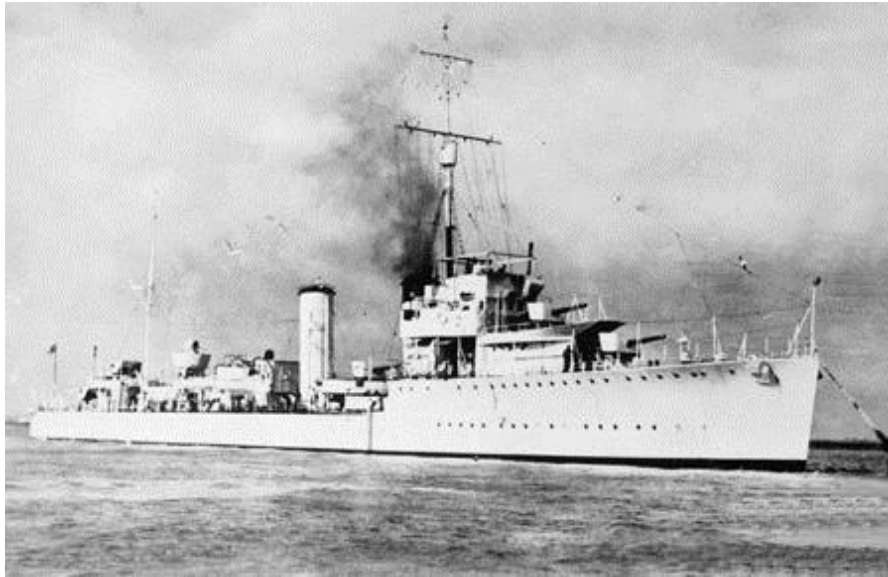# Australians in the Mediterranean during WW2

Thousands of Australian soldiers saw combat in a series of battles in the Mediterranean and North Africa. Their service is less well known as it has tended to be overshadowed by the later battles in New Guinea and the Pacific. This publication tells the stories of the determination, resilience, bravery and sacrifice of the Australians who served in the Mediterranean theatre of the Second World War.

Contents

Scrap Iron Flotilla: The Royal Australian Navy at its Best

To the Axis Powers, the Australian flotilla that fought in the Mediterranean during the Second World War appeared to be no threat. Anyone looking at the old, small and slow destroyer group would think the same. Soon, however, the Axis and the rest of the world would learn just how formidable it was. The 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' and those who manned it proved just how much grit, determination and valour can achieve.

By Madison Moulton

The Scrap Iron Flotilla

The flotilla of destroyers was made up of five ships: Stuart, Voyager, Vampire, Vendetta, and Waterhen. Completed in 1918, these ships were designed to the standards of the First World War. Given the massive advancements in military technology by the late 1930s, the flotilla was considered obsolete by the beginning of the Second World War.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   P01810.007

View from HMAS Vendetta of HMS Defender sinking. AWM.

Australia acquired the vintage destroyers, readying them when war broke out in 1939. Just three months in, they were sent to Singapore to protect the country from a potential Japanese attack.

By 1940, the situation in the Middle East and along the Mediterranean had grown more dangerous. Before Australia's decisive victory at Bardia, Libya, this flotilla had already begun to make its mark. The flotilla arrived in Malta in January 1940.

When the Axis first discovered that the ships were in the Mediterranean they saw it as a chance to win a propaganda victory. Compared to the modern, fast, and powerful ships of the German and Italian navies, the Australian destroyers seemed to be outclassed. So Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Propaganda Minister, thought he was being intimidating when he named it the "Scrap Iron Flotilla".

Taking to nickname, the Australians renamed the flotilla as such. The Scrap Iron Flotilla would go on to prove that even though the ships looked insignificant, they could still do more than their part to help win the war.

The Men Behind the Flotilla

A group of warships is only as formidable as the sailors manning them. Hector Waller, Fredrick Offord, and Ean McDonald were just three of the hundreds of young Australians that helped make a name for the Scrap Iron Flotilla.

Ean McDonald

Ean was born in Melbourne and grew up during the Great Depression, working in a small factory after he left school. McDonald's love for sailing began early on. Before he joined the Sea Scouts, he would build canoes out of scrap corrugated iron and sail them on a local lake. Fighting at sea ran in the family, both his grandfather and father were part of the Royal Naval and fought during World War I. McDonald was aware of the hostile situation brewing in Europe and grew more and more concerned. The year before World War II began, he joined the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) as a signalman.

One of the tasks of a signalman was to know a good selection of phrases from the Bible, in order to use them as impromptu code. He described how it worked "so that lets say that your captain said to you "Oh signalmen look I'd like to send this signal to HMAS Voyager, I'd like him to come over and have dinner with me, can you think of a appropriate signal?" And so you'd say, "Oh yes Sir. I think that Matthew 10 Verse 2 might be a good one and he'd say what's that?" And say "Well that's says that he called upon his disciples and ask them to come sup with him". And he'll say, "Oh yeah that's fine." So the signal would go out, Matthew 10, 2 and the signalmen at the other end would have to open the bible and say, "Well sir the captain of so and so said to you the disciples are invited to come and sup with him"

Ean left Australia on the cruiser HMAS Sydney, famous for sinking an Italian cruiser at the Battle of Cape Spada. Early in the war HMAS Sydney was asked "have you got any spare signalmen?" And they said, "Well McDonald's no bloody good send him!" So he was transferred to HMAS Stuart, commanded by Hec Waller, who he described as a wonderful man.

Ean took part in the bombardment of Bardia, made 25 runs as the Tobruk Ferry, which kept the besieged Australian 9th Division supplied and was bombed more times than he can remember. He was part of the Battle of Cape Matapan, where HMAS Stuart was damaged. He and Hec Waller transferred to HMAS Waterhen, which was sunk a short time later by German JU-87 Stuka dive bombers. He survived this, and the war, continuing to serve in the reserves for years afterwards.

Fredrick Offord

Fredrick Offord was a member of a navy family, much like Ean McDonald. His father had been a Merchant Mariner during the Great War and his brother was in the navy. Fredrick was born in Port Melbourne, attending Nott St Primary School. During the great depression, Offord's family was amongst the millions who were terribly affected, moving from house to house because they couldn't afford the rent. As soon as he turned 18 he joined the navy.

He joined HMAS Voyager as a stoker. This meant that he spent his time in the boiler room, ensuring it was delivering the power needed to keep the ships speed up and dodge the enemy shells and bombs. Working in the boiler room during combat took a particular type of courage, as the sailors there had no idea what was happening outside. They would get no warning of a hit on their ship, just the inrush of tonnes of water.

Fredrick was also part of the Tobruk Ferry, as well as evacuating British, Australian and New Zealand troops from Greece.

Hector Waller

Born and attending primary school in Benalla, Vic, at 13, Hector MacDonald Laws Waller joined the Royal Australian Naval College (RANC) as a cadet midship. Throughout his time at the Naval College, he climbed ranks. He was sent to Britain to serve in the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet, though he didn't see combat. After several years of training Waller was given his first command at sea on HMS Brazen. This ship was tasked with monitoring the Spanish Civil War. When the Second World War broke out, Waller was appointed captain of the HMAS Stuart, the lead destroyer of the Scrap Iron Flotilla.

Hec Waller was highly respected both by the officers and men he lead as well as the senior echelons of the Navy. After leading the Scrap Iron Flotilla he was promoted to command HMAS Perth. This was sunk in the Battle of the Sunda Strait in March 1942. Hec Waller went down with his ship.

The Warhorses of the Mediterranean

Malta and Beyond

During its time in Singapore, the Scrap Iron Flotilla and its men became acquainted with submarines and anti-submarine tactics. This critical training allowed them to achieve their successes in Malta.

They saw their first major action in June 1940, just after Italy officially entered the war. Almost immediately, Malta's shipyard was under attack by Italian bombers. The destroyers were set to work immediately. Italian submarines had strategically placed mines around Malta, in anticipation of the Royal Navy steaming out to engage the Italians. The minefields remained unnoticed until HMAS Stuart, captained by Hector Waller, saw the mines as they sailed past. The old destroyer narrowly escaped destruction and all 5 began hunting the submarines.This old flotilla proved its strength and ability quickly. Italy had only been in the war for 9 days and already they'd lost two submarines to the Scrap Iron Flotilla. Waller was more than just a captain on HMAS Stuart. He took his turn in shooting floating mines during the patrols. Their success in Malta was just the beginning.
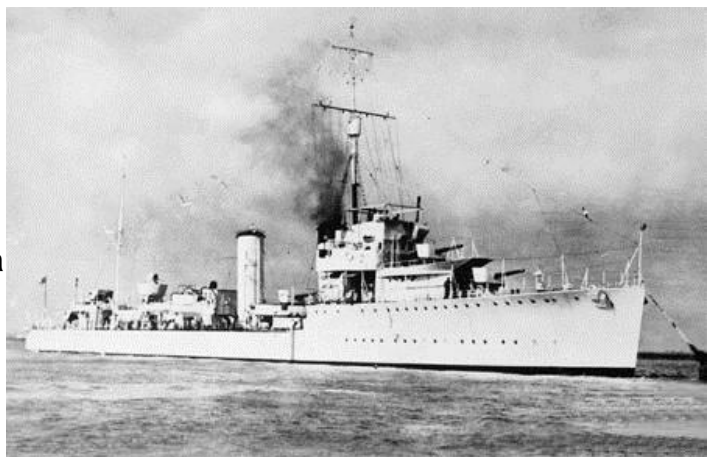
HMAS Stuart

Following their success at Malta, the Scrap Iron Flotilla assisted the Allied forces all around the Mediterranean. HMAS Stuart shelled Bardia, a small fortified town in Libya under Italian Control.

Despite the old technology and the jokes made about the Scrap Iron Flotilla, they quickly became a force to be reckoned with. Members of the flotilla were very proud to be a part of this force.

> "We kept it going with string and wire and whatever so they said.
> Yeah. Yes, I'm very proud of the Scrap Iron Flotilla".
>
> *Fredrick Offord, Stoker, HMAS Voyager*

Battle of Cape Matapan

The tone of the war changed in the Mediterranean with the Battle of Cape Matapan in March 1941, one of the most important naval battles of the war.

In the weeks leading up the battle, analysts cracked the Italian Naval code, finding out that they planned to attack Allied merchant convoys on their way to Greece. There had been a critical miscommunication between the Axis over and above that which aided in the Allies decisive victory. The Italians were informed that their opposing forces in the Mediterranean were made up of a single functional battleship, with no aircraft carriers. In reality, the Royal Navy had three battleships and a fully functioning aircraft carrier. Accompanying the main fleet were members of the Scrap Iron Flotilla.

First Shots Fired

Upon hearing of the approaching Italian forces, several destroyers left Alexandria on March 27th. Despite hearing that they lost the element of surprise, the Italians forged ahead with their plans. 28th of March saw the first shots of the battle fired. Just after 8am, the Italians began firing on a British Squadron moving toward the southeast. Three Italian cruisers continued firing for almost an hour.
Despite this, the Italians scored very few significant hits. The Allied ships changed course and closed the range to the Italian fleet. After a few minor hits from Italian forces, the Allies moved further away.

Air Attacks

From there, the Allies began attacking from the skies, sending torpedo bombers from the HMS Formidable. They scored a hit on the Italian battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, damaging one of her propellers. The Italian main fleet began to withdraw towards Taranto.

Fighting at Night

The Allied forces detected the Italian squadron on radar shortly after 22:00, and were able to close without being detected. The Italian ships had no radar and could not detect British ships if they couldn't see them. The Italians had not trained extensively for night actions and their main gun batteries were not prepared for action.

The battleships Barham, Valiant, and Warspite were able to close to 3,500 m – point blank range for battleship guns – at which point their searchlights were turned on and they opened fire. One of those searchlights was directed by Midshipman Prince Philip, aboard Valiant.

After The Battle

This massive Italian defeat proved the inadequacy of their training, especially for night battles. This lead to the Italian surface ships mostly avoiding battle. The German and Italian air forces however kept up a steady pressure on the Allied ships.

The Scrap Iron Flotilla were the backbone of the Tobruk Ferry service, which kept the besieged garrison at Tobruk supplied and able to fight. The Germans and Italians knew

HMAS Voyager

they had to keep doing this, and were waiting for them with dive bombers every trip.

The odds were stacked against the Scrap Iron Flotilla once again. But they continued to prove their worth, successfully evacuating over 40,000 men and bringing in over 30,000 reinforcements. During the eight-month siege, they brought in thousands of tonnes of stores.

HMAS Waterhen

Many ships were lost during the Tobruk Ferry, including HMAS Waterhen. HMAS Waterhen was the first Australian vessel lost during the Second World War, and after it's loss the old and battered Scrap Iron Flotilla sailed back to Australia. They were refitted, before seeing action against the Japanese.

The Scrap Iron Flotilla were true underdogs in the Mediterranean theatre. Their age made them seem obsolete, especially when compared to the Italian and German naval and air forces. Despite this, they more than proved their worth and strength.

The Scrap Iron Flotilla – Australian Destroyers in the Mediterranean – Video

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   016259

To the Axis Powers, the Australian flotilla that fought in the Mediterranean during the Second World War appeared to be no threat. Anyone looking at the old, small and slow destroyer group would think the same. Soon, however, the Axis and the rest of the world would learn just how formidable it was. The 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' and those who manned it proved just how much grit, determination and valour can achieve.

This video was created by the Drachinifel Naval History video channel. It was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Watch the video here https://historyguild.org/the-scrap-iron-flotilla-australian-destroyers-in-the-mediterranean-video/

The Battle of Cape Spada: The Australian Navy Proves Its Mettle

The Battle of Cape Spada was a short, violent encounter on the 19th of July, 1940 where the cruiser *HMAS Sydney* of the Royal Australian Navy sank one Italian cruiser and severely damaged another off the coast of Crete. In this article, we go over the events of that day, as well as what life was like for the crew of the ship.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

By July 1940, the HMAS *Sydney* had been in the Mediterranean for about a month. At the start of the year it had patrolled closer to home waters, through the Indonesian archipelago and between Singapore and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and even been part of the hunt for the *Graf Spee*, a German heavy cruiser which had been falsely rumored to be preying on ships in the Indian Ocean.

As the summer approached in the European theatre, things were heating up in more ways than one. Not only had Germany activity in the Mediterranean increased, it looked more and more likely that Fascist Italy would act on its dreams of once again making it a Roman lake by joining Berlin in its war against Britain and France.
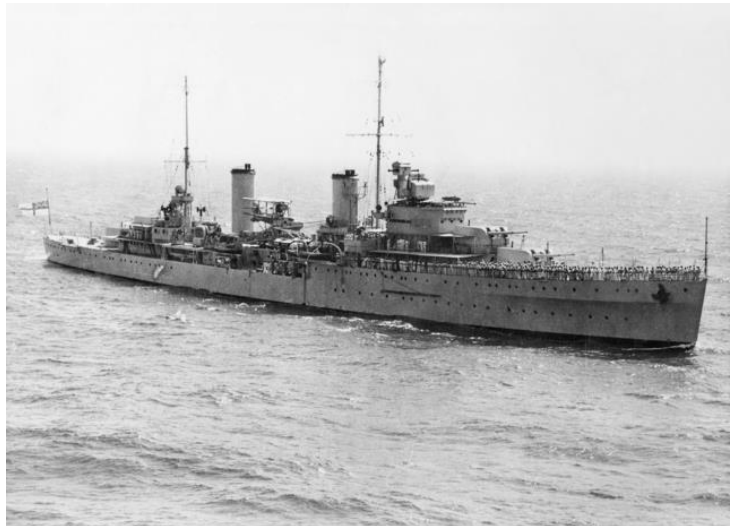
The HMAS Sydney in 1940.

The Royal Australian Navy sent several ships to support the British fleet in heading off Axis ambitions in the Med. In late May the HMAS *Sydney* joined the British fleet operating out from Alexandria, Egypt, which was then a British protectorate, just in time for the Italian declaration of war on June 10th. Fleet admiral Andrew Cunningham wasted no time and immediately sent out the fleet to go and pick a fight with the would-be heirs of Rome.

Oriel Ramsay, a crewmember on *HMAS Sydney* recalled in a 2004 interview with the Australians at War Film Archive that the ship quickly became a bit of a celebrity as one of the first Australian ships in the war: it was the first one to bombard an Italian port (the Libyan port of Bardia in early June) and also the first to sink an Italian ship, the destroyer *Espero*.

Sinking the Espero

The *Sydney* has the distinction of being involved in the very first surface battle between allied and Italian fleets during the Second World War, the battle of the Espero convoy. Though small, the battle proved that the British meant business in the Med.

On June 28th, the *Sydney* was part of a task force that interdicted a small group of Italian destroyers. During the initial engagement one, called the *Espero*, had its engines disabled and the *Sydney* was tasked to finish the ship off and pick up any survivors.

The Espero in dock in Taranto.

The *Espero* fired off a desperate volley which fell short, and then the *Sydney* returned the courtesy with four of its eight 6-inch (152mm) guns, all of which hit on the stationary target and wrecked it even further.

The ship sank quickly, but the *Sydney* continued its approach to see if it could pick up any survivors.

The Italian sailors were, in Mr. Ramsay's words, "floating around in a mess of oil and debris and Christ knows what." To get them out of the water and aboard, Mr. Ramsay recalls that a large net was dropped into the water from the gun deck and then the Australian sailors would clamber down it.
Once at sea level, they'd swim toward the survivors and try to get them into the net and so onto the
Sydney.

According to Mr. Ramsay, in the middle of all this "their bombers would come over, and they would bomb even their own men in the water." The Italian Navy seemed to have no scruples bombing even their own men when presented with stationary targets, something which would be a recurring theme during the war in the Mediterranean.

The Battle of Cape Spada

Having proved its worth, the *HMAS Sydney* briefly returned to Alexandria to resupply before going out with the fleet again for escort and sweeper duty. It played its part in the Battle of Calabria, a huge naval engagement that ended up fizzling out a bit: in the words of Mr. Ramsay "they invited the Italian ships to come out and fight, and see who was going to be King of the Med, and they showed up a little bit, but they backed off and they didn't come out."

A few weeks later, though, things were set to heat up. The *HMAS Sydney* was sent out on a submarine sweep to the north and west of Crete, together with five British destroyers. The *Sydney*'s captain, John Collins, decided that his ship and one of its escorts, the HMS *Havock,* would venture north of Crete, close to the Greek mainland, while the four other destroyers would stick closer to the island, near Cape Spada, a promontory on the northwest part of Crete. This proved to be a fortuitous decision (and also not the last time Crete played a part in Australian feats of arms).

Map of the Battle of Cape Spada.
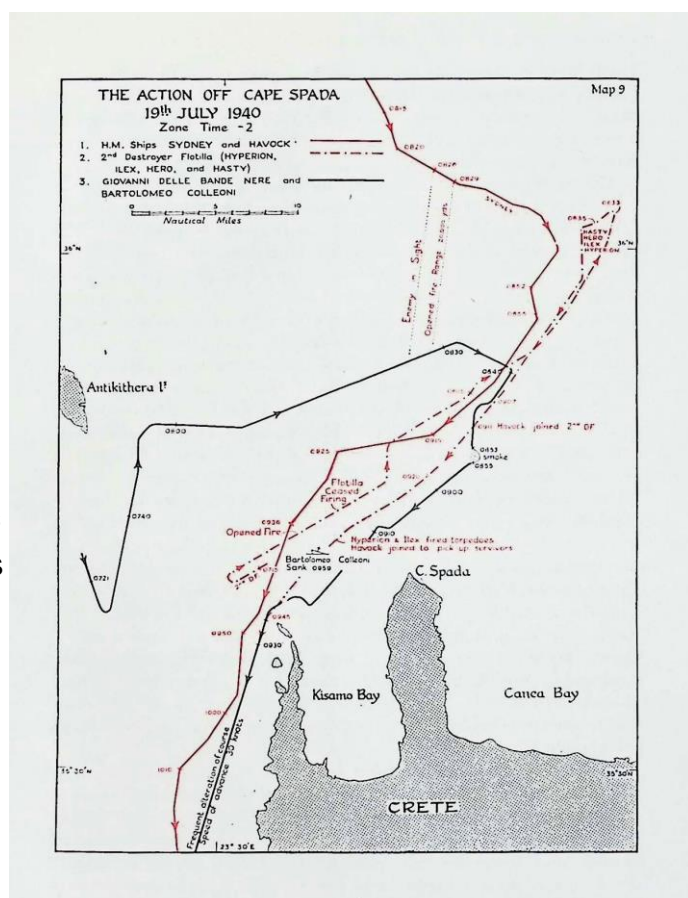
On the morning of July 19th, 1940, two light Italian cruisers, the *Giovanni dalle Bande Nere* and the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, some of the fastest cruisers ever created — capable of reaching up to 40 knots (75km/h) thanks to massive engines and having virtually no armour — rushed into sight of the destroyer wing off Cape Spada. The Italians were on their way from Tripoli to Leros, an Italian colony in the Dodecanese islands northeast of Crete.
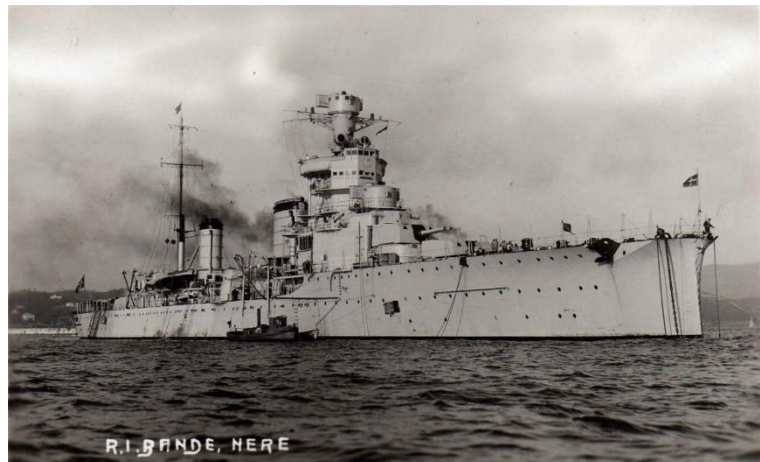
Giovanni dalle Bande Nere

Seeing just a handful of destroyers, the Italians decided to attack. The British ships knew the *Sydney* and the *Havock* were to the north, though a little unsure of the exact location. Knowing they couldn't handle two light cruisers on their own, they turned tail to try to lure the Italians toward the *HMAS Sydney*. The *Colleoni* and *Bande Nere* took the bait and the chase was on. The destroyers sent out a radio message to Captain Collins asking for assistance, Collins turned towards them at top speed, but didn't reply as the radio transmission might give away their position to the Italians. This also meant the destroyers didn't know how far away their support was.

