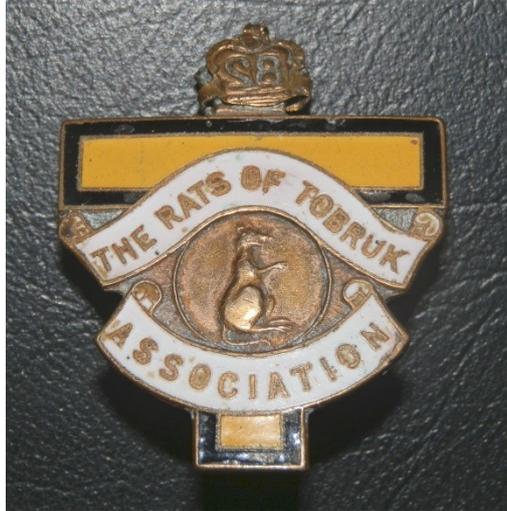


## TASMANIANS/AUSTRALIANS AT TOBRUK

By

Reg. A. Watson.



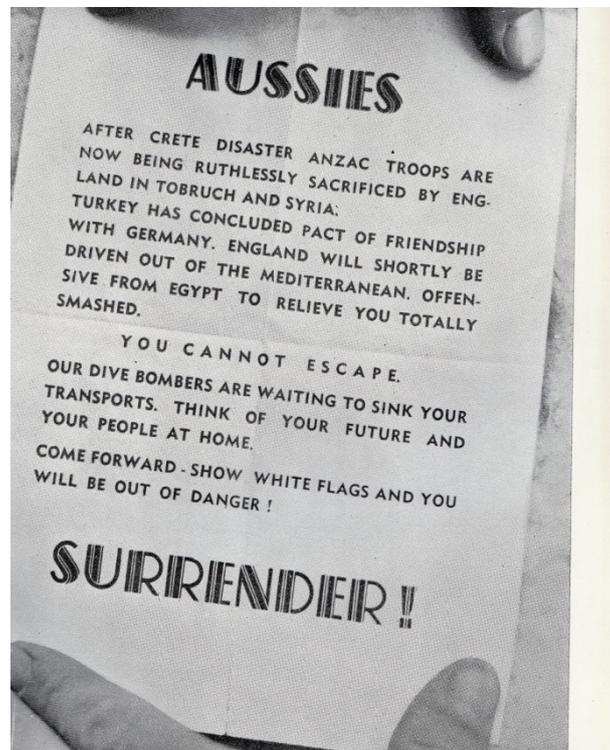
When I was in Canberra. I attended the unveiling of the National Boer War Memorial. After the unveiling I inspected the Tobruk Memorial in ANZAC Parade. I was disappointed when I saw it as it was very plain. Then I read the accompanying plaque. The Tobruk Memorial was a replica of the memorial at Tobruk erected by our men during the siege itself. My companion posed the obvious question? How could they erected the memorial with all the bombs and war going around them? A very good question. But they did. Knowing the story behind this somewhat plain memorial, I was much impressed and moved.



Tobruk memorial, ANZAC Parade, Canberra

Tobruk 1941. As it was at Gallipoli, Tobruk shines in our nation's military history. All the great attributes which were the hallmark of our diggers at Gallipoli came to the fore; fortitude, comradeship, endurance and sacrifice. It showed once again that the sons of Gallipoli were worthy of the heritage for which they were responsible.

The Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Regiment fought with their Australian comrades earning them enduring respect and admiration. As a result the Australians awarded them with the prestige title of "*Rats of Tobruk*". The term was originally one of derision. It was Lord Haw Haw, whose real name was the plain, William Joyce who was the German propaganda radio announcer who said sneeringly of the besieged Australians, "*These rats of Tobruk. Living like rats, they will die like rats*". The slur was taken on by the diggers as being one to be proud of and ever since they were known as the "*Rats of Tobruk*".



Germany propaganda flyer to Australians

The siege of Tobruk is the largest siege in British military history. Lt-General Leslie Morshead said of Tobruk to his men, "*There will be no Dunkirk here. If we should have to get out, we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat.*"

Two infantry divisions were involved, one Australian, the other British. The Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division successfully defended the fortress of Tobruk against the Germans and their Italian allies during the first six months of the siege and won fame by so doing.

Morshead, later Sir Leslie Morshead went on to lead the 9<sup>th</sup> Division at El Alemein and after returning to Australia he lead the New Guinea Force and commanded the Allied forces that recaptured Tarakan and Balippan in 1945. He was mentioned in despatches six times during

World War One and three times during World War Two. He was very much every inch a General.

