Australians in North Africa January 1940 - 43

Background – Why North Africa?

As was the case in the first war, Australia immediately joined Britain in declaring war on Germany in 1939.

The Egypt and the Suez Canal was under British control and it was of vital strategic interest that the Canal remained in Allied control. The Suez Canal provided a vital transport link from Britain to India, Australia, New Zealand, Asia and the Pacific allowing movement of troops, weapons, munitions, food, oil and other vital resources to move back and forth without having to sail around Africa.

With Australia not being under direct threat, Australian troops were sent to Egypt to help secure the Canal.

Australians in North Africa – World War 2 – 1941 - 42

Action against Italy

June 1940 with France defeated and anxious to share the spoils of victory, Fascist Italy declares war on France and Britain thus Australia is at war with Italy.

Libya, to the West of Egypt was an Italian Colony. January 1941, Australians attacked the town of Bardia on the coast of Libya and took over 40,000 Italian prisoners. The went on to capture Tobruk, a vital deep water port town, in late January 1941

In order to stop the rout Hitler sent in one of his top generals Erwin Rommel to head a crack army the Afrika Corps. Rommel was a master strategist with a flair for desert warfare. He was also aided by intelligence supplied by spies in Egypt.

The Siege

By early April, Rommel’s forces had surrounded Tobruk which had a garrison of 14,000 Australians and 12,000 British and Indian troops. They were cut off by land and the Germans controlled the skies.
The only way to keep the garrison going was by the ‘Tobruk Ferry Service’ made up of 5 Australian World War 1 vintage destroyers that were mocked by the German propaganda machine as the ‘Scrap Metal Flotilla’. These ships would leave Alexandra in Egypt at 6am and sail to Tobruk arriving at midnight, unload and depart by 2:30 am all the while being under constant air and artillery attack.

Troops had to survive in daily heat up to 45 degrees, cold nights, a daily water ration of about a litre of water and limited tinned rations.

William Joyce [Lord Haw Haw], an Irish Nazi sympathiser broadcasted German propaganda to the troops in an attempt to demoralise them into surrender. He disparaged them saying they 'were living like rats' the troops adopted the nickname Rats of Tobruk as a badge of honour. After the war Joyce was tried and executed for treason.

During the siege the defenders continued to harass and attack the numerically superior Germans and frustrate Rommel’s advance to Suez.

Ordered to defend Tobruk for three weeks, the Australian were there for five months gradually being withdrawn starting in September and replaced by Polish troops because they had reached the point of exhaustion. The fresh defenders eventually broke out in November and linked up with a British attack. In total the siege lasted 242 days.

The withdrawn Australian troops eventually went on to join the British in the battles of El-Alamein July – November 1942 which eventually saw the defeat of Rommel in North Africa.

Significance
Apart from the military and strategic significance of halting Rommel’s advance and protecting the Canal it was a great morale boost for the Allies. This was the first time after disasters in France, Greece and Yugoslavia the seemingly unstoppable German war machine was blocked.

Aftermath

| Service Medal – Siege of Tobruk | Casualties at Tobruk |

**Siege of Tobruk**
Casualties amongst Allied ground forces 10 April – 27 November 1941

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forces</th>
<th>Killed</th>
<th>Wounded</th>
<th>Missing</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>1,974</td>
<td>476</td>
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<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>509</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
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<td>Polish</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-totals</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>2,487</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>3,836</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

70th Division — — — 2,153

Total — — — 5,989

**Return to Australia**
Japan entered the war in December 1941 and by February Singapore had fallen, 22000 Australian troops taken as prisoners and Australia was being bombed.

Prime Minister John Curtin, believing that Australia was under threat of direct invasion demanded the return of Australian troops from North Africa and the Middle East. This was strongly
opposed and delayed by Winston Churchill who wanted the security of Britain to be ensured and once Germany was defeated, Australia could be liberated. This was totally unacceptable to Curtin.

By January 1943 all Australian troops from North Africa and the Middle East as well as Royal Australian Navy ships had returned to fight in the defence of Australia and the Pacific War

**Fast Facts**

**Australians who served**
- Over 555,000 Australians served overseas in the Second World War
- Approximately 14,000 Australians served at Tobruk
- Three Australian Divisions, the 6th, 7th and 9th served in North Africa

**Casualties**
- Over 3,000 Australians died in North Africa
- Approximately 800 Australians died at Tobruk and almost 2,000 were wounded

**Victoria Crosses**
- Four Australians received the Victoria Cross for their part in the campaign in North Africa.
  - One medal was awarded for service in Tobruk
  - Three Victoria were awarded for actions at El Alamein

**Cemeteries**
- Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries are located in:
  - Egypt—2312 Australians
  - Libya—856 Australians

**Reviewing and Going Further**
1. What difficulties would Britain face if Germany took control of the Suez Canal?
2. Explain why holding Tobruk was more than just a military objective.
3. Did the Germans ever take Tobruk?
4. Why did Australia want to withdraw from
   a. Tobruk?
   b. North Africa and the Middle East?
5. Cartoon: ‘Long Distance Thinking’ – Sydney Daily Telegraph 1942

![Cartoon](http://john.curtin.edu.au/pmportal/text/00468.html)

- a. Identify who are talking on the telephone and where they are talking from?
- b. What does the cartoonist believe is the current circumstances facing both counties represented in the cartoon? What evidence supports your view?
- c. What events have caused this cartoon to be drawn?
- d. Explain how did these events fundamentally change Australia’s foreign policy?
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