After about an hour, the *Sydney* came into sight and the Italian ships broke off pursuit and veered away instead, adding a cruiser to the fight shifted the odds against them. They probably expected to be able to outrun the *Sydney*, which could muster 32 knots (about 60km/h), fast for a cruiser, but nothing compared to the *Bande Nere* and *Colleoni*'s 40 knots. However, they were already well within gun range of the *Sydney* and couldn't escape because the most direct route away from their pursuer would have led them directly into the Cretan coast.

The running battle lasted about an hour, but in the end the *Colleoni* was hit several times by the *Sydney*'s massive 6-inch shells, which tore through her unarmored hull, disabling her boiler and guns. She was dead in the water, and easy prey for the British destroyers' torpedos, which duly finished her off.

The *Bande Nere* was a little luckier: according to Thomas Fisher, from Geraldton, WA, a gunner aboard the *Sydney*, they "did get one salvo right on her quarterdeck. There was a flash there, you know. So she did get some damage." It would turn out later that the hit had caused some casualties, but not enough to keep the *Bande Nere* from returning fire, which scored a superficial hit on the *Sydney.*

After trading blows for over an hour, though, the *Sydney* was forced to break off the engagement after almost running out of ammunition. The *Bande Nere* made good her escape, probably counting her lucky stars.

After the Battle

The escorting destroyers went back to the site where the *Colleoni* had sunk to pick up survivors while the *HMAS Sydney* went on ahead. According to Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Fisher both, they were under constant attack from Italian bombers all the way, and at one point, close to Egypt, had to make their way back to help screen the following destroyers from the aerial attacks.

Cheering sailors look out through the hole created by the Bande Nere's shell in HMAS Sydney's funnel.

In the end, though, the Sydney made its way back to Alexandria in one piece, where the crew found a surprise waiting for them. In Mr. Fisher's words, "when we got back to harbour it was a proud day in my life because the whole of the Mediterranean fleet and all the civilians had lined the harbour on the foreshore and all cheered us into harbour." A sign that the Australian Navy had made its mark on the war in the Mediterranean.

Shortly after, Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Fisher were transferred off the *Sydney*, which ended up being a blessing in disguise: on November 19, 1941, the *Sydney* got into a naval duel with the German cruiser *Kormoran* off the coast of Western Australia, a duel that resulted in the loss of both ships. It sank with over 600 souls aboard and the wreck wasn't rediscovered until 2008. A sad fate for a ship that saw so many Australian firsts.

Remembering the Victory at Bardia

Just over 80 years ago, Australian forces fought their first major battle of World War II. Bardia, a small town on the coast of Libya, some 30 km from the Egyptian border, was an Italian stronghold. The Australian troops occupied Bardia, defeating the Italians in a little over 3 days. Australian veteran, Phillip Wortham, simply summarised the battle as "an overwhelming victory".

By Madison Moulton

Ordinary Australian Men

Ordinary men made up the 16th and 17th brigades that fought the battle of Bardia. Much like many fighting in World War II, Philip Wortham and Wallace Cameron led 'normal' working-class lives.

Phillip Wortham, who grew up in Melbourne and attended Brighton Grammar School, had a love for cars and fixing things. When he finished school he decided he wanted to go into the motor trade. He completed his mechanics apprenticeship at Lane's Motors in 1938 and also he joined the militia, the equivalent of today's Army Reserve. His militia unit was the 4th Field Brigade which was based in Chapel Street and had horse drawn artillery!

In the time leading up to the war, he fought the Black Friday bush fires, including grass fires around Broadmeadows. He subsequently resigned from Lane's Motors and became part owner of a local service station in Brighton. Phillip enlisted as soon as the war began in 1939.

Phillip Wortham

Wallace Cameron, son of a World War I veteran, was born in Greenvale, then just outside of Melbourne and grew up in St Kilda. As a teenager during and after the Great Depression, Wallace Cameron and his friends spent their time at school, swimming and creating music. He was successful both as a busker and boxer, surely not a common combination! Once the war broke out he enlisted, keen for adventure. He was assigned to the 2nd/6th Battalion of the 17th Brigade, part of the Australian 6th Division.
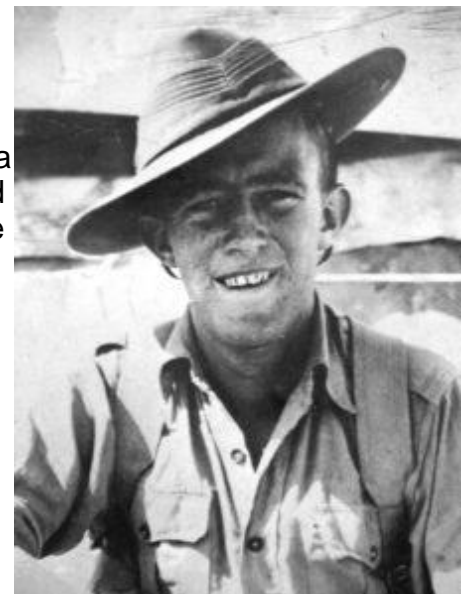

Wallace Cameron

The Battle of Bardia

Italian Stronghold at Bardia

From the 1880's through to WW2, Italy had colonized Libya and some surrounding regions. Bardia was developed as a military outpost with defensive works around the town and harbor built just before WW2.

Italy entered the war in June 1940. What followed were small raids and skirmishes along the coast of Egypt near the border of Libya. In September, Italian forces invaded Egypt and captured Sidi Barrani, a small coastal Egyptian town. However, Italy's position in Sidi Barrani was short-lived. By December troops from Australia, New Zealand and India had been called to reinforce British forces in Egypt. The Allies attacked Sidi Barrani, capturing the town and thousands of prisoners of war. This drove the Italian forces back into Libya.

The operation was meticulously planned. This is the 6th Division's operation order detailing their plan for the capture of Bardia can be read here.
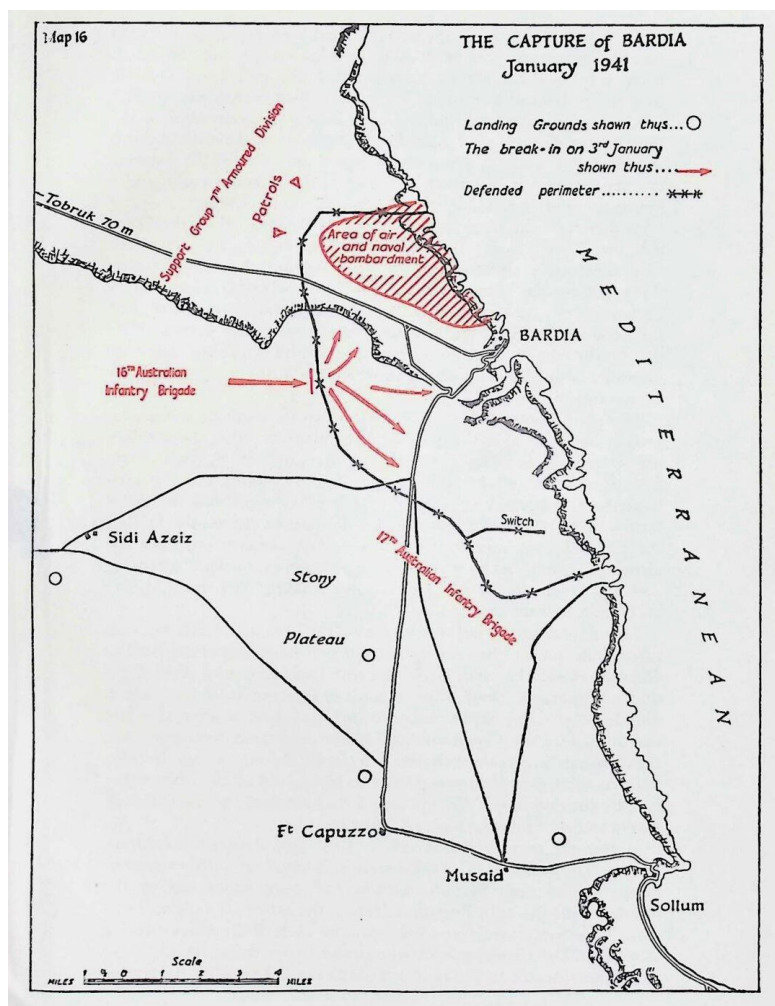
Map of the Battle of Bardia.

Australian Forces Attack Bardia

Following the victory at Sidi Barrani, the Australian 6th division, made up of the 16th, 17th and 19th brigades, moved towards Bardia.

Australian Soldiers enter Bardia. AWM.

Despite the tough training members of the 16th and 17th Brigade had received in Egypt and Palestine, many senior ranking officials believed these men to be too inexperienced. Further, the 6th Division, with only 16,000 soldiers, faced 40,000 Italian troops in Bardia. The Australian infantrymen were also somewhat under-equipped, with limited heavy weapons.

It was only about 30 kms from the border. That is the first time we ever saw how well the Italian Army was equipped. They had everything, guns, rifles, boots and a stack of grog.

They [Italian forces] were well equipped?

Very well equipped.

Better equipped than you?

Yes. Well equipped, different types of guns.

-Phillip Wortham, recalling the start of the battle in an interview.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   041688
6th Australian Division with captured Italian weapons in Bardia, 1941

The Australians pushed on and the Battle of Bardia commenced on January 3rd, 1941.

Well by this time we're fully trained troops and we went in and we crossed the start line…
at 5 o'clock in the morning it's as cold as a mother-in-law's kiss and we wearing
Greatcoats and we must have look tremendous cause some of the fellows were 6 foot and
all that and when you're bulky with a great big greatcoat on.

–Wallace Cameron, describing the morning of the attack on the Italian defences in the harbour town.

The 6th Division began their assault assisted by air support and naval gunfire and under the cover of an artillery barrage. The naval gunfire included ships from the Australian Scrap Iron Flotilla. The 16th brigade was the first to attack from the west at dawn. They blew gaps in the barbed wire and filled in and broke down the sides of the anti-tank ditch with picks and shovels. This allowed the supporting Matilda tanks into the Italian defences, where the combined force took over 8,000 prisoners.

we had to crawl through this barbed wire fence, go through there and they had their
defences in concrete, they'd been there for years, the Italians, reinforced concrete, men
lived in it, 300 hundred men lived in [the bunker]

Wallace Cameron, describing the attack.

Bardia is Won

Next the 17th Australian Infantry Brigade exploited the breach made in the perimeter and pressed south as far as a secondary line of defences known as the Switch Line. The next day, the 16th Australian Infantry Brigade captured the township of Bardia, cutting the fortress in two.

With this the Italian defences started to crumble. Thousands more prisoners were taken and the Italian garrison now held out only in the northern and southernmost parts of the fortress. These surrendered the following day, the Australians captured a total of 36,000 Italian prisoners.

By the end of the battle, the Australian 6th Division lost 136 men and saw well over 300 wounded. However, they had captured tens of thousands of Italian soldiers, along with hundreds of guns, light and medium tanks, and plenty of military equipment. With the capturing of the site came two well-equipped field hospitals and various modes of military transport, including trucks, motorcycles, and horses.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   005253

Thousands of Italian prisoners captured at Bardia.

The battle of Bardia lasted about 3½ days, it was an overwhelming victory. It was very well received and Wavel thought this is good we will keep going. The next step was Tobruk which was the major port. We had a rest for about 2 days as I remember, I know I had my birthday at Bardia and I thought what a bloody good way to spend a birthday. I was 23.

-Phillip Wortham

The success of the Australian 6th Division didn't stop at Bardia. They, along with the British forces, pushed the Italian troops further into Libya. Eventually, the 6th was moved to defend Greece.

According to Sergeant Henry Gullet of the 2/6th battalion, who later became a member of the Australian Parliament, there was no questioning their involvement in the Battle or Australia's involvement in the war:

It did not strike us as extraordinary or unfair that our generation should be called upon to fight. As volunteers we were there of our own free choice anyhow. Neither did we believe in our hearts that our country was threatened and that we were fighting for Australia's existence. Even when the Japanese came in we did not think that. But we knew England's position was very serious and that we should help her as our fathers had done. It was the order of things.

– Henry "Jo" Gullett

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   004906

Soldiers of the 2/2nd Batalion celebrate victory at Bardia

The Benghazi Handicap and the Siege of Tobruk

The Benghazi handicap is the name Australian soldiers gave to their race to stay ahead of the German Afrika Korps in Libya, 1941. They won the race, but the reward was just to be besieged in the city of Tobruk for 241 days, the longest siege in British military history. In this article, we use the words of veterans themselves to describe these events, and how the Rats of Tobruk experienced the siege.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

1941 began very well for the British and Australian forces. The Italians forces had invaded British-held Egypt from Libya late 1940, but the fascist offensive had collapsed at the merest fraction of resistance. Not only had the Allies been able to defend against it, they had been able to launch a successful counterattack.

The Capture of Tobruk

The first Libyan town of note taken by the British-Australian force was Bardia in January 1941, which we've covered at length in our article on the victory at Bardia. It also has the dubious honour of being the first Italian town shelled by the Royal Australian Navy, which we talk about in our article about the HMAS *Sydney*.

Soon after, the town of Tobruk and its strategic port also fell into Allied hands. Though the fighting had been fierce, it hadn't lasted long and the defences of the town were mostly intact still when the town and its port were captured. This would prove to be a great boon later, when the British forces themselves would be besieged in Tobruk.
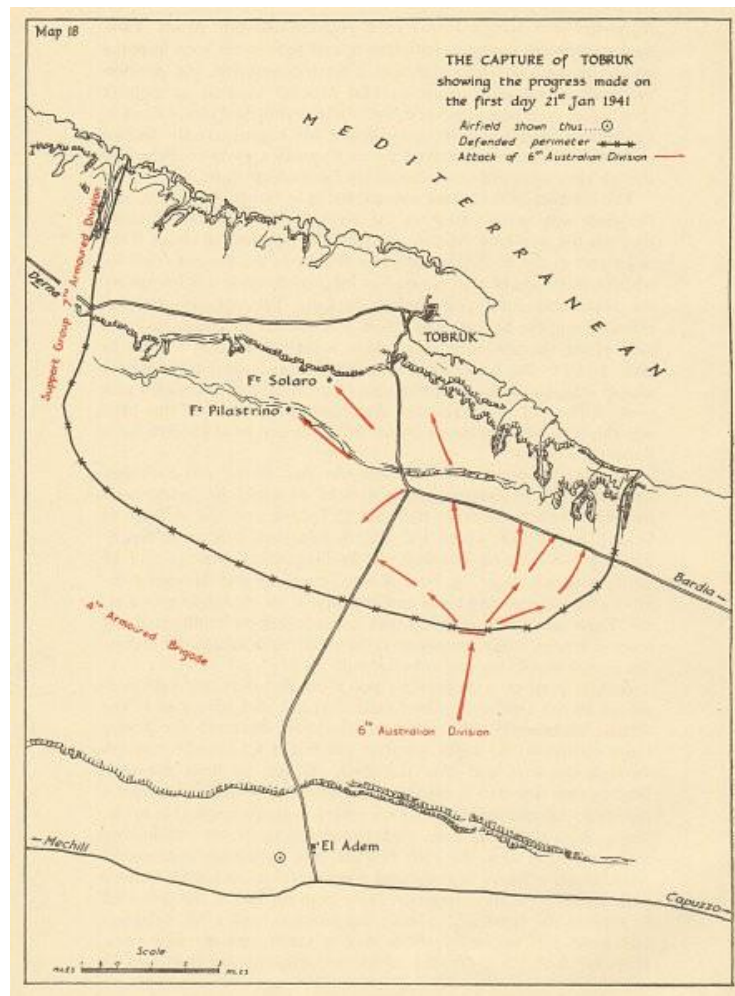
The Capture of Tobruk, Jan 1941. History Guild.

John Campbell from Mildura, Victoria was one of the people dropped off by ship just a few weeks after Tobruk had been taken. He recalls seeing burnt out vehicles everywhere, but that the town itself was mainly untouched.

One of the men who was able to poke around the town a little soon after it had been captured was Ray Norman from Sydney. He confirms that most buildings were undamaged. He also tells the story of finding a cash box full of lira notes in the abandoned Bank of Italy. He and his mates used the bundled notes as toilet paper or to light cooking fires, not finding out until later that the lira was still perfectly legal tender and they had burned and wiped their behinds on a small fortune!

Australian soldiers after the capture of Tobruk. AWM.

To Benghazi

With Tobruk in the rearview mirror, the British and Commonwealth forces pressed on, taking several towns. The most important of these was Derna, another port. These towns mostly fell without incident, though there was sporadic fighting here and there between the Italians and the Allied forces.

Fortune seemed to smile on the Allied war effort, or at least it did until Benghazi. The town itself was taken without a fight, according to Alexander Barnett from Glenferrie, Victoria, who added that they found several Italian heavy guns in good working order that his unit made ready for their own use.

Because the campaign had been such a doddle, British commanders figured that the worst of the fighting must be over in North Africa. As such, they decided to send the larger part of their force, made up of mostly British soldiers, to Greece and Crete to prepare for the German invasion there. A force of mainly Australian troops would stay in Libya as a garrison in case the Italians decided to try their luck again

Though this made sense at the time, it ended up being a pretty serious mistake. Unbeknownst to the Allies at the time, Berlin had decided to help out its Italian allies and had sent Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his Afrika Korps to North Africa. The Desert Fox would become a thorn in the Allied side for the next few years.

The Germans Arrive

The first anybody saw of the Germans was when Australian pioneers about fifty miles south of Benghazi noticed some planes flying over. According to one of them, Jack Bertram from Maldon, Victoria, he pointed out the aircraft and was told "they're German, they've got a cross on them." Soon after, the first reports came in that the Germans had landed in Tripoli, just a few hundred miles away.

The British forces were completely unprepared for the onslaught that Rommel was seemingly preparing, and the order quickly came down that all forces were to retreat back to Tripoli as it was the first town with decent defences.

Mr. Barnett recalls spiking his captured Italian guns, while Mr. Bertram was ordered to blow up a bridge over a gully he calls the Wadi Cuff. However, when his unit arrived they found the Italians had already blown it weeks before, so they made haste to turn back and join the retreat.

The Benghazi Handicap

The retreat to Tobruk wasn't exactly Dunkirk levels of chaos, but it was made in great haste: the Australians knew that if they were caught before they reached Tobruk they'd be toast. The breakneck speeds at which they were going quickly gave it the nickname the "Benghazi handicap" after the type of horse race.

In the opinion of Mr. Barnett, the handicap didn't really start until the troops had reached the desert south of Derna. Up to then, things had been going alright, but then a sandstorm hit the area one night, causing massive confusion. The chaos slowed down the column significantly, allowing the Germans to catch up.

One example of the chaos was the story of another Australian soldier, Raymond Widdows of Moonee Ponds, Victoria. He was part of a truck convoy meant to supply Benghazi and heard some of the fighting as his unit approached. When he reported it to an officer, he was told "that's the Indian army on manoeuvres, don't worry about that." It wasn't until the next day that they ran into a unit of Australian pioneers holding off the German vanguard that he realized what was really going on.

A German tank advances in the desert. Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv.