General Erwin Rommel was appointed commander of the German Afrika Corp in February 1941. Rommel needs no introduction, but what of the man? Field-Marshal Sir Claude J.E. Auchinleck wrote in 1950 of his opponent, "I was surprised to learn how simple and homely he seems to have been. I think that we who were fighting against him pictured him as a typical Junker officer, a product of the Prussian military machine.

"That he evidently was not and it accounts for his amazing - and it was amazing - successes; a leader of men in battle"

He then goes on to say, among many things, "I salute him as a soldier and a man and deplore the shameful manner of his death." Stating that Rommel had qualities which would wish to possess himself, adding in reference to Rommel "respect for a brave, able and scrupulous opponent and a desire to see him treated, when beaten in the way one would have wished to be treated had he been the winner and oneself the loser. This used to be called chivalry, many will now call it nonsense."

Tobruk was one of the few good harbours on the Mediterranean North African coast and was a fortress for Mussolini's Italian troops. The allied forces captured the fortress from the Italians, entrenching themselves.

The siege of Tobruk began April 11 and three days later General Morsehead was appointed commander of the Tobruk fortress. The 9<sup>th</sup> Division had been holding positions around Berghazi. One of the division's battalions 2/13<sup>th</sup> had fought a delaying action at Bir el Reghem to allow the remainder to fall back on Tobruk. It is interesting to note that they were the first Australians to confront the Germans during the Second World War and this battalion and its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Bull Bourrows would also be the last Australians to fight during the siege.

Between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April anti-aircraft units and weaponry were rushed to Tobruk by sea with many of the guns having been captured from the Italians. A number of tanks had also arrived including the Matilda. Added were personnel from 258 Wing and 6 Squadron together with a number of Lysanders and Hurricanes from the 73 Squadron. The perimeter defence line stretched a distance of 16 miles which was defended by a number of concrete posts which had been constructed by the Italians, set below ground level, 128 in total in two rows, each front two post surrounded by an anti-tank ditch and wire with each post connected by telephone.

It was Easter 13 April 1941 when it was clear that a battle was soon to be underway when Rommel's forces were seen advancing having probed the defences of the 20<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade which were repulsed by artillery-fire. German infantry who reached the anti-tank ditch were forced back by Australian infantry. This surprised the Germans having assumed

that the shipping at Tobruk was to evacuate the garrison. Nonetheless it showed that the Germans had arrived. The strong German attack began after dark with an attempt to get over the anti-tank ditches, however, again the Australians repulsed. Another attempt was later made and by dawn a small bridgehead had been established where the 5<sup>th</sup> Panzer Regiment drove through and turned northwards, ready to divide into one column for the harbour and one to move west to stop the escape of the defenders.

While doing so they were engaged by British cruiser tanks and lost 16 tanks with the Australian infantry holding their ground, pinning down the German infantry. This forced the Germans to retreat losing about 75 per cent of their men.

Three days later Rommel attacked again with a very large force consisting of infantry, and armoured divisions. The 2/48<sup>th</sup> Australians advanced taking over 800 German prisoners. The German armoured divisions counter-attack this time with tanks, but found that their infantry had not followed up and a number of their tanks were knocked out. This prompted the Australians to organise a number of counter raids, which resulted in more German prisoners.

Rommel then ordered the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division from Tripoli and a number of aircraft had arrived to Libya from Sicily. The Luftwaffe flew dive bombers by day and medium bomber raids by day and night on the docks, buildings, anti-aircraft sites, artillery positions and the air fields. The toll on Tobruk was being felt with a number of Hurricanes having been shot down or damaged and on 25<sup>th</sup> April 73 Squadron was withdrawn. Even so, the air war was taken to the Germans with airfields on Gazala, Derna and Benina being bombed at dusk and night. The Royal Navy bombed along the Libyan coast helping to destroy airfields and ports.

Over the ensuing months, Tobruk was attacked by artillery, tanks, infantry and thousands of Stuka aerial bombings.

The siege lasted until the 7<sup>th</sup> December when British forces also comprising of Indian and South African soldiers relieved the Australians after General Thomas Blamey had asked the Australian Prime Minister to have them evacuated, the Prime Minister at that time being Fadden, who had followed Menzies and was before John Curtin. Churchill was disappointed the Australians were to withdraw, but continued to voice confidence in Claude Auchinleck. Now politics came into play.

