derided the tenacious defenders as 'rats', a term that the Australian soldiers embraced as an ironic compliment.

The Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy provided the garrison's link to the outside world, the so-called 'Tobruk ferry'. These ships included the Australian destroyers Napier, Nizam, Stuart, Vendetta and Voyager. Losses comprised two destroyers, including HMAS Waterhen, three sloops, including HMAS Parramatta, and 21 smaller vessels. HMAS Waterhen was the first ship of the RAN to be lost by enemy action in World War II.



Half the Australian garrison was relieved in August, the rest in September-October. However, 2/13 Battalion could not be evacuated and was still there when the siege was lifted on 10 December, the only unit present for the entire siege. Australian casualties from the 9th Division from 8th April to 25th October numbered 749 killed, 1,996 wounded and 604 prisoners. The total losses in the 9th Division and attached troops from 1st March to 15th December amounted to 832 killed, 2,177 wounded and 941 prisoners.



Monument and graves in Tobruk war cemetery. The original monument was erected by Australian forces in 1941 when the cemetery was first used as a burial ground during the siege of Tobruk. The cemetery was later expanded to include battlefield graves moved to the site.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, Tobruk



German Memorial, Tobruk



Rats of Tobruk Memorial Service at Tobruk Memorial Kings Park 2018.

As custodians of the memorial, the CCGS Army Cadet Unit paid tribute to the surviving Rats of Tobruk with 21 of our Army Cadets providing a guard of honour for the three remaining servicemen during the annual service. Christ Church Grammar School's Army Cadet Unit took on the role as custodians of the Rats of Tobruk Memorial at Kings Park in 2001.

The Army Museum has exhibits and dioramas explaining both the capture in January 1941 and the later siege of Tobruk. This exhibit area also features a diorama based on the Ivor Hele painting, *Bardia (action leading to the fall of Post II)*.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Recognition is also integrated into the display, of Polish veterans, many of whom, unable to return to a Communist dominated Poland, chose to make their homes in Western Australia.

LINKS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Visit the Australian Army Museum of Western Australia web site

<https://armymuseumwa.com.au/>

<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/tobruk>

https://www.temehu.com/Cities_sites/WorldWarTwo.htm

<https://italianprisonersofwar.com/tag/italian-soldiers-tobruk/>

<https://www.ratsoftobruktribute.com/gallery/slideshow>

<https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/tac-talks-23>

<https://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-waterhen-i>

<https://www.airforce.gov.au/sites/default/files/minisite/static/7522/RAAFmuseum/research/units/451sqn.htm>

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U59436>

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205234475>

<https://ratsoftobrukassociation.org.au/the-siege/polish-carpathian-brigade/>