The Germans weren't just behind the Australians, either: because the British had failed to take the high ground to the south of the coast thanks to the sandstorm near Derna, part of the Afrika Korps took that high ground and started to overtake the Australian forces. According to Rupert Goodman of Kew, Melbourne "you could see the Germans out there in the sand, kicking up the dust."

Apparently, the Germans were able to move a few units ahead of the Australians and capture some command staff and ambulance personnel. Among them was Thomas Canning from South Australia, who reported that one of the generals captured didn't believe what was going on until a German with a machine gun ordered him out of his car.

Things were looking up for the Germans, but the Australians had hurried enough that they made it to Tobruk before the Afrika Korps, even if only by a whisker. According to Mr. Goodman, the Germans were so confident in their success that a high-ranking German officer showed up at Tobruk in just a staff car, assuming the city had already been taken. He was quickly taken prisoner, a victim of his own hubris.

The Siege of Tobruk

Beating the Germans to Tobruk was only one part of the challenge, though, next was to survive the siege. The Germans had completely surrounded the city, but thanks to the excellent defences abandoned by the Italians, the Allies who were mostly Australian soldiers, but also British, Poles and Czechoslovak volunteers, were able to hold them off for the better part of eight months. The 9th Australian Division composed the majority of the allied garrison.

Czechoslovak soldiers at the siege of Tobruk. Wikipedia.

Still, though, it was a hard time. The Germans and their Italian allies would regularly bomb Tobruk — almost all the statements from veterans mention the Stuka dive bombers and the noise they made as they came down for a bombing run — as well as near constant raids and attacks by both infantry and tanks.

One infantryman, Charles Cutler, who would go on to become Deputy Premier of New South Wales, recalls that he would lie in his trench most of the day, exchanging fire with German units lying low in their own holes. According to him, it was the "closest to trench warfare" Australian units ever got in WWII.

Another soldier, Kenneth Clarke from Adelaide, mostly remembered the terrible food: most meals consisted just of biscuits and brackish water. In his words, "the only thing that kept us going was the ascorbic acid tablets, the vitamin C."

To add insult to injury, the Germans would broadcast propaganda programs over the radio. Organized by the American fascist William Joyce, who went by the name Lord Haw-Haw, these were mostly nasty jibes aimed at the men surviving in the dust of Tobruk. In one of his harangues, he derisively named the defenders the Rats of Tobruk, a name which the Australians cheerfully appropriated and wore as a badge of honor.

Mosaic at the foot of the Rats of Tobruk Memorial, Queen's Park, Mackay, Queensland. Wikipedia.

The forces in Tobruk were supplied by the Tobruk Ferry Service, which was a force of Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy warships that kept the defenders supplied and supported. These included vessels of the Australian 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' which made dozens of trips through the gauntlet of German and Italian air, submarine and surface attacks. This included the evacuation of the majority of the 9th Australian Division and their replacement with the British 70th Division. After 198 days under siege the men of the 9th Division were exhausted. They had suffered 3,164 casualties including 650 killed, 1,597 wounded and 917 captured. Their tireless work improving the defences of Tobruk as well as their aggressive raiding of the German and Italian positions were vital to the success of the defence.

A patrol from the Australian 9th Division during the siege of Tobruk. These men of the 2/13th Battalion are waiting to move forward in no man's land. AWM.

In the end, though, the Rats were a lot tougher than the Germans: after 241 days Rommel had run out of ideas and the clock was ticking on the British counter offensive. Seeing no other solution, the Desert Fox retreated back to Libya to rest and regroup. Breathing a sigh of relief, the Rats of Tobruk got some rest themselves, but not for long as the next chapter in the desert war loomed.

Tobruk – Podcast

Tobruk was one of the greatest Allied victories – and one of the worst Allied defeats – of the Second World War.

History Guild has organised this discussion between David Mitchelhill-Green, author of TOBRUK – Fiercely Stand, or Fighting Fall and Angus Wallace, creator of the fantastic WW2 Podcast.

It is a fascinating read which places Tobruk in a wider history to help explain why it was strategically important. It provides a nuanced picture of the differences at both a tactical and strategic level, between the first 242 day siege and the second catastrophic defeat.
Listen to this podcast here https://historyguild.org/tobruk-podcast/

The Battle of Greece – Australia's Textbook Rear-Guard Action

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   007848

Retreat doesn't always mean defeat, sometimes it can be a victory to withdraw in good order and deny your enemy a total victory. This is was the outcome for the allied forces in Greece during April 1941, thanks in part to textbook rear-guard actions fought by Australian units, which allowed 50,732 men to escape the grasp of the advancing superior Axis force. But why were Australian units involved in Greece in the first place?

By Brendan Spencer.

Australia's commitment to the Second World War is astonishing, 14.25% of its population was mobilised with around 993,000 serving in Australia's armed forces during the war. Initially Australian forces were committed to the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East, helping Britain defend her imperial possessions and fight the Axis nations. Australians served alongside the New Zealanders in the ANZAC Corps, the only time the corps would exist during the Second World War. But after the declaration of war by the Empire of Japan Australia's focus shifted to home defense. This helps to explain why the Greek campaign has been overlooked in Australia, despite the very significant part played by Australian.

The Allies deploy to Greece

The Greek campaign had few of the big battles or the world changing consequences of the Battle of France or the Battle of Britain in 1940. It was a key moment in Allied strategy in the Mediterranean, but for the wrong reasons. The Allies sent 63,000 men to help Greece counter a German invasion. This was named W-Force and it included the Australian 6th Division led by Major-General Sir Iven Mackay. This included the Victorian 17th Australian Infantry Brigade, comprising the 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th battalions, as well as the 2/2nd Field Regiment, a Victorian artillery unit. It also included the 16th Australian Infantry Brigade from New South Wales and the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade drawn from multiple states, which included the Victorian 2/8th battalion.

These forces were veterans of the North African campaign and were taken from the Libyan front after their stunning success against the Italians. They were heavily involved in the rear guard fighting that would come to define the campaign in Greece. Allied forces had been in action in Greece for 6 months prior to the German invasion, with R.A.F units supporting the Greeks in their war against the invading Italians. This should have given the Allies time to make a detailed plan for the defence of Greece. This was not done effectively and the deployment of Allied forces was chaotic. Private Roy Heron from Albany, WA, who had previously defeated the Italians at Bardia, remembers that they had no idea why they were being sent to Greece, what they were to do or how long they would be there.

When the Australians arrived at the port of Piraeus and marched through Athens they were cheered by the civilians and welcomed like heroes. Many Australians enjoyed their time in Greece, especially as the British Pound was very strong against the Greek Drachma meaning they could spend lavishly on their low army wages, with one soldier remembering how the local village baker had to borrow money from the whole village to give the soldier change. The Australians enjoyed the Greek countryside and saw a lot of it while travelling up the country to reach their defensive positions. When they moved to Florina on the Greek Yugoslavian border the weather turned awful, the soldiers had a hard time adjusting from the heat of the North African desert to the snowy hills of Northern Greece.

The German Invasion of Greece

The Germans started Operation Marita, their invasion of Greece, on the 6th of April 1941. The first major engagement the Australian forces were involved in was on the night of the 10th April 1941 near Vevi on the Greek Yugoslav border.

Map of the Battle of Greece, 1941. Wikimedia.
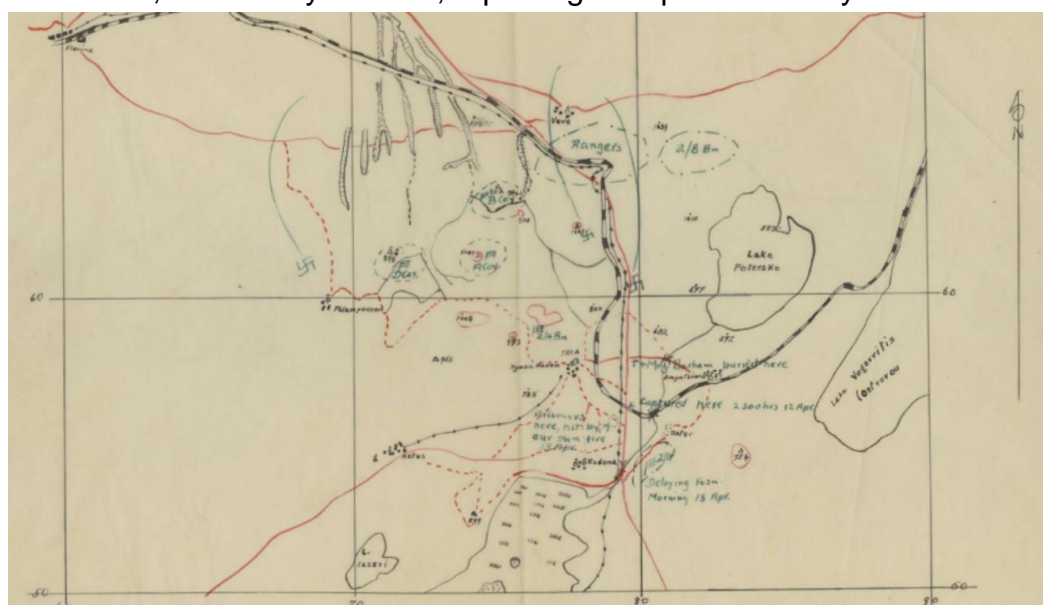
Map of Battle of Vivi, April 1941. AWM.
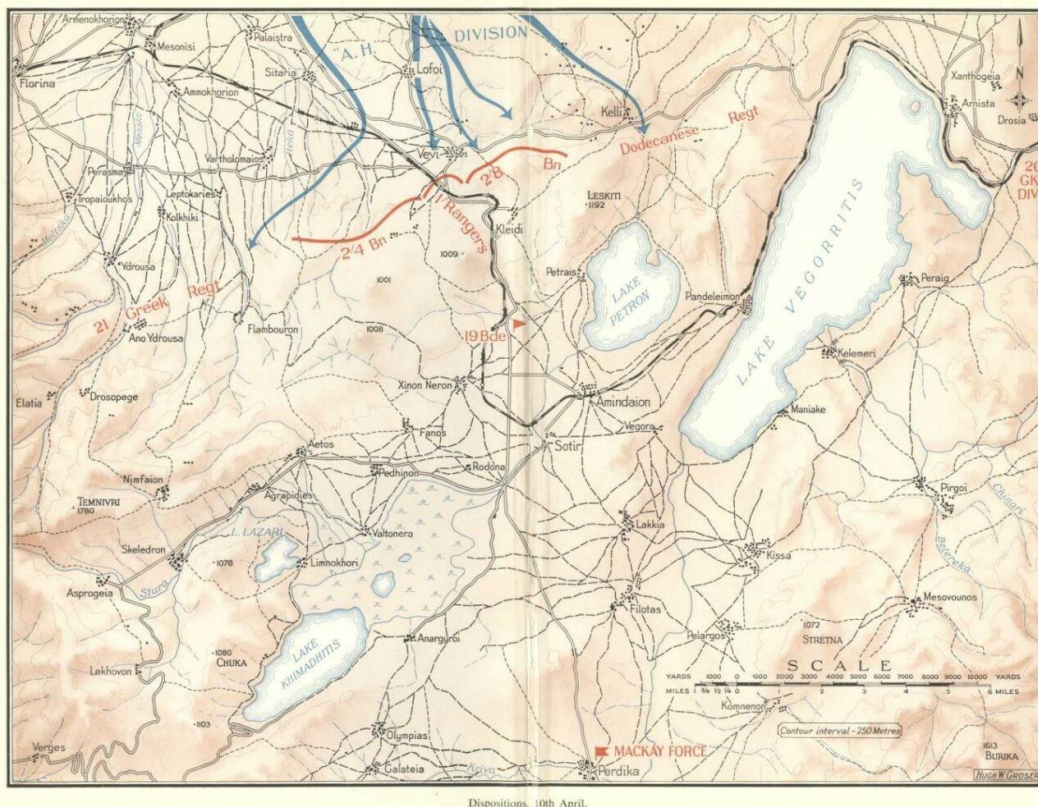
The forward elements of the 1st SS Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler crashed into the Australian 2/4th and 2/8th battalions, who had only moved up to their positions in the previous 24 hours.

Weather conditions were less than ideal, Sgt Rex Yeomans of the 2/3rd Field Regt remembers that the weather was awful, with the snow making it harder to engage the enemy. The Australians had to hold a 4 km front, which they did well, repulsing multiple attacks by the SS regiment. The Australian artillery was quite effective in stopping the German tanks and mechanised forces.

After two days of near continuous fighting with little sleep the Australian position had deteriorated. A significant part of B Company, 2/8th battalion were killed, wounded or captured and the Australians were forced to withdraw. This in itself

Australian Positions during the Battle of Vivi, April 1941. AWM.

was far from easy, but the Australians maintained their cohesion while disengaging under fire for 10km.

Retreat and Pinios Gorge

While in the process of withdrawing from Northern Greece the Australian 19th Brigade was deployed south of Siatista, while the Victorian 17th Brigade (known as Savige force due to their commander), was kept as a rear-guard at Kalabaka. Savige force held this defensive line until they disengaged on the night of the 17th-18th April. The withdrawal was hard for the Australian units, William Osborne, a gunner with 2/3rd Field Regiment, recalled that the roads were filled with refugees making their way south and there were constant attacks from Luftwaffe aircraft during the day. As a result they travelled almost exclusively by night, but the retreat didn't result in panic or chaos. This was the experience of much of W-Force, but the ANZAC forces were usually the ones tasked with providing the rear-guard.

Elements of the 2/2nd and 2/3rd battalions alongside some New Zealand units fought a rear-guard action at Pinios Gorge on the 17th-18th April. Major-General Sir Iven Mackay had prepared for the defence of this area by removing all of the heavy equipment from the north side of the Pinios river, then blowing up all the bridges over it. This bought the ANZAC forces time to create a defensive position where they could hold the Germans while the remainder of W-Force was evacuated.

However the ANZAC forces had too few units to guard the whole riverbank against a German crossing so they relied on their Bren Gun carriers to provide a quick counter attack wherever the Germans crossed.

The 2/3rd Battalion were exhausted after their retreat south, were depleted by casualties they had suffered and men who had become separated from the unit. William Jenkins, of the 2/3rd battalion recalled moving into the defensive positions at Pinios Gorge as wounded New Zealanders were being withdrawn. William, from Newtown, NSW had worked in the Chubb safe factory before the war and gave a false name when he joined the 6th Division in order enlist without his parent's permission. He also had better memories during the retreat of finding an abandoned NAAFI canteen in the heavily bombed town of Larissa. He was happy to have stopped the Germans getting their hands on the food, beer and supplies!
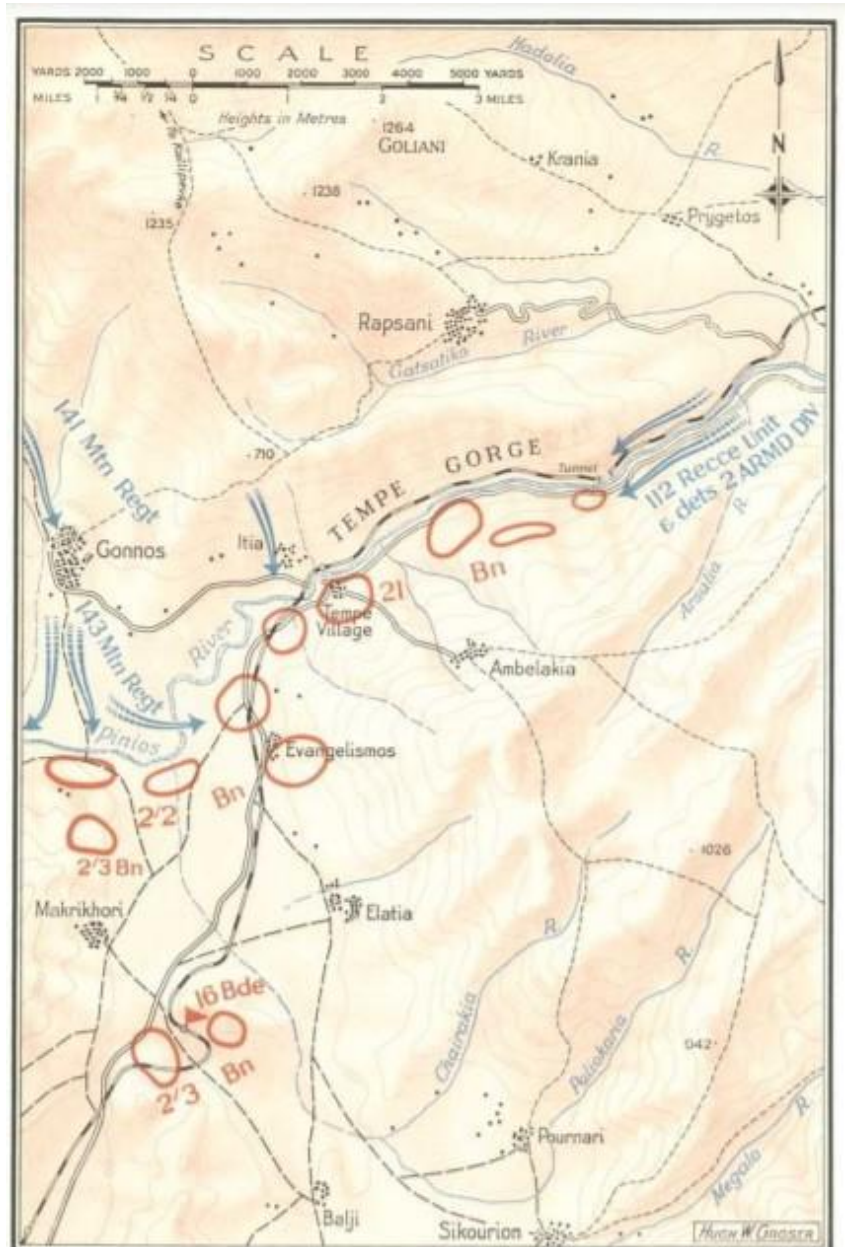
Map of the Battle of Pinios Gorge. AWM

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   ART27554

Action in the Vale of Tempe, Greece. Painting by William Dargie of the fighting at Pinios Gorge. AWM

The forces at Pinios Gorge had to hold a 5km long line against a highly experienced German force of the 6th Gebirgs Division that was backed up tanks from the I/3 panzer regiment. On the 18th April at 7:00 the German XVIII Mountain Corps launched an assault against the 2/2nd Battalion, this was combined with an assault on the New Zealand positions. The ANZAC's were also under constant air attack by up to 30 German dive bombers at a time. By the end of the day both units had to fall back, but they had managed to hold the Germans up for 24 hours. This delay meant that W-Force was able to make it to the Thermopylae line. They had done their job well.

The withdrawal from Pinios gorge followed the now familiar process of the Australian rear guard attempting to reach the next defensive position far enough ahead of the Germans to establish firm defences. Neville Blundell of the 2/3rd Battalion, describes it well.

> We were on trucks… you had to keep an air raid alert. There were a couple of blokes standing by the back of the cabin with the cover pulled back so we could see what was coming. When the planes approached we used to bang on the lid and they'd pull up.
> Everyone would dive out and get as far away as they could in the time they had. Two blokes got wounded during one attack… Then it was just to keep going day after day. We'd move in the night and hide in the day.
>
> *Neville Blundell of the 2/3rd Battalion*

Neville, a tool maker from Tempe, NSW enlisted in the 6th Division the day Australia declared war on Germany. He is part of a very small group of Australian soldiers who fought against each of Australia's enemies in WW2. He fought the Italians at Bardia, the Germans in Greece, the Vichy French in Syria and the Japanese in the Pacific.

Thermopylae and Evacuation

The 24th of April saw an acceleration of the withdrawal of W-Force from Greece. It continued each night, with troops and equipment being taken off by the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy from the port of Porto Rafti. This evacuation was covered by the Thermopylae line, manned by Allied forces that now had extensive experience preparing new defensive positions quickly.

The 19th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier George Vasey from Kew, Vic were assigned the rear guardposition around the village of Brallos. Vasey, whose nickname was "Bloody George" was typically blunt in his instructions.

> Here you bloody well are and here you bloody well stay. And if any bloody German gets between your post and the next, turn your bloody bren around and shoot him up the arse.

Brigadier George Vasey, commander of the 19th Brigade at the Thermopylae line.

The terrain of the Thermopylae line favoured the defenders, with the rough ground making it hard for the German tanks. Michael Lardelli , who was a sugar cane farmer from near Townsville, QLD, of the 2/1st Battalion remembered 'the terrain was too rough and mountainous particularly around the pass it was very very rugged country'. The German attack came on the Thermopylae line on the 24th April as elements of the 6th Mountain Division attacked the Australians at Brallos, but they met fierce resistance. The Australians were under constant air attack from Luftwaffe dive bombers, Ronald Currie, of the 2/7th Battalion describes his experience.