Fadden had requested Churchill that the British Government directed Auchinleck to adhere to the Australian Government's wishes. The main reason for the evacuation was what Blamey considered the decline of the Australian forces justified evacuation and suggestions by the British Government to discontinue plans for evacuation did not impress Blamey. Auchinleck told Morshead that it would endanger his plans and sent a telegram to Churchill in which he set out the factors why this would be so. It was his opinion, that the 9<sup>th</sup> Division had suffered a physical decline, but added, "The health and morale of Tobruk garrison is

very good but the power of endurance of the troops is noticeably reduced and this is likely to be further reduced as time goes on and I detect signs of tiredness in those in responsible positions. An alternative solution to relief would be to strengthen the powers of resistance of the garrison."

It was in August that relief began in Tobruk now 77 years ago when two companies of the 2/9<sup>th</sup> and other details embarked for Alexandria with the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish. The departures from Tobruk had now begun and for this to be successful the jetties had been improved and new berths constructed beside the wrecks close to the southern shore and all skilfully camouflaged.

The infantrymen, the gunners, the Dragoon Guards, the Hussars and the Indian cavalrymen turned infantry who clambered aboard the destroyers and left at dead of night, casted no longing, lingering look behind but knowing a job well done had been accomplished by denying Rommel a vital port.

Nonetheless a number of Australians did remain at Tobruk until the end of the siege.

Unfortunately of course, Auchinleck and Churchill had a falling out although later in 1946 he was promoted to Field Marshall.

The siege had lasted for 241 days and held up the German advance to Egypt and the Suez Canal. Eight hundred and thirty two Australians were killed with nearly 2000 wounded as well as many casualties suffered by our gallant Polish allies. Nine hundred and forty one Australians were taken prisoner.

In the end 15,000 Australian and Polish troops were shipped out from a port which still remained under attack. The evacuation was filmed by war photographer Damien Parer. The 2/13<sup>th</sup> was the last to leave, the last doing so 16<sup>th</sup> December, the only battalion to leave by road.

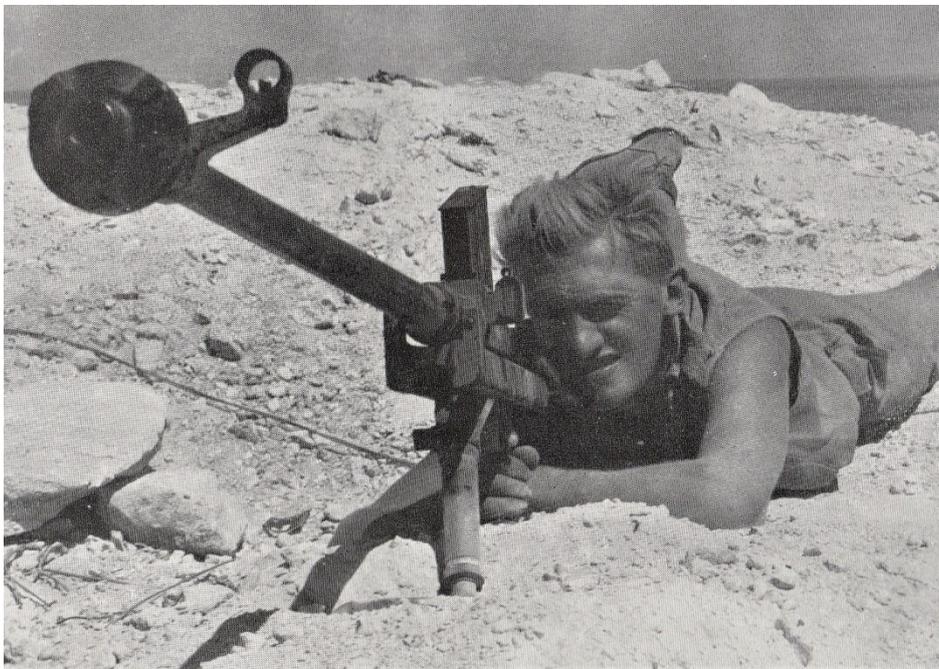
At Tobruk the Australians perfected the art of night fighting with continuous series of patrols and raids against the German and Italian positions. Moreshead's doctrine from the outset was one of spirited aggression. It was important he considered rightly, that the Australians must dominate the No Man's Land of the perimeter.

The British 70<sup>th</sup> Division took over the defence of the fortress when the Australians were withdrawn.

Australian Author William M. Stokoe wrote of Tobruk, "*Have you ever lived for weeks without taking a bath, without putting any water on you except on your face? You feel sick and you get desert sores and the dirt is caked on your body with your sweat and you feel ashamed. You count the days until you'll be able to emerge from your hole and go down to the sea. And days and weeks and months go past and there is no end to it*".

Many Tasmanians were among those besieged by Rommel. The men left Tasmania from this most beautiful of all isles; they left their towns, villages and farms. They were fisherman, they were factory workers, and they were bakers, clerks, salesmen, labourers, and zinc workers. Far from their home did they travel finally to the war zones of North Africa. The mothers and fathers had the agony of waving their sons goodbye to endure the siege and carnage of Tobruk. They played their part well and sadly, but in honour too, the names of those Tasmanians, along with their Polish comrades have been recorded on the memorial on the corner of Main Road New Town and Augusta Road now called the "Polish Corner" the memorial being outside the Polish Club.

I would like to read the names of those **Tasmanians** who died at Tobruk and are buried in that far distant land.



This caption simply reads: "A Tasmanian with 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment sighting his tank-attack gun" No identification. (Pictorial History of Australians at War 1939-45 – Australian War Memorial Vol II P. 193)

**Brett**, Charles Walter. Pte. TX 1057. 2/12/. Age: 21. CofE. DD: 4.5.41. Buried Tobruk Grave. 5.D.1

**Butler**, Clifford Aubrey Pt. TX1054. 2/12. Age: 26 Methodist 4/5/41. Buried Tobruk War Cem 5.B.0

**Cameron**, Leslie Lewis. Pte. TX318. 2/12. Age: 19. Methodist. DD: 17/4/41 Tobruk Cem: 3.K

Christie, Leslie Lewis. Pte. TX318. 2/12. Age: 24. Roman Catholic. DD:14/4/41. Tobruk Cem: Gr. 3. H.1.

**Clark**, George Victor. Spr. TX465. 2/3 Aus. Fd. Coy. Age: 24. CofE. DD: 23/9/41. Buried Tobruk Cem. Grave 6.K.2

**Elphinstone**, Sydney Claude. Pte. TX1059. 2/12. Age:22. DD:17/4/41. Buried Tobruk Cem. Gr.3.K.

**French**, Stanley Lloyd. A/Sgt. TX 35, 2/12. Age: 24. CofE. DD:14/4/41 Buried: Tobruk Cem: 3.H.2.

**Gregg**, Rex Thorpe, A/Sgt. TX 590. 2/12 Age:22. CofE. DD:3/5/41. Buried: Tobruk Cem:5.B.10

Hazelwood, Algernon Lyell. Pte. TX128. 2/12. Age:23. CofE. DD:10/4/41. Buried: Tobruk Cem: 3.D.3

**McCulloch**, John George Gordon. Cpl. TX312. 2/12. Age:28. Presbyterian. DD:18/5/41. Buried:Tobruk Cem: 5.J.3.

**Powell**, Daryl. Pte. TX 3221. 2/12. Age:21. CofE. DD:14/5/41. Buried: Tobruk Cem:5.G.1.

Proctor, Basil. .Pte. TX 167. 2/12. Age:30. CofE. DD: 3-4/5/41. Buried: Tobruk Cem: 5.C.2

**Salier**, Albert George. Pte. TX1043. 2/12. Age: 34. CofE. Buried: Tobruk Cem:4.4.5

**Smith**, Basil John. Pte. NX17563 (enlisted NSW). Australian Infantry. Age: 29. DD:30/6/41. Buried: Tobruk Cem: 4.F.1.

**Taylor**, William Pollok. Capt. TX2020. 2/12. Age: 33. Presbyterian. DD:4/5/41. Buried: Tobruk Cem: 5.C.3

The Polish contribution to the Second World War has not really been appreciated. It was not only at Tobruk, but in Palestine, and at the famous battle in Italy, Monte Casino and well as fighting over the skies of England during the Battle of Britain.

Just an interesting note: the Polish connection to Tasmania is strong and very early. Pioneer John Polaski born in Poland arrived in Van Diemen's with Governor David Collins in February 1804. Before they came ashore, his wife Catherine had a child, the first white child born in our surrounds.

We must never forget and it is more than pleasing that the two peoples are named side by side heralding their bravery and sacrifice on the memorial.

I would now like to personalise it somewhat by mentioning my father who served at Tobruk.

Dad's number was always easy to remember; TX1000. **Reginald Gordon Watson** was born a long time ago, 1 April 1903 in the historic township of Richmond Tasmania. He was a bushman and became a very good shot. Earlier in his life he worked at the early Hydro projects of Waddamana, Tarraleah and The Shannon. His father, Frederick, who was a Boer

War Veteran (2nd Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen) was foreman. The family military history can be traced back to the English Civil War of the 1640s. Reg also worked during the years before the war at the cement works on Maria Island which was in colonial times, a penal settlement off the east coast of Tasmania.