> they used the Stukas and they would mainly use them prior to an attack. Whenever you got a bad Stuka raid, you knew there was going to be an attack coming… in my book he was the best soldier in the world at that time, the German, and he had the best equipment. His artillery, I remember one night on Brallos Pass we, putting up a stand, but we was right on top of a mountain and there was all rock, you couldn't dig in, you might get behind a bit of a rock… that was the worst fright I ever got. Oh you could hear the bloody things coming, whistling, crashing into the bloody bare rock. Pieces of rock going everywhere… it's a wonder any of us got out of it.

Ronald Currie, 2/7th Battalion.

Ronald Currie was a farmer from Narre Warren, Victoria. He trained at the Flemington Showgrounds and Puckapunyal before seeing action against the Italians at Bardia.

*Camouflaged Gun of the 2/1st Field Regiment in action near Brallos. AWM*

The ANZAC's held the Thermopylae line against a full day of determined attacks from the Germans, destroying 16 German tanks in the process. They were then ordered to withdraw, their delaying action giving the remainder of W-Force time to evacuate. They pulled back in good order, managing to take most of their equipment with them. The exhausted Germans failed to press home their attack.

It was now a race against time for the Australians to reach the evacuation points before the advancing Germans cut them off. Most of the troops were able to make it to the evacuation ports or beaches, although a total of 26 Allied ships were sunk by German air attack during the evacuation. The ship evacuating Ronald Currie, who was from Narre Warren, VIC, was torpedoed, but he still managed to make it to Crete, which was the site of a German airborne invasion shortly afterwards. The greatest tragedy of the evacuation was the sinking of the Dutch troopship Salamat and the Royal Navy destroyers HMS Diamond and HMS Wryneck by the Luftwaffe with the loss of 983 men including at least 31 Australians and likely many more. This was a result of the ships remaining in the port of Nafplio for too long loading evacuees. This meant they hadn't got far enough away from Greece by first light and were found and sunk by German aircraft.
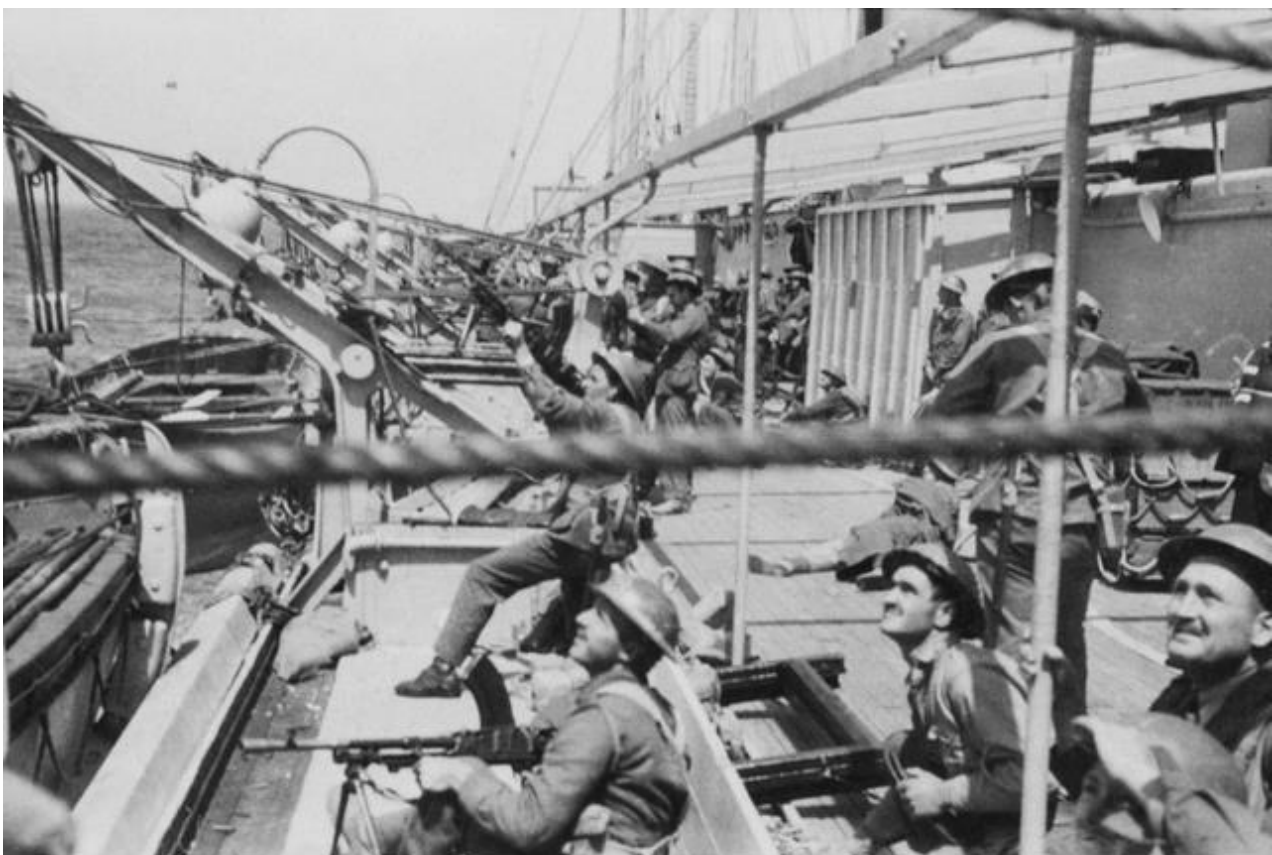
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   069346

Australian Bren Gunners firing at enemy aircraft attacking the Transport Costa Rica during their evacuation from Greece. AWM.

The Australian experience in Greece

The Australians fought a good campaign overall. They were involved in most of the fighting that occurred and were not decisively beaten on the battle field. Their casualties were relatively light considering all of the fighting they took part in. The Australians suffered 320 killed in action, 494 wounded and 2030 captured. Listen to an incredible story of one of these POW's in Escape from Greece. The Australian and ANZAC forces were not beaten because they weren't as skilled as the Germans but because they were vastly outnumbered and had little air support. In their reports after the battle the 1st SS division recorded that the Australians and New Zealanders had fought an outstanding defensive battle and used the terrain well. Coming from their enemy, this is significant praise.

Escape from Greece

NZ POWs being transported to Germany in 1943. Credit: Photo by Leigh Hill Ref 1/4-069786-F / War History Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library

It began, as it sometimes does, with an old photograph.

Three men dressed in khaki uniforms standing in front of an exotic facade in some distant land. The man in the middle – hands in pockets, slouch hat tilted at a jaunty 45 degree angle – is my uncle.

By Stephen Hutcheon.

John Greaves, or Jack as he was known, had served in WWII with the 2/2nd Battalion of the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the North African, Mediterranean and New Guinea campaigns.

I'd watched him march on Anzac Day and met some of his old comrades-in-arms. And when we met in person, there was *that* physical reminder of his war service. His gnarly left hand was missing a couple of fingertips as a result of a wartime injury which both shocked and secretly fascinated me.
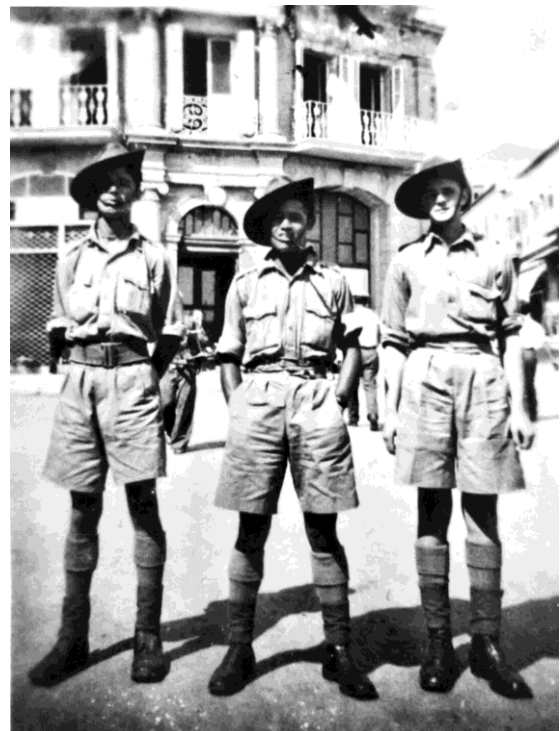
Private Jack Greaves and two mates outside the Australian Soldiers' Club in Jerusalem in 1940.

One day in late 2019, I was looking at the photo and began to wonder where it was taken. I typed in a search term about Australian soldiers during WWII in the Middle East and it wasn't long before I was able to identify the building behind the three diggers.

It was the Australian Soldiers' Club in Jerusalem in what was the British Mandate for Palestine, which now encompasses Israel and the Palestinian territories. The photo was almost certainly the work of a photographer from the Matson Photo Service, which had a shopfront in that same building behind the three diggers on leave from their base in nearby Camp Julis.

Matson would have done a roaring trade in taking photos, processing film and selling cameras to the Australians, some 130,000 of whom served in the Middle East between 1940-42.

That discovery whetted my curiosity and although Jack, his wife and only son had long since passed on, his daughter-in-law was still living in the family home.

I come from a family with a predilection for hoarding life's ephemera and luckily for me, most of Jack's papers and photos (and even his uniforms) were still around. And when I finally got to rummage through Jack's collection – and there was a lot of it – it was like stumbling into a pharaonic tomb.

The exterior of the Australian Soldiers' Club in Jerusalem. The Matson Photo Service shop is on the bottom left the building. Matson Photo Service / LOC

From that beginning I was able to find some missing parts of Jack's story and piece together the tale of a remarkable World War II escape that had never been told in full before.

From Shanghai to Sydney

What makes Jack's story different from many of those who served in the same war was his mixed-race heritage. Born in Shanghai in 1914, John Robin Greaves was the eldest son of a Eurasian family which had made its home in the Chinese treaty port two generations before.

Jack grew up between two cultures. His Anglo-Scottish forebears came to China in the mid-19th century as traders and merchants. And in time they found local partners and started families.

In 1937, when Jack was aged 22, war arrived at his doorstep.

As a member of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, he was mobilised to protect the foreign enclaves from Japanese incursion during what became known as the Battle of Shanghai. He would have witnessed enough brutality to make him realise his hometown faced a bleak future.

He wanted no part of that and decided to reboot his life in a quieter corner of the world.

Jack Greaves, left, farewells his brother Stan as he prepares to leave for Australia in 1939. CREDIT: Greaves/Hutcheon family

Eighteen months later, he was aboard a passenger ship when it steamed into Sydney Harbour on a spring morning in 1939. With a suitcase of belongings, £50 in his pocket and not knowing a soul, Jack disembarked at Circular Quay.
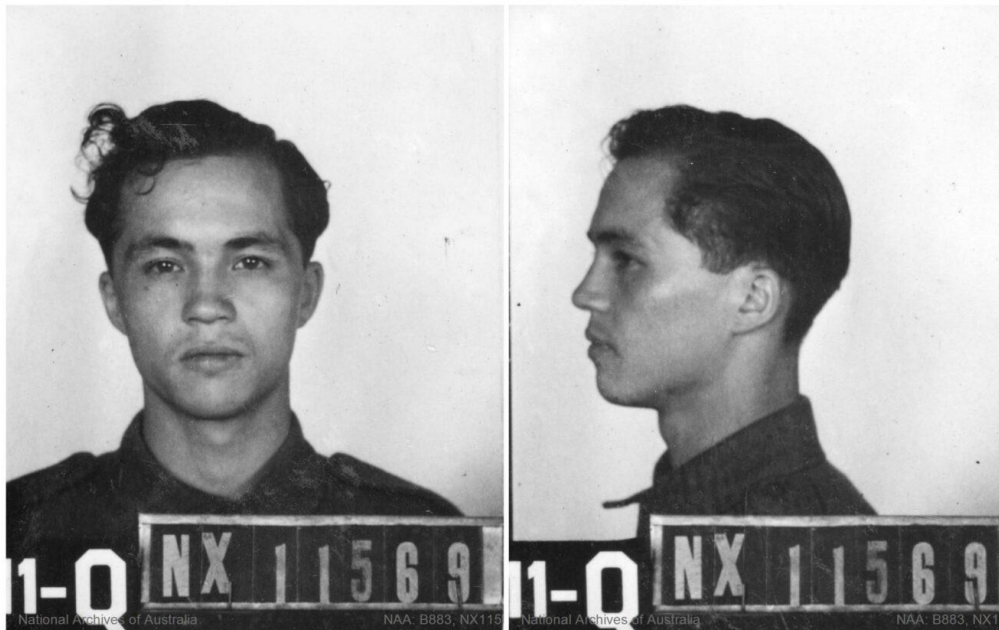
"The East will never see me again," he wrote to his sister Beatrice, my mother, from his new homeland.

To Palestine and beyond

But the war Jack tried to escape caught up with him. A year after his arrival, he enlisted at the recruitment office at Sydney's Victoria Barracks. And a few months later he was sailing back out through Sydney Harbour on a troopship crammed with AIF recruits.The destination was the British mandate of Palestine, where the recruits trained for combat – although they had enough time to duck into Jerusalem and do some sightseeing, as the photo in front of the Soldiers' Club attests

Jack Greaves's enlistment mugshots. Credit: NAA, B883, 203067169 and 203067170

After a brief interlude in the North African campaign of early 1941, where Jack lost his fingertips on the eve of the Battle of Bardia, he spent the next few months convalescing in Egypt.

I found this photo of him in the Australian War Memorial archives. Taken by the renowned war photographer George Silk, it shows Jack on the far right, smiling as a group of injured soldiers pose with a couple of New Zealand nurses.

But by now, the British War Cabinet had turned its attention to the looming threat of a German invasion of Greece. Operation Lustre, as the Allies code-named it, was an ill-conceived plan to support the cradle of civilisation against the might of Hitler's war machine.

By March, Jack had recovered and rejoined his unit in Egypt and within a few days was boarding another ship, this time bound for Port Piraeus on the Greek mainland.

Jack Greaves, on the right with his arm in a sling, recovering at a hospital in Helwan, Egypt in January 1941. Credit: Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, 005236

After a few days, Jack's unit was dispatched north to Veria Pass, high in the mountains of northern Greece.

By early April, the German invasion was underway and the entire Allied expeditionary force of some 60,000 men was soon in full retreat.

The Battle of Pinios Gorge

Pinios Gorge, also known as the Vale of Tempe, lies near Greece's eastern coast. It has long been a strategic choke point used to defend the Greek heartland from invasion. And on April 17, 1941 invaders once again advanced towards it, opposed this time by Australians and New Zealanders.

Private Greaves was there as part of what the diggers called the PBI — the Poor Bloody Infantry. His mortar platoon was among those ordered to help slow the German advance, which threatened to cut off the main Allied retreat. To the north, a German Panzer division with infantry support approached the Anzac defenders. And from the north-west, elements of the 6th Mountain Division trekked over nearby Mount Olympus to outflank them.

"The valley was filled with the roar of rushing shells, the thunder of exploding mortar bombs, and the crackle of musketry echoing and re-echoing," the New Zealand historian JF Cody wrote, describingthe scene captured in this illustration by fellow countryman and war artist Don McNab.

Illustration by New Zealand official artist Don MacNab shows the action at Pinios Gorge on April 17.

)

The Anzacs proved to be no match for a combined tank and infantry assault supported by the Luftwaffe's overwhelming air superiority. The battle extended into the following evening, and at dusk the German Panzers broke through, scattering the defenders.

"Orders were then given to us to retire, every man for himself," Jack wrote in a report. "Close behind, a German tank seemed to be aiming its fire directly at me. Flaming onions [tracer rounds] flew past as I ran for my life." He hopped into a truck heading south. But in the twilight, the Germans had cut off their escape route. They had only travelled a short distance when a single shot rang out.

"Then all of a sudden hell broke loose … The Jerries were in a perfect ambush … Machine guns, mortars and Very lights [flares] turned night into day for a few brief moments," Jack wrote in his account of that evening. "Before I realised what had happened, Jerry was searching us for arms."

Although the Germans were victorious, they had been delayed just long enough to allow thousands more retreating Allied troops to avoid capture. Nine days later, the Germans swept into Athens and following that, the rest of the Greek mainland was overrun.

Escaping the Germans

As enemy forces streamed south, Jack was marched north to Dulag 183, a notorious prisoner of war (POW) transit camp in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, or Salonika as it was then known.

Housed in a disused army barracks, the makeshift camp was already overcrowded when he arrived. And it wasn't long before prisoners succumbed to diseases including dysentery, malaria and beriberi.In a letter to his sister Beatrice, Jack described camp life as being a "hellish … nasty nightmare" where poor sanitation, meagre rations and backbreaking work became the norm. The POWs were attacked by what he described as "all species of body vermin " which covered their bodies and the rags that passed for bedding. "Life there was an unbelievable hell," he wrote.

Jack biding his time while covertly assembling his own escape kit: a compass, a map and a set of civvies. He made several attempts to escape, but each time he was thwarted.

On June 25, he was among about 2,000 prisoners assembled on the camp parade ground in preparation for a four-day rail journey to more permanent camps in Germany and Austria. As they marched to the station, Jack knew that the train journey was his best and last chance to escape.

"Sixty men per carriage … and through a little hole two feet by one foot we had to relieve ourselves when nature called. Other than this there was no ventilation at all," Jack recalled. With Greece now approaching mid-summer, the conditions were abominable.

This photograph taken in 1943 gives an indication of the conditions the men had to endure during the train journey.

Jack paired up with Private Tom Walker, a fellow digger from his battalion, and they made their way to the back of a carriage near the ventilation hole. At 7:00pm, the train pulled out of the station.

The night wore on and the train crossed the border into German-occupied Yugoslavia. Jack made his move, squeezing through the tiny window and onto the buffers and waited until the train slowed down going uphill.

The train stopped briefly and the guards fired a few parting shots into the bushes before resuming the journey without the two escapees. "Kaput! Kaput!" he heard them shout, as if to indicate that the bullets had hit their mark. As the pair scampered off into the moonless night, their plan was to head for neutral Turkey and then on to Egypt. But they weren't out of danger just yet.
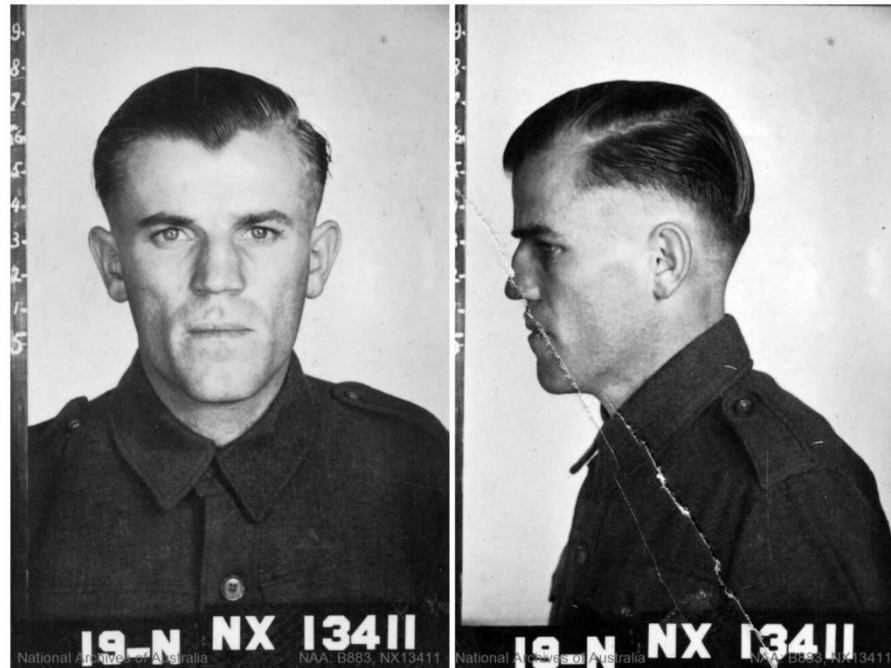
Tom Walker's enlistment mugshots. Credit: NAA, B883, 203067159 and 203067160

A trek through Greece

Jack and Tom spent the next six weeks navigating their way south from Yugoslavia back into Greece, following the path of the Vardar River valley before heading east towards the coast.

Jack kept a diary of his journey in a small, black notebook which he filled with tiny, cursive handwriting. It describes how the two men village-hopped their way through northern Greece, dodging the enemy and relying on the kindness of strangers.