In 1930 he enlisted in the Militia Forces and on the Attestation Form he stated he had served for three years in the 40th Battalion (a purely Tasmanian one) and one year with the 52nd. This must have been the reserved army or as was known then, Citizens Military Force (CMF).

He enlisted in the full time army 4th March 1940 (2/12 Bn) and by this time he was just on 37 years old and single. He put his age back to 30, as the Attestation Form states having been born 1 April 1910.

Like all Tasmanian soldiers he trained at the Brighton Army Camp (recently closed down by Victorian bureaucrats with the Federal Government selling the land at a very low price to a Queensland developer for housing. One block to be sold of 250 the total cost of the of the over all selling price )

Within six months Reg had been sent to Ingleburn NSW and by November 1940 had arrived in England having first sailed to South Africa and stopping off at Durban. There he met a South African family and set up a friendship. I have a photo of the family and often wondered what happened to them. They do not seem to be Afrikaan in appearance nor English South African as they have rather Mediterranean features, perhaps Portuguese

In March 1941 he was in the Middle East and he was transferred to the 18 Aus Training Bn then to the 2/10 Bn and back again to the 2/12th. He had more than one spell in hospital; illnesses seem to plague him. He returned to Hobart in 1942 as medically unfit, but then he was taken on strength again and sent to Heidelberg, Victoria where, because of illnesses, was returned to Hobart. Later he was discharged as again medically unfit.

After his service he worked on trading sailing vessels that sailed the coasts of Tasmania and to the Bass Strait Islands, such as Finders. The best known vessel was the *Naracoopa*. The story of coastal trading vessels is fascinating, but like many things have long since gone.

He married my mother in 1948.

He spoke little of any of his experiences, but as I grew to manhood we, with my brother-in-law, often went hunting and camped over night. It was then while mesmerised sitting by the blazing camp fire the tales began and what follows are some of those brief stories regarding his time at Tobruk....

When he left the shores of Tasmania his parents were there to see him off and he said to his father, "Well dad<sup>i</sup> you went once so now it's my turn." 1.

I can recall him talking about London. He said the Germans did indeed try to invade England but were stopped by the English troops spraying oil and petrol on the water, setting it alight thus burning the invading soldiers. I have never come across this report, but I have little doubt that it is true. Perhaps it is still secret. Dad felt sorry for the way the Germans died.

In London he must have been on parade when they were addressed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill who, dad said, "praised the Australians". He did mention that he became friends with a young lady in England. He also mentioned that, unlike many of the other Australians, he never visited brothels or accompanied low/easy women.

He then was sent to North Africa and I can remember him mentioning Tripoli, Tel Aviv and Palestine.

Then to Tobruk where he said at one time he was asked to be a sniper. He was also placed in charge of some prisoners of war. While on duty one German gave him the Nazi salute and spat him in the face and as a consequence dad shot him in the middle of the head, apparently to the cheers of the other prisoners who must have hated this bully.

He said that while in battle one deals with the situation, but afterwards one would shake uncontrollably. He had a lot of time for the Germans, but little time for the Italians. Once he added that the Maoris (New Zealanders) would go out on patrol and come back with a tally of ears mounted on a long pole that they had taken from the enemy. He said that the only reason he was alive was that "no bullet had his name on it."

His service number, as stated, was TX1000. 2nd AIF. He may have said many other things, but time and my own memory have forgotten. He died in 1990. I was his only child.

That generation of Tasmanians no longer exist. Sophistication (so-called), urbanisation, over education and permissiveness have erased such unique individuals who were hard working, initiative, independent and willing to serve.

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<sup>i</sup>1, His father was in The Anglo-Boer War



Caption reads: "Tobruk: Symbol of Tobruk. A determined, unshaven Australian watching for any movement by the enemy – at the spot only 300 yards away. (Pictorial History of Australia at War 1939-45 – Australia War Memorial, P. 192 – Vol II)

**BELOW: LAST OF THE TOBRUK TASMANIAN VETERANS. TAKEN OFFICER'S MESS, ANGELSEA BARRACKS, HOBART April 29<sup>th</sup> 2003.**



From left: Len Carter, Alf Clark, Pat O'Leary, Max Irvine, Stan Bester, Paul Hope, Bill Jeffrey, Phil Turner, Eddy Marlowe.



Anzac Day 2016 in front of the Tobruk Memorial, Polish Corner, New Town. Author second from left.



Lone Pine planting ceremony joint effort on behalf of the Tobruk veterans by Tasmanian Rats of Tobruk Association and the Polish ex-servicemen's Association. Left: Last Polish Tobruk veteran, Wladslaw Krzysica. Right: Reg Watson. Pontville Cemetery, March 2017.