"Forty five days on foot up hill and down dale, through swamps and rivers, in scorching sun and torrential rain. It was all in the game that we faced and then some," he wrote.
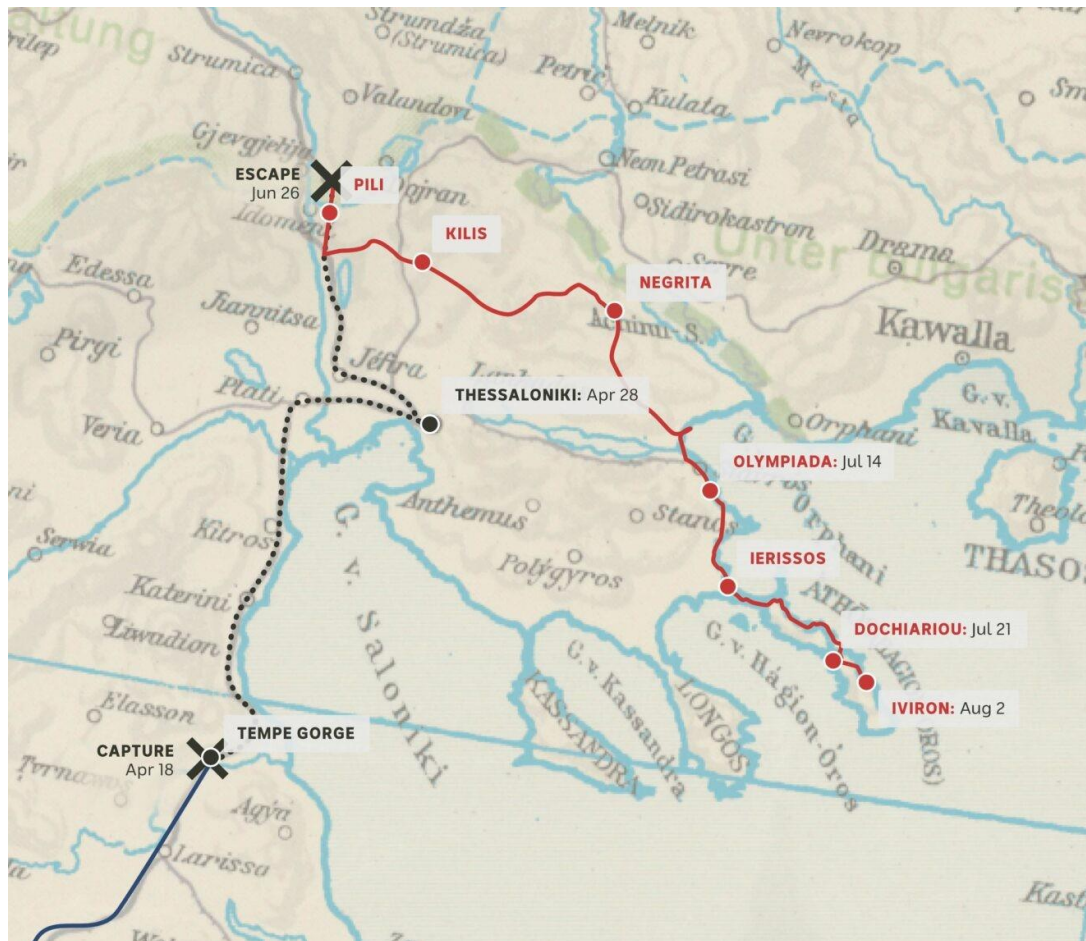
A map of Jack's capture and escape route across northern Greece. Credit: Alex Palmer

It's a journey of almost 300 km which today would take almost 60 hours to walk. But in 1941, the presence of Germans and their allies made every footstep a calculated risk for escapees weakened by disease, malnourishment and, sometimes, physical injury.

And it wasn't just Greeks they met on their journey. Jack and Tom later crossed paths with three New Zealanders who were also on the run after escaping. And the five would eventually band together for the final, dramatic leg of their odyssey.

A Kiwi contingent

The first of three Kiwis they met was a 35-year-old lance corporal in New Zealand's 25th Battalion called Bill Kerr. The Aussie soldiers, Jack and Tom, come across him in mid-July in the town of Olympiada, a small fishing village in the Macedonia region of northern Greece.

Bill was a sheep farmer from the North Island before he enlisted. In Greece his unit saw action in late April on the ancient battleground of Thermopylae, surrendering on April 24 after he had run out of ammo and was surrounded by tanks.

"Prison life didn't appeal to me; so I made plans to escape," he wrote in a letter to his family that was published in a New Zealand newspaper in 1941. "I managed to get some rope and in the middle of one night I lowered myself from a balcony, climbed under barbed wire and was away like the wind."

Remarkably, he remained on the run for the next three months mostly on his own. And — despite being tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed — remained undetected by the Germans and their allies.

On July 18, just days after his meeting with Jack and Tom, Bill ran into fellow Kiwis, the Brewer brothers, Owen and Frank.

L-R: Owen and Frank Brewer and their Kiwi colleague, Bill Kerr. Credit: Brewer and Kerr families

Owen was a private in New Zealand's 21st Infantry Battalion. Frank, who had enlisted in Sydney, was a gunner with the AIF's 2/1st Field Regiment. Owen was captured on Anzac Day at Kissos, a village in central Greece, and taken to the same prison camp at Thessaloniki where Jack was being held.

In late April 1941, Frank Brewer was one of about 10,000 Allies waiting to be evacuated from the southern port of Kalamata when he was captured along with hundreds of other Allies left stranded there. Frank and the other POWs were eventually marched north, arriving at the camp in Thessaloniki in June where he was reunited with his brother Owen.

In early July, the two brothers decided to make a break for it. Exploiting a gap in the fence created by an earlier escape attempt, they wriggled their way through a maze of wire "inch-by-inch in constant fear of being caught", according to Owen's escape report. It was, he said, "one of the longest hours of my life".

"We took the risk of a quick death rather than a slow one by starvation and exhaustion," Frank wrote in a letter to his sister, excerpts of which were published in a New Zealand newspaper.

Two weeks later, the Brewer brothers ended up in Olympiada, where they bumped into Bill Kerr. From there the three POWs trekked south toward the peninsula of Mount Athos, where in late July the five escaping Anzacs teamed up for the final leg of their escape from Greece.

The final dash for freedom

The Mount Athos peninsula rises from the aqua waters of the Aegean Sea, a mix of rocky coves and forested slopes crowned by a 2,000-metre-high peak known in Greek as the Holy Mountain. Since the Middle Ages it has been home to some 20 Orthodox Christian monasteries.

It was here that many Allied escapers and evaders fled in the aftermath of the disastrous Greek campaign, not only because it was a departure point for neutral Turkey, but also because of the sanctuary they believed the monks would offer.

Jack and Tom had spent a few weeks recovering from their arduous trek in the monastery of Dochiariou on the western shore of the peninsula. By the time the Brewer brothers and Bill Kerr arrived on the peninsula in search of a way out of Greece, Jack and Tom had already been trying to obtain a boat to take them on the 165km journey across the Aegean to Turkey.

Eventually, the five Anzacs converged on the monastery of Iviron on the east side of the Athos Peninsula. Frank Brewer, who had picked up a good command of the language, haggled a deal that saw the monks agree to supply a boat and crew in return for some cash up front and a promise to pay £50 when the war was over.

At 10:00pm on August 4, 1941, the escaping POWs pushed out from shore aboard a 6-metre-long traditional boat called a caique.

New Zealand soldiers pose with monks in front of a local fishing boat, or caique, at a monastery on Mount Athos in 1944. Credit: Photo by Peter McIntyre / Courtesy of War History Collection Alexander Turnbull Library.

After a treacherous journey, they beached on the Turkish mainland on August 8, just south of what was known as Cape Helles and the mouth of the Dardanelles Strait – names that would have been very familiar to the Anzacs of 1915.

They were given food and water by the local villagers, but Turkish soldiers who arrived later wanted the Anzacs to leave and mocked-up a firing squad to scare them away. They were sent back out to sea, only to return the next day.

Their persistence finally paid off when a Turkish officer arrived and the escapees convinced him to allow them to stay.

Under the Geneva Convention a neutral power was obliged to allow escaping prisoners to transit through its territory and back to their bases or homes. But that process took another five weeks of diplomatic argy-bargy before the five were finally given the green light to leave Turkey.

That day came around on September 18 when the five, and a number of other escapees, boarded the British-registered freighter SS Destro at Iskenderun, a port in southern Turkey near the border with Syria.

They were heading back to their units in Cairo to complete a successful escape – a feat known colloquially as a "home run" and one accomplished by fewer than 1 per cent of British and Commonwealth troops captured by the Germans during WWII. After an uneventful voyage, the Destro docked at Port Said Egypt's northern coast on October 6, 1941.

There is this final photo of the escapees taken on the deck of the Destro. Eight men in ragtag outfits posed for the camera, squinting in the bright Mediterranean sunshine. Bill Kerr and Frank and Owen Brewer are there.

But among the other faces in the photo, there's no Jack, no Tom and, frustratingly, no explanation or even clues as to why in any of the documents and personal accounts I have obtained. But the diggers were definitely on the same ship.

"At long last we have reached our objective and carried out our duties as soldiers. We have no regrets about the hardships, disappointments, and often dangers, which were our lot for the past four months," Jack wrote about the day of his return.

It had been 170 days since his capture.

1Taken aboard the SS Destro in September 1941, this shows Owen Brewer, centre back, Bill Kerr, centre front, and Frank Brewer, second from right, on the final leg of the escape. Credit: Kerr family

Epilogue

All five men survived the war. Owen Brewer and Tom Walker were repatriated home, classified as medically unfit to continue service. Owen tragically took his own life in 1970. I never found out what happened to Tom.

Bill Kerr was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and went on to fight the Germans in North Africa. Injured and captured, he was sent to Italy and then later Germany before being repatriated home by the Red Cross in 1944. He passed away in 1984 aged 79.

Frank Brewer was awarded the Military Medal and later mentioned in dispatches. He joined MI9, a special forces unit, which returned to occupied Greece to assist the resistance and escaping Allied soldiers and later served in New Guinea, rising to the rank of captain. He died in 2004 in his mid-80s.

Jack Greaves went on to complete two tours of duty on the front lines in New Guinea. He never made it past the rank of corporal and his role in planning and executing the escape was never officially acknowledged. He passed away in 2003 aged 85.

ESCAPE FROM GREECE – PODCAST

Listen to this incredible story, told by Stephen Hutcheon and Angus Wallace, creator of the fantastic WW2 Podcast. You can find the podcast here https://historyguild.org/escape-from-greece-podcast/

The Battle for Crete: Hard Fought

German Mountain troops before departure to Crete

Wherever they fought in the Second World War, Australian troops acquitted themselves well. They escaped the clutches of the Afrika Korps in the Benghazi handicap and soon after helped hold back Rommel at the second battle of El Alamein. Australian troops fought well even in defeat. This was especially so in Crete, where they and their New Zealand counterparts fought a rearguard action that cost the Germans dearly.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

The battle for Crete in May and June 1941 was the closing chapter of the battle for Greece, in which British and Commonwealth forces managed to stay just ahead of the invading German armies and evacuate thousands of soldiers to North Africa, ready to fight another day. Many of these men were interviewed in the first few years of this century and the resulting footage was posted on the Australians at War Film Archive; we'll be using these veterans' recollections to get an impression what the fighting in Crete was like.

The battle for Crete saw many firsts. It was the first time the world saw an assault carried out mainly by air as the Germans sent in wave after wave of paratroopers. It was also the first time the Germans met heavy resistance from a civilian population, as the people of Crete fought tooth and nail against the invaders. It was also the first time the Allies were able to crack German communications thanks to their decryption of the Enigma code, though they weren't able to capitalise on this advantage yet.

The Germans Land

Of course, for the troops stationed on Crete, none of this mattered much at the time, except maybe the part where they suddenly found themselves knee-deep in German paratroopers, disgorged by transport planes overhead.

Neville Wintin from Sydney witnessed the first wave of Germans come in from a hilltop near the town of Hania (Chania), in the west of Crete: "down below us we could watch this huge armada of parachute troops being dropped." However, his perch wasn't entirely safe: "before we could blink we were surrounded by gliders that gradually came in and crashed all around us […] not all of them were killed in the crash so we had the Germans all around us."


German paratroopers are dropped over Crete

Mr. Wintin had the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time: German high command had chosen the western part of Crete as the place that would bear the brunt of their assault. However, their first attempt wasn't a complete success. The Allied forces — which included British and Greek troops, as well as men from Australia and New Zealand — were able to hold their own, at least for the most part.

However, the Germans just kept on coming. According to Stephen Pontin from Mordialloc, Victoria, who fought on Crete, Hitler had decided that Crete would be the "Isle of Doom" for the allies and threw anything he could spare at the small island. For Mr. Pontin, this meant almost relentless bombing raids: "well I tell ya, we had fourteen air attacks from daylight… Stuka dive-bombers… layin' their eggs we used to call it, like a bloody chook sittin' over a nest and away they'd go."
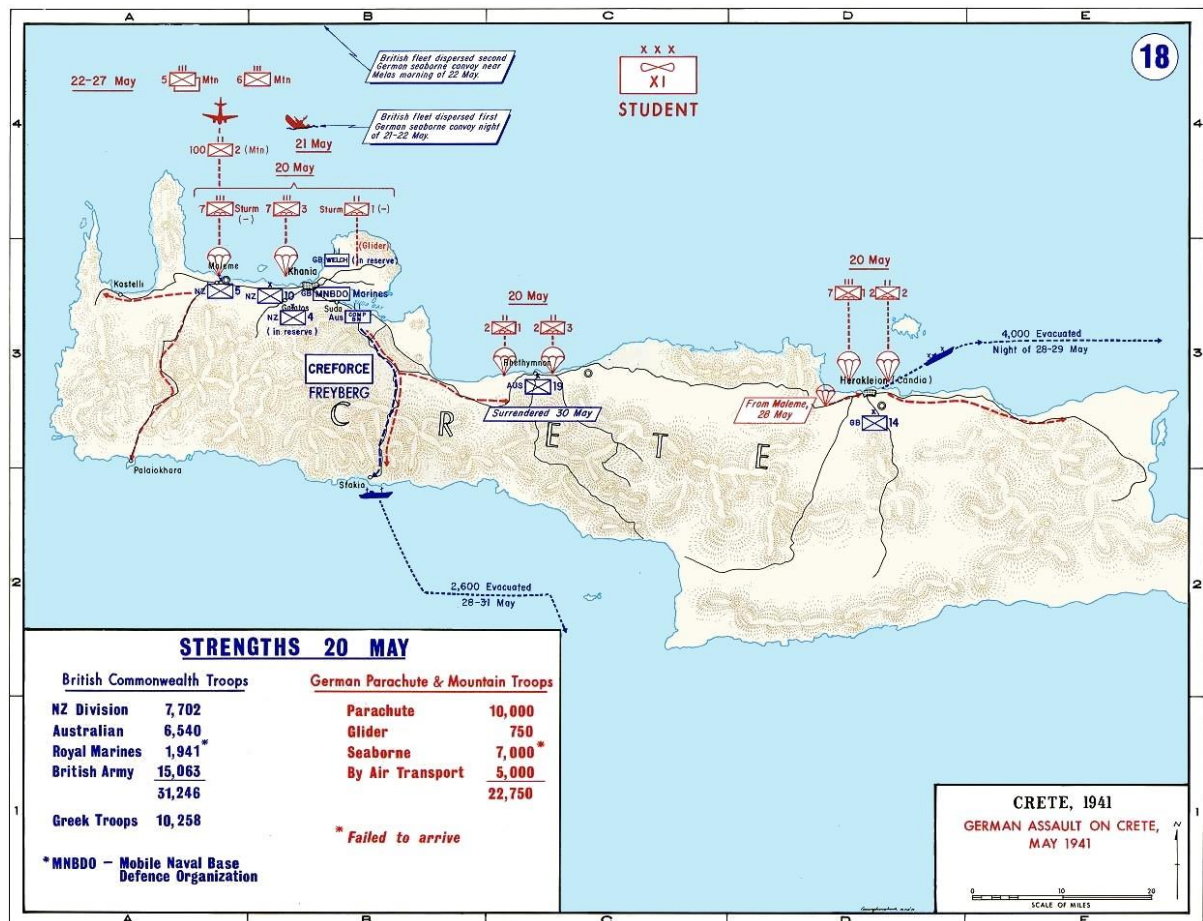
The German battle plan for Crete.

A Rearguard Action

JU-87 Stuka dive bombers above Crete, 1941. Wikimedia

Under relentless pressure from raids like that, as well as new waves of troops being landed, over the next few weeks the Allied forces were slowly pushed back. However, they made it tough for the Germans: Frank Reiter of Meeniyan, Victoria recalls one rearguard engagement in which he was told to guard the road.

"I put me three Bren guns in one nest on the bend of the road, Tequila Road, while the rest of us were spread up the hill a bit." His position secure, he and his mates waited a while until, in his words, "about twenty motorbikes come down, side cars, machine gunners on 'em and they thought they could come right through but the nine platoon machine gunners wiped the lot out."

Despite their efforts, though — including such heroics as the battle of 42nd Street — the Allied forces could only delay the German assault, they simply didn't have the materiel. "In Crete we had nothing, [not] even the artillery pieces," says Mr. Pontin. "They said they had two tanks in Crete, I never saw one."

Frederick Megahey, an Irish immigrant to Australia who settled in Candelo, NSW, said much the same about the RAF: "the only time you saw the air force was if you got to the pictures and you saw the newsreel. We just didn't see them… I can safely say, of all the aeroplanes I saw in Crete, I never once saw a friendly aeroplane."

German paratroops trek up a hill in Crete. Wikimedia.

On top of a lack of heavy equipment, there were also issues with small arms. Several of the veterans interviewed mention that there weren't enough rifles to go around, with the shortfall partially made up by U.S.-made Springfields. However, as these took a different type of ammunition, even if you were fortunate enough to be armed, there was no guarantee you could actually fire the weapon.

Evacuation

In the face of the Germans' overwhelming superiority in both men and arms, all the Commonwealth troops could do was fight the best they could and pray for salvation. The plan, much as it was, was to make it to the southern coast and from there onto the waiting ships of the Royal Navy and from there to the safe haven of Alexandria.

Mr. Wintin recalls how that went: "we were taken by truck to Souda Bay and then the walk across the mountains began; the trek across the mountains. We had to cross from one side of Crete over to the other side to a little coastal fishing village called Sfakia. It was arranged that the navy plus troop ships would be waiting there to evacuate us."

Mr. Pontin remembers that most of the marching was done at night, without torches to escape detection. Sleep was a precious commodity: "you lay on your hand on a rock for a pillow when you have a little break, about ten minutes, "and wake up ready to go again." It took its toll on the men, but anything was better than being captured.

Commonwealth soldiers are marched off by their German captors in Crete. Bundesarchiv.

It wasn't much better for the Australians serving shipboard during the evacuation. One sailor, Patrick Bridges from Sydney, described transporting the men from Crete as "chaos, absolute chaos. The amount of ships that were sunk during the evacuation, I just don't know the number. But you'd see the ships coming in from the trip to Crete, and you'd look over and count and say, 'well what one's missing this time.'"

Actually moving the troops from the beach onto the waiting ships wasn't much better, according to Mr. Bridges, "oh no, it wasn't an orderly withdrawal." With the constant pressure the Germans were applying to the front, men would jump on any ship they could, and the sailors would fit them the best they could.

"You put them anywhere you could place them. Standing, lying, walking anywhere… So you got them on the best way you could and got them off the best way you could as quick as you could. There was no comfort involved. Oh you made them as comfortable as possible but you put them everywhere you could."

HMS York after being damaged by enemy fire in Souda Bay.

Once they dropped off one load of evacuees in Alexandria, the return trip would begin almost immediately. In the end, the Royal Navy and Royal Australian

Navy would ferry roughly 19,000 men from Crete. However, this left 12,000 on Crete. The men left behind were either captured or took to the hills and joined the Cretan resistance against the invaders.

As for Mr. Pontin and Mr. Wintin, they made it off the island, though other British and Anzac troops weren't so lucky. Mr. Pontin sees a silver lining to his hardship, though. According to him, the hard fighting in Crete resulted in no bombing raids over London for several weeks, as well as a delay of two weeks to the start of Operation Barbarossa.

In his opinion, "that fortnight brought him [Hitler] into the freezing temperatures of Stalingrad and that's how they lost the bloody war." It could very well be that Australian bravery in Crete certainly showed a stiffening of resistance to the Germans. In the aftermath of their losses on Crete the Germans abandoned airborne assaults. For the remainder of the war their paratroopers were employed only as ground forces. This in itself is an indication of how hard the defenders of Crete fought.

Australian troops leave the ship in Alexandria after evacuating from Crete. Wikimedia.

Stukas attacking HMAS Perth, Crete, 1941. AWM

The Battle of Crete, WW2 – Video

The Battle of Crete saw around 40,000 Allied troops, including over 6,500 Australians, defending against a German airborne invasion. The Allies fought valiantly, but were eventually overcome by the German paratroopers. However, they inflicted such severe casualties on the Germans that they never again used their airborne forces on a large scale.

This video was created by Stewart Mortimer, creator of the fantastic Premier History video channel. It was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Watch it here https://historyguild.org/the-battle-of-crete-ww2-video/

Battle of 42nd Street – Anzacs Proving Germany Could be Beaten

Morale can make all the difference on the battlefield. On the 27th May 1941, with the Greek island of Crete close to loss and the Allies in full retreat, a 12 minute moment of madness by Australian and New Zealand troops proved that aggression and bravery could overcome Germany's elite troops.

By Richard Shrubb.

Background to the Battle

Australian and New Zealand troops were on Crete having just been evacuated from the Greek mainland where the German Blitzkrieg had overwhelmed Allied forces quickly and effectively.

Allied forces were in disarray and thousands of men, having been defeated in Greece were redeployed to hold back the German advance on Crete. Crete was seen by German High Command as an important island to maintain air supremacy over the Eastern Mediterranean and to protect Rommel's flank in the North Africa campaign.

Even with naval supremacy on the Mediterranean the Royal Navy could only do so much. One of the troopships diverted to land Anzacs on Crete was sunk, and while many aboard survived most lost their rifles and boots. Those that made it ashore to defend the island were ill-equipped to fend off a well prepared and triumphant Wehrmacht.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   P03731.001

The Fall of Crete

New Zealand commander Bernard Freyberg was criticised for putting too much emphasis on defending against seaborne invasion when German plans – and Allied intelligence – suggested that the majority of the attack would come from the air.

*The German Airborne Invasion of Crete*

When the invasion began on the 20th of May, there were three airfields to defend on Crete and the Allies knew the Germans just needed one. The Luftwaffe did a good job in tackling Allied air defences and the Royal Air Force was said by defending troops to have been as "Rare as fairies", in the defence of the island.

Airborne invasion is a question of getting numbers on the ground and accepting that many paratroops will be killed even before they land. To the east of Malame Airfield, it is estimated that 66% of German paratroops were killed before hitting the ground but to the west, several gliders landed safely in an undefended area and the foothold was gained.

Rearguard Preparations

Morale is a critical factor among fighting soldiers. Those who have been beaten can get it in their heads that they cannot win. The German Mountain Troops were well trained and battle-hardened and had high morale with several battlefield successes under their belts.

The Allies were in retreat and suffered many reverses in the preceding year. On the 27th May 1941, three New Zealand battalions and two Australian – the 2/7th and 2/8th – had been instructed to slow the German advance while the main Allied force evacuated. With most of the battalions at half strength or less, they formed up overnight along the line of a track known as 42nd Street. 42nd Street was a defensive berm that ran from Suda Bay to the Malaxa Escarpment, with dense olive groves to the west.
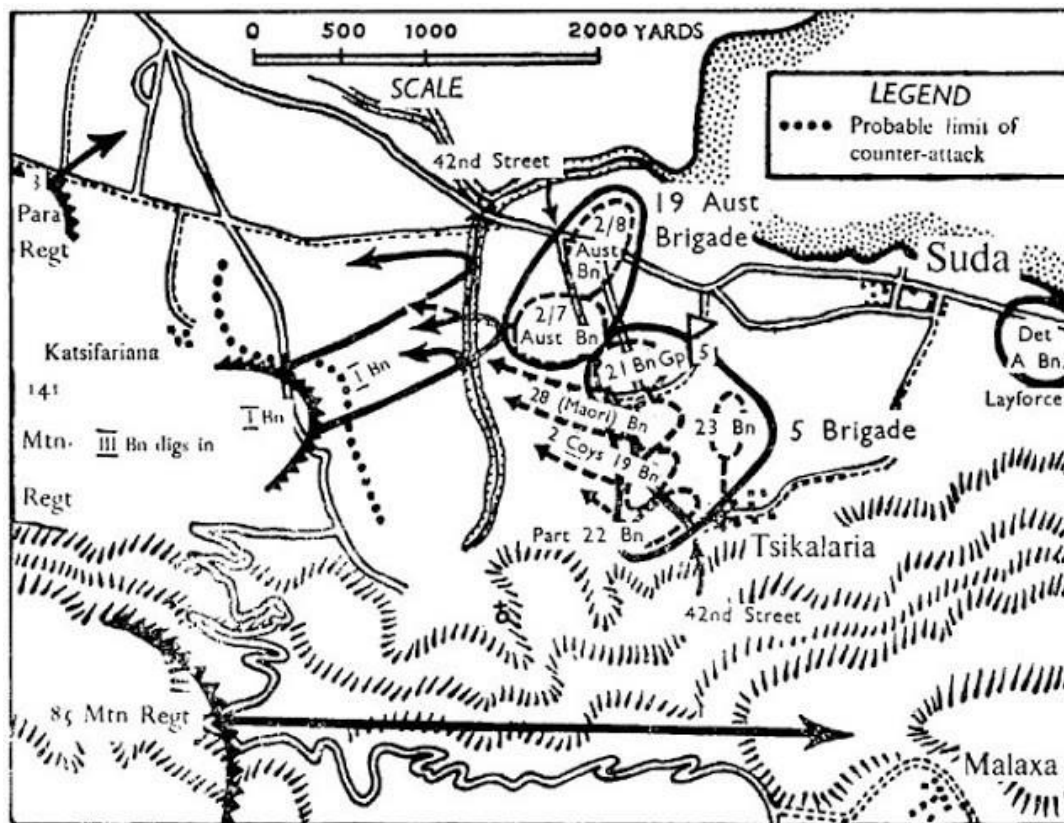
Map of Battle of 42nd Street

"Fix Bayonets!"

This order is given when hand to hand combat is likely. They fixed their 18 inch (45cm) long bayonets and psyched themselves up for the coming battle. The New Zealand Maoris were heard chanting a Haka. The stage was set.

> "When this order went out it seemed to lift the tension that had been hanging over us for the past few days. The time had come when we were going to show Jerry a few tricks…"
>
> *Private H G Passey, Lt-Colonel Walker's batman.*

When the German troops were seen emerging through the olive groves, the Anzacs let loose. They charged the 400 Germans and in just 12 minutes it is estimated they killed or incapacitated 300 of of the enemy for a loss of just 12 of their own – many in hand-to-hand combat.

The Germans broke and ran. The sheer ferocity of the rearguard action drove the enemy back as much as a mile as the blood lust among the Anzacs was let loose. There were reports that the commanders lost control of their men for a time as they put the enemy in fear of their lives.

> It was crazy, crazy, the most thrilling few minutes of my life. We were all obsessed with this mad race to slaughter with the bayonets – it wasn't like killing kangaroos any more. When we got there they were real men excited like us and some of them terribly frightened. They were highly trained Germans but they got such a shock.
>
> *Sergeant Reg Saunders.*

The whole event is estimated to have lasted just 12 minutes but proved that aggression and bravery could take on the very best soldiers on the battlefield of the day.

Why isn't this battle more well known?

First of all, the German battleship the Bismarck was sunk on the 27th May 1941 – a major naval victory in the Atlantic. This made global headlines as the Battle for the Atlantic turned a corner.

Crete would still be lost. There wasn't the naval capacity to evacuate most of those who fought so bravely in the Battle of 42nd Street – some were captured as POWs while many would be looked after and helped to escape by the local Cretan Resistance.

One soldier in the Battle of 42nd Street, Reginald Saunders, who would later become famous as the Australian Army's first First Nation commissioned officer was hidden by the resistance and smuggled off the island at a later stage. He was one of the lucky ones while thousands of his comrades would spend the rest of the war in captivity.

Cretan Resistance During WW2

Cretan Resistance Fighters.

One of the more impressive feats of arms during the second World War was the way in which the people of Crete fought a guerrilla campaign against the German occupation force. With help from the allies, the Cretans — men, women and even children — fought a brutal and bloody campaign against the invader. In this article, we look at what happened through the eyes of some of the people who participated, Cretan, British and Australian.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

In June 1941, after the fierce battle of Crete, the island had fallen into the hands of the Germans. The Commonwealth troops on the island had managed to fight a bloody rearguard action to get as many onto Royal Navy transport ships, but in the end only roughly 19,000 made it to safety in nearby Egypt.

Capture and Evacuation

That left about 12,000 men and their materiel on the island. Most of the men surrendered or were captured by the Germans, though some gave the invader the slip and escaped into the mountains of central Crete, helped by local villagers. For example, one Australian veteran, Frank Reiter from Meeniyan, Victoria, was on the run for six months in the Cretan mountains, moving around until he got news he could be evacuated.

About 100 other men, including some Australians, were rescued in July 1941, only a few weeks after the last evacuation ship had left Crete. Lt. Commander F.G. Poole of the submarine HMS *Thrasher* landed near Limni in western Crete and made contact with a local monastery's abbot, saying he came to rescue 100 men.
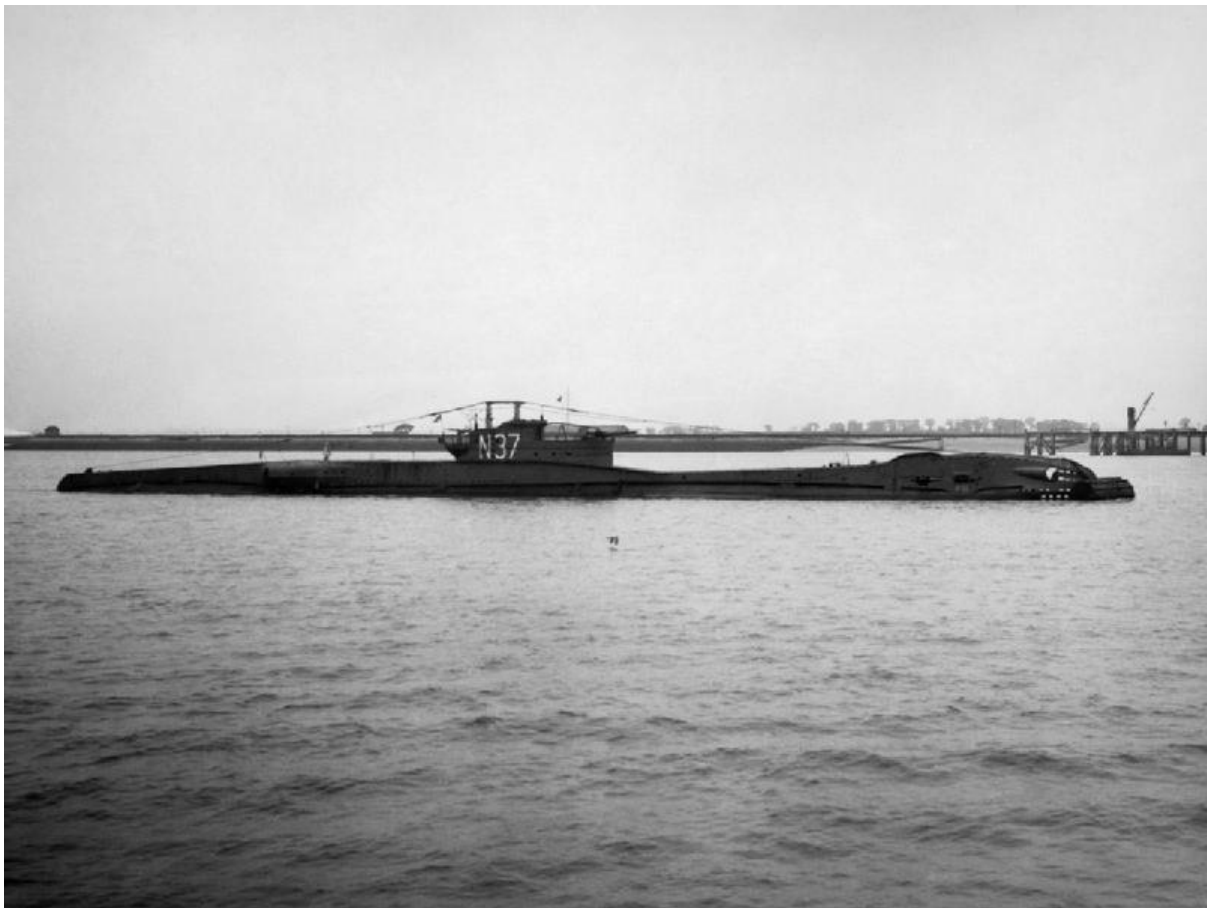
HMS Thrasher

The cleric was at first suspicious of Poole, but eventually was convinced of his good intentions and sent news to all the surrounding villages to find as many British soldiers as they could (most Greeks called all allied troops "British"). The next night, the men made their way to the monastery, where the abbot fed them and then made their way to the beach where Poole was waiting with his submarine. Though the source doesn't make clear how many he rescued, they made clean their escape.

Reg Saunders, who went on to become the first Aboriginal commissioned officer in the Australian Army, as well as fighting with distinction in the Battle of 42nd Street, managed to evade on Crete for 11 months. He was assisted by the local Cretans, who provided him with civilian clothes and taught him the language. Saunders was among a party of men evacuated from Crete by a British submarine in May 1942.

Fight, Not Flight

A handful of Commonwealth troops would even join the Cretan resistance as they fought against the German garrison, bolstered by help from London in the form of operatives from the Special Operations Executive, Churchill's "Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare." In the end, these resistance cells would grow so strong as to be able to wage a full-blown guerilla war in the mountains of Crete.

This guerrilla war is the subject of the independent documentary *The 11th Day* and we draw from that film for some of the testimonies in this article. We also draw liberally from the Australians at War Film Archive, a massive treasure trove of information we've drawn from many times for our Australians in the Mediterranean during WW2 series.

The SOE's role in the guerrilla war was mainly intelligence and coordination, at no point were there more than a handful of officers on the island, with maybe a few regular soldiers left over after the evacuation. The brunt of the hard work fell to the Cretans themselves, who stepped forward in impressive numbers, with the men doing the fighting, the woman handling the logistics and children acting as couriers.

Cretan resistance fighters Ioannis Vardoulakis, Ioannis Kontekakis and Manolis Vardoulakis from Anidri near Chania, Crete.

Even when they weren't actively involved in the fighting, the Cretans helped in other ways, like with feeding and hiding Commonwealth troops on the run. Most of them lived rough in the mountains or holed up in villages. In the words of Vasilis Spahis, a young boy at the time, "we idealised the [British soldiers], any time we heard there was a British soldier around, we would go and help him."

Mr. Reiter for his part recalls how villagers would sneak into the mountains at night to feed him and his mates. "I can't speak highly enough of [the Cretans] they helped us out with what they had […] you know they were really good."

German Reprisals

Helping British and Commonwealth soldiers was dangerous, though, and the Germans were renowned for carrying out reprisals when they found soldiers hiding somewhere. For his part, Mr. Reiter never stayed in the villages for that very reason, because of the risk it posed to the people living there.

According to him, one Australian soldier was found living in a village during a German raid and, in his words, "they took it out on the village. I can remember seeing one village completely surrounded by troops, they rounded everybody up, shot all the blokes and burnt the village to the ground."

Atrocities like Mr. Reiter describes weren't unique. According to Michalis Anastasiades, all the people in his village were marched to a nearby creek and asked whether they had helped the British during the invasion. Depending on how they answered, they were divided into two groups.

With all the villagers "sorted," the Germans started shooting the men who had helped the British. One man, who was only wounded by the rifle fire, lay on the ground crying with his hand outstretched until, according to Mr. Anastasiades, "a German walked up to him with a pistol and shot him in the head."

The aftermath of the massacre at the village of Kondomari by German paratroopers.

This kind of slaughter would become commonplace in Crete, but, much like anywhere else in occupied Europe, it only turned the local population against the Germans even more. As a result, when SOE operatives like Patrick Leigh Fermor — who was interviewed for *The 11th Day* — arrived to coordinate the evacuation of remaining troops, they found, in Fermor's words, "fertile ground" for organizing a full-blown guerrilla army.

Escalation

Fermor had been selected for service in Crete because he spoke Greek, as a young man he was quite an adventurer and had travelled on foot throughout the region. However, it wasn't like London had a very strict plan about what to do except evacuate as many men as possible. As such, Fermor says he and his colleagues were "very free to do what we wanted."

Patrick Leigh Fermor, second from left. Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor Archive/National Library of Scotland.

Fermor quickly became something of a celebrity in Crete. According to Giorgos Dondoulakis, who fought alongside him, Fermor was an "amazing character." Fermor would stop German soldiers on patrol, ask for a light for his cigarette, and even ask how things were going. All the while he'd size up their weapons and insignia and use that valuable information when planning their next action.

There was plenty of action to be had, too: the Cretan resistance's main aim, inspired by London, was to sabotage the island's airfields and thus starve the German garrison of supplies. The Cretans carried out several successful raids that severely hampered the occupiers' logistics.

The Germans weren't taking this lying down and they further escalated their terror campaign. However, to do so, they needed to move deeper into the mountains and find the villages where the guerrillas were holed up. This turned out to be a mistake as, in the words of Manolis Tzikritzakis, "the Germans were confused in the mountains, in the mountains [they] were nothing."

Hit and Run

The guerrillas made good use of this and ambushed the Germans whenever they could. The most significant engagement was the Battle of Trahili, a ridge near the village of Vorizia, where a resistance group under the command of Giorgos Petrakis — a famous guerrilla leader more commonly known as Petrakogiorgis — managed to escape German encirclement, losing only seven men, and inflicting as many as 33 casualties on the Germans.

However, in retaliation, the Germans ended up committing one of their worst acts of the entire occupation, the destruction of Vorizia by aerial bombardment. In the words of Fermor, "the whole palace was a pillar of smoke, it was a horrifying holocaust."

The Final Act

In 1944, Fermor had his most audacious idea of all, to capture and abduct the German commander of Crete, General Kreipe. The full story is described very well here as well as Fermor's own book
Abducting a General, but the short version is that Fermor assembled a team of SOE operatives and Cretans, ambushed the general's car and then drove off with it.

The Anglo-Cretan capture team with their prisoner. Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor Archive/National Library of Scotland.

They abandoned the car in the mountains, left a note about how sorry they were to leave the car behind, and then marched their prisoner across the island to a waiting transport, which brought him to Egypt where he was debriefed.

This was also the crowning achievement of the SOE's activities in Crete: a few months later, the Germans abandoned Crete, too exhausted to hold on to the small untameable island. Fermor's name lives on in Cretan folklore, as do the actions of all the men who fought to free the island.

We recommend that anybody interested to know more about this subject check out the documentary *The 11th Day* for themselves on its website; it costs $9.95 to stream for three days.

Australia's War with France

Australian troops among the ruins of the old Crusader castle at Sidon, Lebanon. IWM.

The Nahr al-Kalb, or 'Dog River', meets the Mediterranean Sea just north of Beirut, after meandering thirty kilometres downstream from its wellspring in the Lebanon range. A four-lane highway overpass runs along this stretch of coast, and tentacles of concrete obscure the river mouth. The strip of land to the north and south has been reclaimed from the sea. It's a flat, featureless stretch of windblown sand and garbage. In ancient times, though, the view was very different. The steep riverbanks dropped straight into the ocean, and the Lycus, as the river was then known, was a significant obstacle to conquering armies. Ramases II carved a monument into the rock when he passed this way, as did Nebuchadnezzar, Marcus Aurelius, and various Assyrian kings. When Napoleon III sent an army to the Levant, his soldiers also carved an impressive memorial to their emperor—right over the top of Ramases' inscription which, until then, had stood proudly for two-and-a-half millennia.
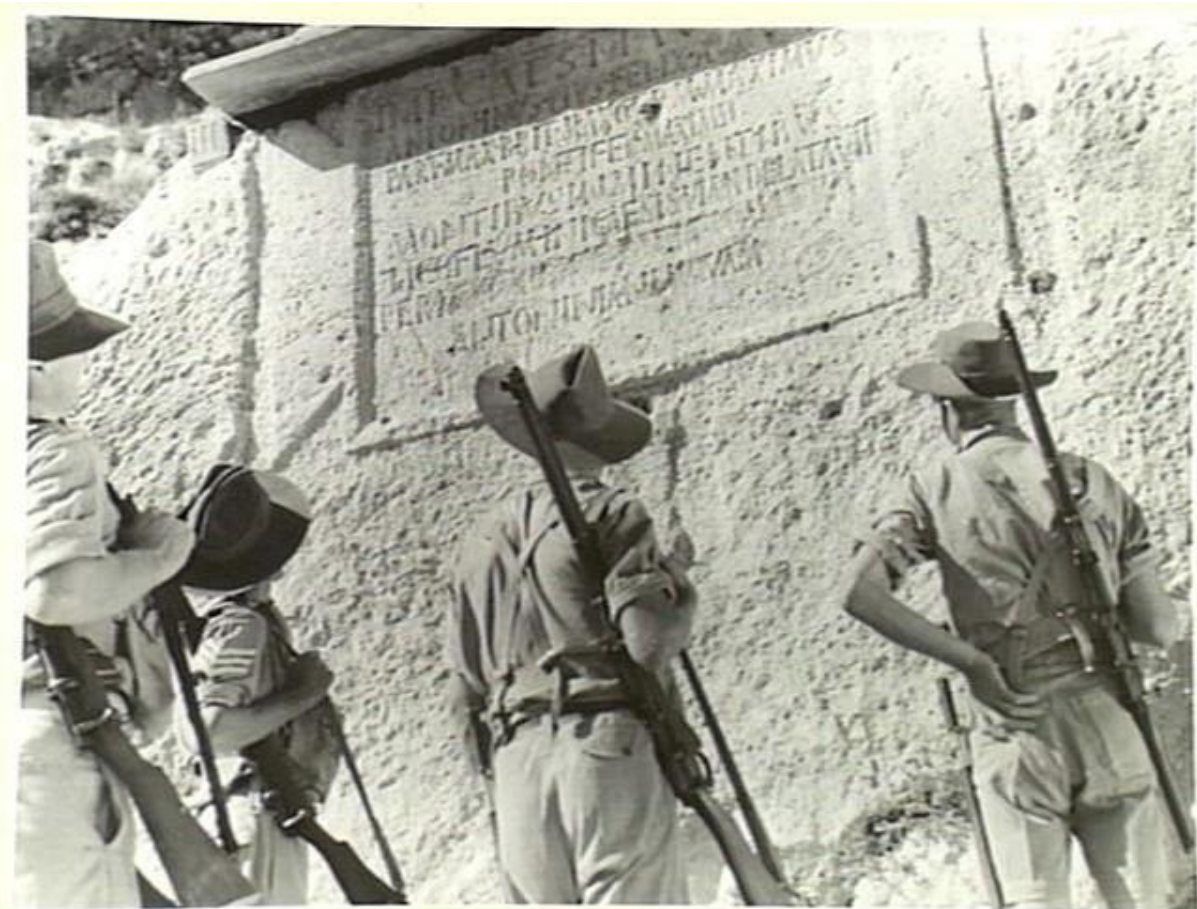
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   010545

Dog River, Australian Troops examine historic stone tablets. AWM.

By Richard James, author of Australia's War with France: The Campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1941.

A modern-day tourist, after dodging traffic from an off-ramp and pulling away a few weeds, can still view these glorious engravings. The history they tell is of an ancient and war-scarred land. The British continued the tradition when General Edmund Allenby conquered Ottoman-ruled Syria and Lebanon during the Great War. That inscription pays homage to the Australian Light Horse, who routed the Turks at Beersheba and pushed on to capture Damascus and Aleppo, paving the way for the French mandate and ending Syria's four centuries under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire.

Those horsemen are now an Australian legend; and the mystique, if not the detail, of their exploits is part of our nation's consciousness. But another nearby monument makes mention of a conflict that is not so well recalled:

JUNE–JULY 1941

FIRST AUSTRALIAN CORPS

CAPTURED DAMOUR WHILE

BRITISH, INDIAN, AUSTRALIAN

AND

FREE FRENCH TROOPS

CAPTURED DAMASCUS

BRINGING FREEDOM

TO SYRIA AND LEBANON

It has almost been forgotten that our soldiers were back here again a generation later, once again at the behest of the United Kingdom, fighting a strange war against confused Frenchmen who were not supposed to be our enemy. France had been defeated and subjugated by the Germans. The new French government, installed at Vichy, was answerable to the Führer. With France vanquished, the fate of the mandate in Syria and Lebanon became uncertain.

The British—urged on by Charles de Gaulle, whose Free French movement had received British sponsorship—sent in the Australian 7th Division to seize it, not expecting that the French Army of the Levant, in defence of its military honour, would put up a fight.

In the popular consciousness, Australia and France are allies. Most of these Australian soldiers had fathers and uncles who had fought in the Great War. Many had lost their lives or limbs on the Western Front, fighting in the name of France, defending its territory against the Germans. These young Australian troops assembled in British Palestine, nervous and untested in warfare, about to fire their first ever shots in anger –against the French.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   008247

Australian Troops at the Syrian Border. AWM.

The Australians who invaded Syria and Lebanon had to make some kind of justification. The popular view was that the French soldiers in the Levant were an evil bunch who had decided to cooperate with Hitler and the Nazis. Roald Dahl, who participated in the campaign as an RAF pilot, summed them up as 'disgusting pro-Nazi Frenchmen' who were 'fanatically anti-British and pro-German'. The Australians tended to agree with this simplistic interpretation.

But who exactly were these French soldiers? The Army of the Levant, as the French force in Syria and Lebanon was known, comprised colonial troops from North Africa, local Syrian and Lebanese levies and reservists from metropolitan France. There were also several battalions of that mysterious and romantic army, the French Foreign Legion. The commander-in-chief of the Army of the Levant was General Henri Dentz, who also served in a political capacity as French High Commissioner.

Dentz is portrayed as evil and duplicitous in Allied historical accounts, but he was a man in an impossible situation. His official mandate was to keep the Levant neutral, and he had some degree of independence from the Vichy government in mainland France. Far from being a closet Nazi, Dentz—along with most soldiers in the Army of the Levant—sympathised much more strongly with the British than the Germans. He was forced to allow *Luftwaffe* planes to land and refuel at Syrian airfields, and this almost led to a mutiny amongst his officers.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   008595

Australian Troops advance with covering Artillery fire, Khalde, Syria. AWM.

One can almost feel the painful turnings of his conscience as events unfolded. All the decisions which led to war in Syria were forced upon Dentz by the Vichy administration, and he did not follow orders blindly. He questioned them from both practical and ethical points of view. In the end he had no choice but to obey, because duty to the fatherland was his overriding principle.

The situation in the Levant was complicated by the participation of Charles de Gaulle. At that stage, de Gaulle was far from the conquering hero who would go on to become President of France. In the early years of the war he was seen by most Frenchmen as a traitor and a British lackey. His tiny, ramshackle army was inconsequential. His invitation to participate in the Allied campaign was a favour from Churchill, in an effort to gain some political clout for his cause.

Charles de Gaulle inspects Free French soldiers.

The politicians and generals in London and British Cairo did not expect that the Army of the Levant would resist. Churchill regarded the Syrian affair as 'a political *coup* . . . rather than as a military operation'. General Wavell, commander-in-chief of British forces in the Middle East, assumed that the campaign would be won 'by propaganda, leaflets and showing attitude of force', rather than fighting. Gaullist liaison officers were attached to the head of each offensive column like 'a piece of sugar', in an attempt to win over the French defenders with 'persuasion before fighting'.

British intelligence seriously misjudged the political attitude inside Syria and Lebanon. The Army of the Levant fought fiercely, and the result was a five-week-long campaign in which around 2000 men lost their lives. The Allies won the war, but no-one in the British hierarchy had expected such bloodshed. The soldiers of the Army of the Levant reserved a special antipathy for the traitorous Gaullists, and in some areas the fighting resembled a French civil war, with all the fanaticism and bitterness that such a conflict can provoke.

The Australians were caught in the middle of all this. They were ordered into battle wearing their slouch hats in the hope of playing on French sympathies for Australian sacrifices made in France during the previous war. The defenders were unmoved by this gesture. The Australian force came under a rain of fire within hours of crossing the border. Colin Kerr, an Australian soldier who participated in the campaign, described the reaction:

'The words, "the bastards", shaped themselves on people's lips. Henceforth that's what the enemy were to be, nothing more than that, whether they came from Paris or Provençe or African villages, whether they were hardened legionnaires or youngsters like the badly wounded kid who caught hold of my hand one day on the road to Beirut and wept out of sheer loneliness and bewilderment.'

The Australians emerged victorious in their first taste of battle, but at the price of more than 400 young men, sons of Anzacs who had fought to defend France in the trenches of the Western Front. The British were embarrassed, the campaign was forgotten, and the Australians who fought were dubbed the 'silent men'. On 22 June, as the Australian force entered Damascus, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. This shifted the entire focus of the war away from the Middle East. Alan Moorehead, an Australian war correspondent who had been covering the operation in Syria, summed it up: 'Compared to this news, my reportage of the fall of Damascus had no interest! I left immediately . . .' The confused little war in the Levant was consigned to the dustbin of history.

There was no deliberate subterfuge or conspiracy by the Australian government or military to keep the story of the campaign silent. The Australian newspapers were reporting freely on the campaign. For the

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   024142

C Company of the 2/15th Infantry Battalion in Tripoli, Syria. They have just completed a 100 mile march from Latakia. AWM.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   008194

Fort Khiam, Syria. Australian troops advance. AWM

Australian public, the fact that the exploits of the men in Syria were overshadowed by other events, such as the exploits of the 'Rats of Tobruk', is probably a reflection of the fact that the actions of the latter, a small bunch of valiant Australians holding out against marauding German panzers, made for more exciting newspaper copy than the odd, confusing little campaign in the Levant.

Whist the Allies were keen to forget the whole affair, the Syrians and Lebanese viewed the conflict as a chance for liberation. The Gaullists clung to a stale notion of French colonial glory, but it was British guns that held the peace. The Second World War marked the end of direct French control in the Levant. Independence came to both Syria and Lebanon in 1943. By that time the Australians of the 7th Division had long since returned home and had fought a new war—on the Kokoda Track, against the Japanese—which sealed their own place in history. Even that recognition was late in coming, and the story of Australia's involvement in the Levant in 1941 remains largely untold. Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart's *History of the Second World War* does not mention it. Antony Beevor's *The Second World War* only devotes half a page to it. In Australia, a comprehensive account of the military campaign can be found in the battalion histories, but the geopolitical causes of the conflict, and the motivations of the enemy, are not well understood. To Australians, the 'Vichy French' who fought in the Levant were 'not really French, but . . . a separate species, now extinct in the incomprehensible meanderings of time.'

General Dentz, who had commanded the Army of the Levant, was arrested by the Allies when Paris was liberated in September 1944. He was put on trial for treason and brought before the High Court of Justice in April 1944. He died in prison the following year. By then, the Vichy era was like a murky dream. De Gaulle was the saviour of France and Marshal Pétain—once venerated like the fatherland itself—had been forgotten.

Kenneth Slessor, the Australian poet who was in Syria as a war correspondent, described the atmosphere at the end of the campaign:

'Today the crickets are singing in the trampled grass of the battlefield; corn is dancing on the skyline and farm boys are winnowing the crops. The earth has received the scattered bones of war and forgotten them. Syria, too, in a few weeks will forget, let us hope, the cloud which passed over its green fields.'

In the Levant today, the events of 1941 are like ancient history. They seem as far lost to the past as the antiquated inscriptions of exotic kings at the Dog River. Both Lebanon and Syria have since fought their own civil wars, and many millions have been killed. In the Near East it seems that conflict is the natural state of things. Amidst so much death and destruction, it is easy to overlook the 416 Australian graves, scattered in dilapidated war cemeteries in Beirut and Damascus. They are buried far

Australian Troops at Sidon, Syria. AWM

from home, and have long been forgotten both in the land of their birth and the land of their death. To write them a meaningful epitaph is very difficult. They simply died in a war that should never have been fought.

AUSTRALIA'S WAR WITH FRANCE: THE CAMPAIGN IN SYRIA AND LEBANON, 1941 – PODCAST

History Guild has organised a discussion between Richard James, author of Australia's War with France: The Campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1941 and Angus Wallace, creator of the fantastic WW2 Podcast. Listen to this podcast here https://historyguild.org/product/australias-war-with-france-the-campaign-in-syria-and-lebanon-1941/

When Australia Fought France, WW2 – Video

This video was created by Stewart Mortimer, creator of the fantastic Premier History video channel. It was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Watch it here https://historyguild.org/when-australia-fought-france-ww2-video/

First Battle of El Alamein: Australia Holds the Line

The North African campaigns of WW2 were two years of back and forth action across Libya and Egypt, with offensives, counteroffensives and sieges throughout and Australians in the thick of it. When the end eventually came to this seesaw action at El Alamein in 1942, again it was Australians were integral to carrying the day. In this article we'll see this pivotal battle through their eyes.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

The battle at El Alamein, a small seaside town a little over 100 kilometres west from Alexandria, is often held up as one of the most important turning points of the war — Churchill hailed the victory in November 1942 as the "end of the beginning." What is often glossed over in most popular history books, though, is that there were in fact *two* battles at El Alamein. The second one is the famous one, but it wouldn't have been possible without the first.

Australians were front and centre for both battles, and distinguished themselves with their bravery and tenacity. We'll go over how they experienced the first battle in this article — using the hard work of the researchers at the Australians at War Film Archive — and talk about the follow-up in our piece about the second battle of El Alamein.

The First Battle of El Alamein

The second battle of El Alamein was the first attack in a long push that would eventually see the German Afrika Korps, under command of field marshal Erwin Rommel, and their Italian allies driven out of North Africa. The first battle seems less dramatic at first, as it was a defensive fight to keep the Axis forces out of Egypt.

Appearances are deceiving, though: had the British Eighth Army given way and Egypt fallen, there would have been little hope for the Allies in North Africa as Egypt was the main supply depot for British forces in North Africa and the Middle East. It would also have allowed the Germans to march straight through to Palestine and the oil-rich territories beyond.

The Middle East in 1940. The line at El Alamein was the main defence between British-held Palestine and Iraq and the advancing Germans. Wikimedia.

Clearly, the stakes were high, something that comes across in most of the interviews conducted with Australian veterans who fought at El Alamein. In the words of to Pat Toovey from Tenterden, West Australia, a loss "probably would have increased the time of the war by another year or two and might have cost another million lives. So stopping them at Alamein was very, very important."

A Different Kind of Fight

Many of the veterans interviewed were veterans of the siege of Tobruk and were hardened fighters — some had even been at Tobruk, then gone on to fight in Lebanon before shipping back to Egypt. The fighting was very different from that of Tobruk, though, much more back and forth than the stagnant trenches of an encircled city.

Commonwealth Troops await the German Advance. IWM.

In the words of Larry Maddison from Malvern, Victoria: "It was the same terrain [as Tobruk]. We were closer to the sea this time, but it was fluid. You could go back if you wanted to. We weren't surrounded. We had him in front of us on one side. You could get out, not like Tobruk where you couldn't get out. […] We were advancing a fair bit and coming back."

Not being surrounded and having a much broader front to fight changed tactics drastically. According to Doug MacLean, from Babinda, Queensland, the front was about sixty miles along in some places, and the month of July was spent fending off small attacks by the Germans, probing for weaknesses. According to him, it was a "savage position."
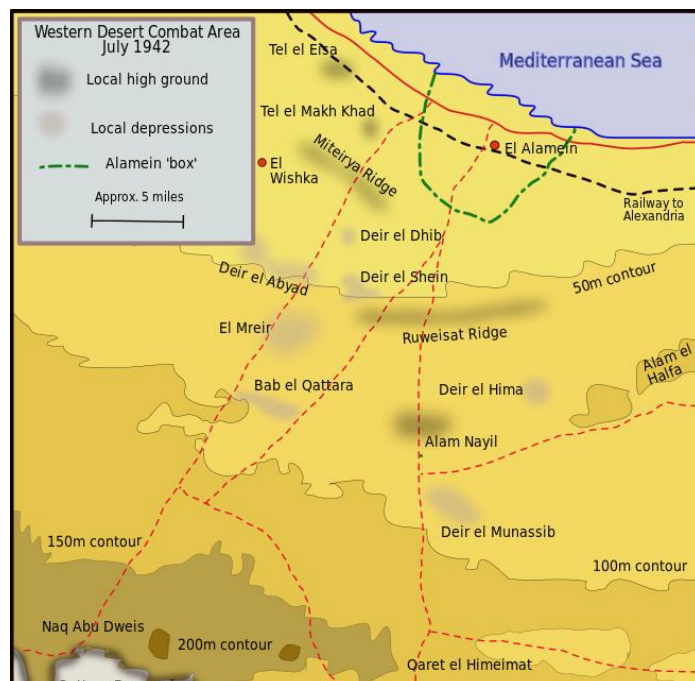
The battleground of the first battle of El Alamein. Wikipedia.

Boxed In

What made it so savage was that the Allied commander, Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck, was focusing his defences around a series of "boxes," entrenched positions that spread south from El Alamein. These boxes served as linchpins between which there wasn't much more than sand.

The idea behind this strategy was to use the terrain against the Germans: either they could go through the defences spun between the boxes, or they could detour all the way around them. That wasn't much of an option, though, as it would mean traveling through the Qattara Depression, a large region full of sand and salt, impossible to maneuver in and one of the hottest places on earth, to boot.

As a result, Rommel had no choice but to go through El Alamein. On top of that, he knew that the Commonwealth forces were slowly gaining strength, while he had scant chance of reinforcement. As such, he knew he had to force a breakthrough, and quick.

Fighting at El Alamein

Rommel's need to get through and Auchinleck's defensive posture made for a battle in which the Germans and Italians would test out different parts of the defenses and the Allies would defend.Counterattacks were generally limited to retaking lost positions, not trying to push back the attacker the way he came. For now, at least, the Allied strategy was to stick to their boxes.

Ships of the Desert

Still, though, there was plenty of movement between the boxes: it's not like the Allies had enough soldiers to completely block every inch of ground. As such, the fighting even took on some characteristics of naval combat, as explained by Bill Rudd from Melbourne. Bill Rudd has a fascinating background, after qualifying as a Geologist at Melbourne University he was on his way to Bonn University, in Germany for further study when war broke out. He was forced to take a very convoluted route back to Australia via Argentina, Chile, Panama, USA and Hong Kong in order to join the AIF. According to Mr. Rudd, Rommels' great strength was his realisation that operating in a desert environment, he could go where he wanted, much like a ship at sea could.

As such, the Allies would often find themselves reacting to what the Germans did rather than the other way around. The Germans even managed to get behind British lines a few times, simply by quickly slipping through holes left in the Allied defense after a feint.

As a result, more than once entire sections of men would find themselves encircled because of these tactics. Raymond Widdows from Moonee Ponds, Victoria, for example, remembers that the entire 28th battalion was lost because the Germans moved so quickly. The Afrika Korps hit so hard and so decisively that reinforcements simply could not get to the troops in time and they were all captured.

Mr. Toovey was one of the men captured that day: his force had been sent out to capture a position called Ruin Ridge. They did so, suffering heavy casualties along the way, but then found themselves surrounded on top of the ridge.

In his words: "[Reinforcements] didn't come about. The other formations were beaten off and we were in there by ourselves and no extra ammunition or medical support or food or water had come up or could come up. […] So we were there high and dry by ourselves and when we run out of ammunition there was not much we could do anyway."

The battalion didn't have to wait long, however, and quickly came under attack from the German tanks. Seeing the situation was hopeless, without ammunition or communications and no relief in sight, the commander surrendered. Mr. Toovey would spend the rest of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Signaling Distress

It wasn't just the Germans who took prisoners, though: Mr. Widdows also recalls that at one point the British High Command decided on a push near Tel el Eisa, just west of El Alamein. An Australian brigade managed to rout the Italians entrenched there and also captured a Germans signals group.

Captured Italian soldiers are escorted to their "cage," a temporary solution until they could be transported to a POW camp. Wikimedia.

Best of all, the Australians managed to get to them before they burned their code books, which ended up being a huge blow to Rommel as this group had been monitoring British communications closely. Losing them meant that he could move less freely around the desert, something that would come back to haunt him a few months later when the Allies made their push.

On the Defensive

For most Australian soldiers, though, the first battle of El Alamein was one where they waited for the other side to do something. Keith Read from Swan Hill, Victoria, for one, remembers that a lot of his time was spent guarding tank traps, a hole dug into the sand in which a tank would fall when passing over. Surrounding soldiers would then fire on the hapless tank and the crew making their way out of it. Though it sounds efficient, manning a tank trap was a dangerous business.

In Mr. Read's words, guarding a tank trap meant "standing out like dogs' balls" as the soldiers would have to stand on the lip above it, at the ready for when a tank would blunder in. As such, he was happy when after a few hours of standing sentinel the call would come to move forward — never back, though "no matter what happens you don't go backwards, you stay."

Beginning of the End

Eventually, after almost a month of heavy fighting all around the El Alamein area, grit like Mr. Read's won out and Rommel went back to his own lines, his forces and energy spent. Thousands had lost their lives fighting in the desert, but neither side had booked any real progress.

While the Germans and Italians may have seen their plans to take Egypt foiled, the Allies hadn't been able to do more than just hold them back. They had, however, won a lot of time, and time was on their side.

Even as Rommel retreated, more and more men and materiel men were rolling off the docks at Alexandria. A few months later, in October 1942, the second battle of El Alamein would start with a new British commander, Bernard Montgomery, who was keen to take the fight to the enemy. When the time came, Australian troops would be there right alongside him.

Ruin Ridge – Podcast

During the 1st Battle of El Alamein the 9th Australian Division was tasked with the capture of Ruin Ridge. Despite heavy fighting during the opening stages they achieved some of their objectives, but their successes obliged General Rommel to divert large numbers of troops to contain the Australian advance. The fighting then became desperate, leading to heavy casualties and the near decimation of one battalion.

This podcast episode by Warwick O'Neill from the Australian Military History podcast was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Listen to the podcast here https://historyguild.org/ruin-ridge-podcast/

Maps of the Battle

These maps are very useful for following the narrative of the battle described in the podcast episode.
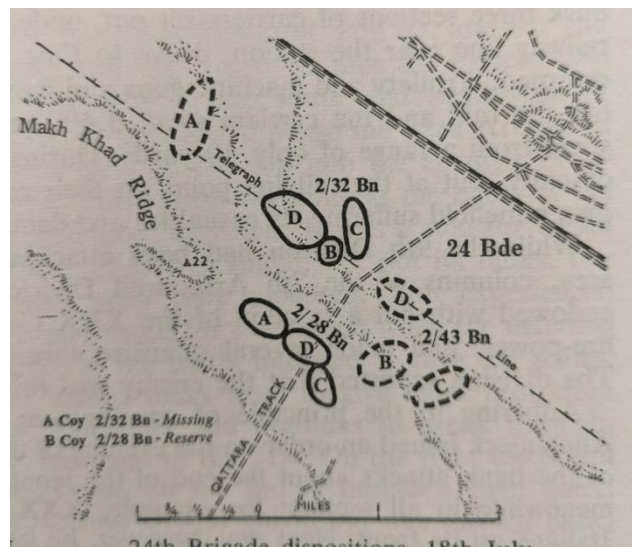
24th Brigade 18th July
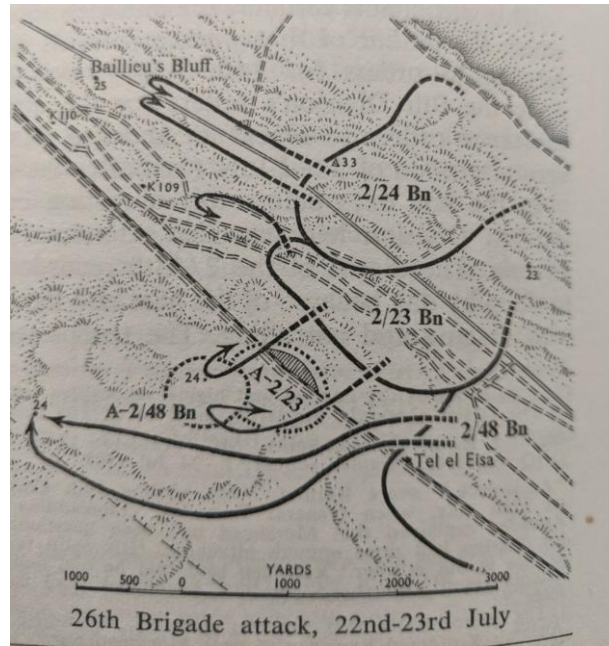
26th Brigade Attack, 22nd-23rd July

Second Battle of El Alamein: Australia Forces a Breach

The battle of El Alamein in late 1942 was the turning point for the North African campaign, which saw the fighting rage back and forth between Libya and Egypt. As with most of the battles in the region, Australians played a vital role in the eventual Allied victory. In this article, we go over their experiences during this pivotal battle.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

El Alamein was and is a small seaside town a little over 100 kilometers west from Alexandria. It served as the linchpin for the defense of the port at Alexandria, which was the main hub for the Allies in the Eastern Mediterranean, vital for the forces fighting the Germans as well as those protecting Palestine and fighting in Lebanon.

Although of little strategic value itself, it lay near an easily defended escarpment which then transitioned into a large sunken area called the Qattara Depression. This made it so anybody thatwanted to take Alexandria from the west would have to go through the gap south of El Alamein or otherwise travel the long way around, through some of the harshest parts of the Sahara.

Changing Horses

British and Commonwealth forces had successfully defended the line in the first battle of El Alamein in July 1942 under the command of Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck. However, British high command were unhappy with Auchinleck and replaced him with Lieutenant-General William "Strafer" Gott. However, before he could take up his post, Gott was killed when the transport plane he was traveling in was shot down. This lead to Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery being appointed to command the British 8th Army. This proved an opportune appointment, Montgomery took to the task of defeating Rommel with vigour.

In the words of Raymond Widdows from Moonee Ponds, Victoria (who also was part of the Benghazi handicap), under Auchinleck there was a general feeling like the army "just can't seem to get it right." Montgomery's arrival changed that, though: he gave clear orders which "explained what every unit and every division had to do… and that's when the morale went up."

Lieutenant-General, later Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery.

Besides being more clear about what he expected from the men under his command, Montgomery also gave up on the passivity the Eighth Army had known until then. According to Glyndwr Evans, also from Box Hill, Victoria, Montgomery "wanted to get the troops out of thinking defensively, to start thinking in terms of advancing and attacking and not sitting there and just defending." After all, sitting still will get you nowhere, "to finish the war they had to attack."

Boxing Clever

One way to change the thinking about how the desert war should be fought was to stop thinking about the "boxes," the defensive positions established around El Alamein that proved so decisive during the first battle. Montgomery held them in particular disdain as symbols of the defensive mindset.

As such, Mr. Evans says that the new field marshal "prohibited the use of the word box, it was to be deleted from military vocabulary. There was an Australian officer up visiting the troops and he asked where this fellow had come from and he said, 'Oh we have just come around from such and such a box,' and he looked at him and said, 'What's a box?' he said, 'a box is something that a bowler hat comes out of.'" The defensive war was clearly over.

Laying Battle Plans

It wasn't enough to have the will to fight, of course, Montgomery needed men and equipment to defeat the Germans and their Italian allies. Thankfully, the first battle of El Alamein had bought the British and Commonwealth governments enough time to bring in fresh troops and materiel, meaning the Eighth Army was at peak fighting strength.

The attack was planned for the 23rd of October, 1942, just under three months after the end of the first battle. During that time, the Germans and Italians hadn't exactly been sitting still. Rommel had ordered the dessert to be mined extensively and plenty of fortifications had been created.

Field Marshal Rommel at El Alamein. Image courtesy of the Bundesarchiv.

Rommel's goal was more or less the same as Auchinleck's a few months before: funnel enemy armor into choke points so as to take away their mobility. It looked like this battle would be fought and won by infantry. Lucky for Montgomery, he had some of the best in the world under his command.
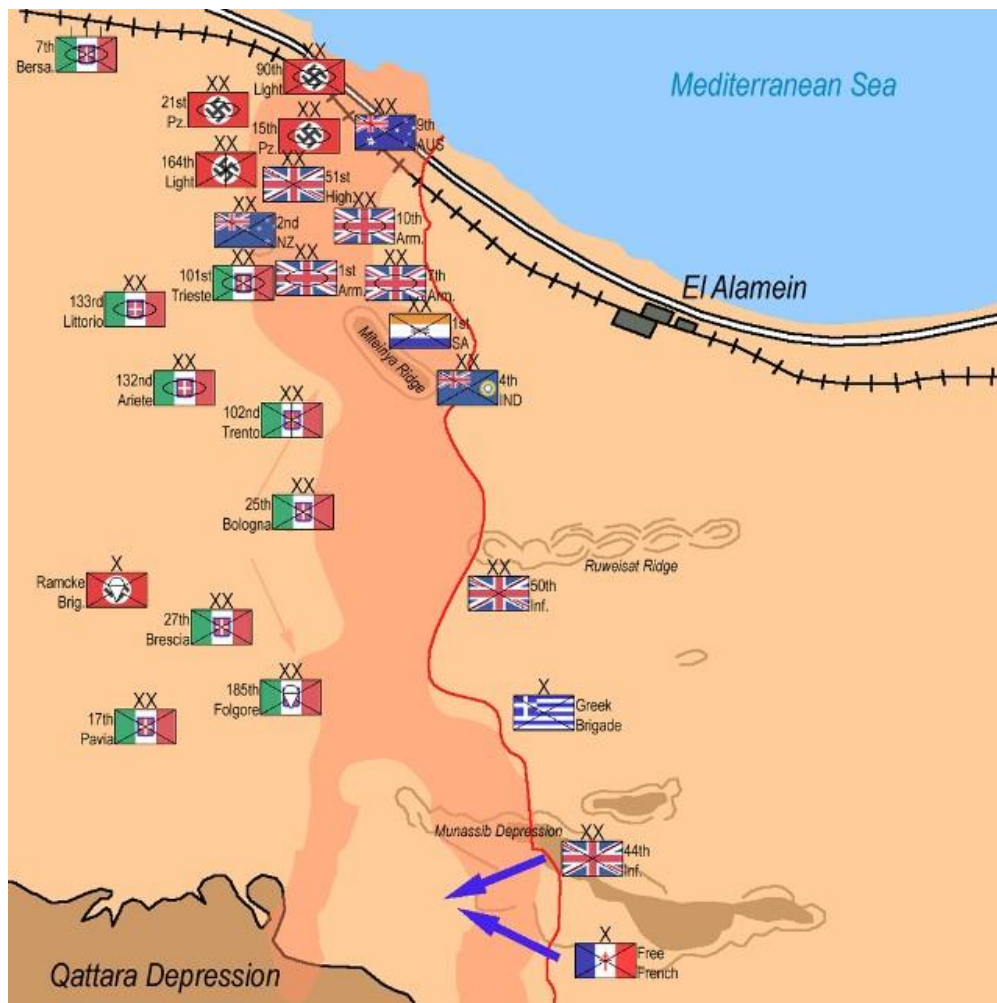
Taking the Initiative

In essence, the Allied plan was simple: assemble superior forces, then push as hard as they could against the Axis defences until they broke through. Montgomery had planned a broad front attack, with a line of troops stretching from the sea to deep in the desert. The 9th Australian 9th Division would take the extreme north of the front.

The starting positions of the Allied forces at the second battle of El Alamein.Wikipedia.

Infantryman Charles Cutler, who after the war became deputy premier of New South Wales, recalls that the artillery "opened fire at twenty to ten on the night of October 23rd and at ten o'clock the infantry, having come out of its holes a few hundred yards back, had moved up onto the starting line which was represented by a white tape… The infantry lined up… and at ten o'clock on the dot we went over the line, and from there on things started to happen."

Friendly Fire

However, as Mr. Cutler's company advanced, things also started to go wrong. The first was that the gun supposed to cover their advance fired what was called a "drop short," and, according to Mr.
Cutler fell "hundred yards short of where it was meant, and unfortunately that dropped right in the middle of our company and our first, I think, five casualties were caused by our own gun."

These men weren't the only ones to succumb to friendly fire, either. Mr. Curtler also recalled that the next morning "18 Baltimore bombers came over to drop their first load on the Germans, and one of them again mis-navigated and dropped their bomb load on the 13th Battalion, which suffered about four or five killed in that bombing."

Despite these mishaps, Mr. Cutler states that his company made it through the first two days, taking objective after objective amid heavy fighting. On the 25th of October, the line halted and they were ordered to get their entrenching tools out and make foxholes. Mr. Cutler and his fellow soldiers were barely done before they saw the reason for the order; tanks bearing down on them.

Allied infantryman capturing a German tank crewman at El Alamein, 1942. National Army Museum.

In Mr. Cutler's words, "I heard the tanks coming in… and I thought to myself, 'This little hole's not real deep and, you know, a… tank running its track alongside this little hole's not going to do me a great deal of good,' so I thought I'll get out and I'll deepen it a bit. And I got out to deepen it a bit and I'd dug about two shovelfuls of dirt out of it when I got shot."

Luckily, one of Mr. Cutler's comrades was able to push him back into the improvised foxhole ("hurt me a bloody sight more than the bullet did") before getting him to a field hospital after night fell. For him, the battle of El Alamein was over, though Mr. Cutler would go on to serve with distinction in the Pacific theater.

Breaking Through

According to another Australian who was at the battle, Ken Pantlin from Ivanhoe, Victoria, all this hard fighting wasn't done in vain. In his interview, he says that "if it hadn't been for the fighting by the Australian battalions on the coast that forced the break-out," the battle would have been lost.

Rommel's tactic was, at least to a certain extent, working. The Eighth Army couldn't get past the mines and other defences put up by the Germans and Italians. The fighting was hard all across the line, but no progress was made, meaning the British armour wasn't able to break through and wreak havoc, much like Rommel had done to them all those months before.

However, Rommel hadn't counted on the tenacity of the Australian infantry. Through sheer grit and determination, the 9th Division eventually punched through the German line and a breach was made. After that, in Mr. Pantlin's words, "the tanks went through and that was it, because it was the Australian 9th Division battalions that did the hard slogging."

It's not just Mr. Pantlin claiming so, either: in later years, Montgomery himself said as much. For example, Mr. Cutler recalls one quote from the field marshal: "one of the proudest achievements of my career was to have commanded the 9th Australian Division. I could not have won the battle of El Alamein in twelve days without that magnificent 9th Australian Division." These thoughts were echoed by Major General Freddie de Guingand, Chief of Staff of Allied forces during D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy, who commented "My God, I wish we had the 9th Australian Division with us this morning".

Without Australian mettle, the battle El Alamein, one of the turning points of WW2, may have turned out very differently.

6th Australian Cavalry Reg in the Mediterranean, WW2 – Video

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   041750

The 6th Australian Cavalry Regiment were the first unit of the AIF to see action in the Western Desert in 1940. This is their story. They were also the first Australian Regiment to use Tanks in the conflict at Tobruk in 1941.

This video was created by Robbie McGuire, creator of the fantastic RM Military History video channel. It was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Watch it here https://historyguild.org/6th-australian-cavalry-reg-in-the-mediterranean-ww2-video/

North Africa in WW2: Total War with Honour?

The North African campaigns during the Second World War have a reputation for being "clean" wars, free from the atrocities we see when studying the Eastern front or the Pacific theatre. However, when we look a little more closely, we can see this romanticised image is a little tarnished in places; we'll take a look at what the historical record can tell us, as well as some details shared by Australian veterans of the conflict.

By Fergus O'Sullivan

Among history buffs, the North African campaigns have taken on a reputation as being relatively clean. It's almost presented as a game, where the two sides chase each other with tanks across the desert in a high-stakes game of tag. In the end, the good guys win, but both sides play the game fairly.

The "players" of this game are also shown in a fairly positive light: The German commander, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, is portrayed as a swashbuckling adventurer — helped in no small part by his movie-star good looks — while British and Commonwealth soldiers are shown to have held him back with little more than pluck and tenacity.

Erwin Rommel, looking like he stepped straight from the silver screen.

An Image Etched in Sand

In this portrayal, the horrors of war are mentioned, but usually as a footnote. The question is, of course, where this image comes from. Some of it naturally comes from propaganda. One good example is how British and Commonwealth troops were lionized after the siege of Tobruk, when they held out for 241 days against almost relentless German assaults.

The defenders became known as the Rats of Tobruk and many stories were told of their upbeat tenacity. As impressive as it was, many second-hand accounts of the siege will gloss over the hardships these men endured and focus mostly on the heroism and tenacity shown.

At the same time, not everything can be cynically deconstructed. Besides stories presented in a way to boost morale or create a positive image of the struggle, there are also some genuinely impressive tales of humanity during wartime. One of the most memorable is the story of how the British air force honoured Italo Balbo, an Italian air marshal who was shot down by his own side.

Upon hearing the news of Balbo's death, the local RAF commander ordered one of his own planes to fly over a nearby Italian airfield and drop a wreath with the following message: "The British Royal Air Force expresses its sympathy in the death of General Balbo — a great leader and gallant aviator, personally known to me, whom fate has placed on the other side."

There's no doubt this was a gallant gesture and one that hearkened back to medieval times, when knights are reputed to have greeted each other on the battlefield. These kinds of stories add some lustre to the North African campaigns, especially compared to the fighting elsewhere during the Second World War.

The desert seems almost tranquil of you compare it to the Pacific Theatre — no mass slaughter as we see during the Rape of Nanjing, no atomic bombs incinerating thousands of civilians in a single second. We won't even mention the Eastern Front and its brutality, with prisoners of war either shot or put to work as slave laborers, not to mention the wholesale slaughter of the region's Jews.

War Is Hell

However, this way of looking at this conflict, popular in documentaries, belies one simple fact: war is hell. No matter how chivalrous your opponent is, you're not going to care much if your tank is hit by a shell and proceeds to brew up, cooking you and your mates alive. Many of the stories we've covered in the Australians in the Mediterranean series reflect this: while the veterans are proud of their accomplishments, they don't miss war, nor would they wish it on anybody else.

One of the best examples is probably Oriel Ramsay, a seaman on the HMAS *Sydney*, who features prominently in our article about the battle at Cape Spada. In 1941, the *Sydney* had sunk the Italian cruiser *Colleoni* in a short battle. After the battle, the *Sydney* went to the wreck to try and save any surviving Italian sailors.

However, this act of nobility left Mr. Ramsay scarred for life: while trying to pick up an Italian crewman, he realized he was holding on to just half of him. Mr. Ramsay describes it as "the worst thing that ever happened to me" and becomes audibly upset, even 60 years after it happened.

Horrible stories like Mr. Ramsay's aren't unique, of course, and the recollections in the Australians at War Film Archive are littered with examples like this. While these videos are priceless sources when it comes to what happened, they're also stark reminders of how bad things can get in wartime.

War Crimes in North Africa

As for war crimes, it's certainly true that North Africa saw fewer atrocities committed than in other theatres. However, that doesn't mean that none took place. The Italians especially committed many atrocities against civilians and prisoners of war in Libya, with Jews especially on the receiving end of cruel, inhumane treatment.

Allied soldiers escort Italian prisoners of war. There are few, if any, reports of Axis prisoners being treated badly by British or Australian troops.

In fact, when listening to recollections of Australian veterans, the poor treatment of prisoners by the Italians is a recurring theme.

Lloyd Moule from Deepwater, New South Wales recalls that the Germans were decent enough to him, saying that this was because of an order of Rommel's which came down to "treat them as how you wanted to be treated yourself." The Italian fascists, though, he said, were "a bit nasty," though in almost the same breath he heaps praise on the Italian partisans who freed him.

Mr. Moule isn't very forthcoming with details of his internment beyond that. Horace Fordyce from Melbourne, in contrast, can recall a lot more about his experiences in a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy, saying the overall experience was "horrible." For one, the camp, near Lecce, was infested with bed bugs and for another there was very little food. In fact, when the POWs were taken for a walk, Fordyce tells a story about how he and his mates were able to steal a chicken, smuggle it into camp and eat the bird before the guards found out.

The North African Holocaust

It wasn't just the Italians that had a poor track record: though the Germans were kind enough to Allied prisoners — though Mr. Moule did have his watch stolen when he was captured — they were brutal to everybody else. For example, members of the British Army's Jewish Brigade — made up of Palestinian Jews as well as ones that had fled Nazi terror in Europe — could expect to be executed by the Afrika Korps if captured.

While Rommel's image may be that of an honourable man, he was a committed Nazi and was more than happy to help persecute local Jews. The Tunisian and Libyan Jewish communities suffered mightily under first Italian and then German occupation.

In Tunisia, they were used as forced labour to build fortifications, while Libya had the dubious honour of hosting its own concentration camp for the roughly 3,500 Jews that lived in the territory.

Further west in Algeria and Morocco, the Vichy regime also established labour camps, where conditions were simply brutal. Prisoners — civilian and military, Jewish and Gentile — were forced to work in the blistering heat and subjected to all manner of inhumane punishments if they disobeyed.

Allied War Crimes

Of course, it wasn't just the Axis forces that broke the rules, though reports of Allied war crimes are far fewer. The worst seem to be the sinking of the hospital ship *Arno* off the coast of Tobruk in 1942, as well as the actions of the submarine HMS *Torbay*, which on several occasions attacked and murdered the floundering crew of the ships it had sunk. Its commander was reprimanded for his actions.

Total War with Honor

There is no doubt that the North African campaigns were waged far less brutally compared to other wars and locations. However, that's not to say they were fought cleanly, either. The Axis especially brought their own brand of brutality to North Africa and visited untold horrors upon the people that lived there.

Add to that the poor treatment of POWs, and a far less rosy picture of the North African campaigns emerges, one where "total war" means that even civilians and disarmed combatants were fair game.

3 Squadron RAAF – Podcast

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   MEC0137

As the Allied armies fought across North Africa, first against the Italians and then the Vichy French and Rommel's Afrika Korps, one squadron of the RAAF was there from the beginning. No. 3 Squadron was the first RAAF squadron to leave Australia and played an important part in many of the important battles from 1940 to 1943 across North Africa, Tunisia and Sicily.

This podcast episode by Warwick O'Neill from the Australian Military History podcast was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Listen to it here https://historyguild.org/3-squadron-raaf-podcast/

Australian VC's in the Mediterranean, WW2 - Video

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   020627

There were six Australian VC recipients during the Mediterranean and North African Campaigns of the second world war. From the heroics of Lt. Roden Cutler in Damour, Corporal Edmondson of the Desert Rats defending Tobruk in 1941 to Sgt. Kibby with his tommy-gun in El Alamein. Learn more about Australian gallantry in the Deserts of North Africa.

This video was created by Robbie McGuire, creator of the fantastic RM Military History video channel. It was commissioned by History Guild as part of our project examining Australian's who served in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2. Watch it here https://historyguild.org/australian-victoria-crosses-in-the-mediterranean-ww2-video/

Want to know out more?

Visit historyguild.org to find out more about the bravery, sacrifice, service and commitment of the Australians who served in the Mediterranean during WW2.

This project commemorating the service by Victorians in the Mediterranean theatre of WW2 was supported by the Victorian Government and the Victorian Veterans Council.

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