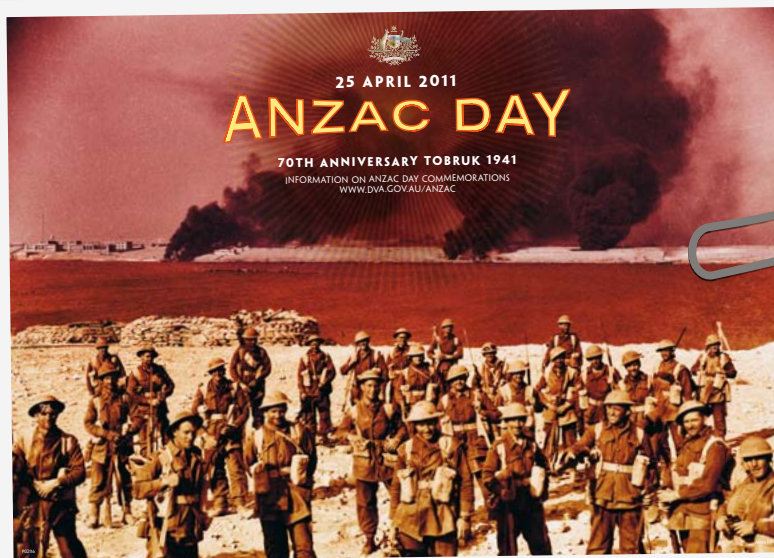


## WARTIME SNAPSHOTS

### 70th Anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk



The poster of the Siege of Tobruk features an image of men of the Australian army at the edge of the harbour with oil tanks burning in the background. With the Italian defences penetrated, the troops secured the town and forced the surrender of the Italians. Australian War Memorial 005409



### Facts, Figures and Background

The Siege of Tobruk (April–December 1941) was a lengthy confrontation in Libya, North Africa, during the Western Desert Campaign of the Second World War. Tobruk was strategically important as it has a deep and protected harbour, making it an excellent place to supply a desert campaign.

In January 1941, Australian and British forces captured Tobruk from the Italians and the town became their garrison. With the Italian forces on the verge of collapse in North Africa, the German commander, General Erwin Rommel launched major offensives aimed at reclaiming a wider area. Striking with unexpected speed and mechanised strength, his 'blitzkrieg' approach proved unstoppable. The Allies were forced to retreat, and fell back to Tobruk. In April, the Germans surrounded the port city and the 'Siege of Tobruk' began. For more than six months the Allied forces, including the Australian 9th Division, held out with the support of the Royal Navy, the Royal Australian Navy, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force. The odds were stacked against Tobruk's defenders. The German force was twice their size, better equipped and commanded by Rommel, who was respected by both sides and accustomed to success. Rommel expected the port city's defences to crumble but the Germans confronted an unexpectedly steadfast defence. The Australians' fighting style caused confusion and made it very difficult for Rommel's attacks to succeed.

Having established a strong defensive system and through aggressive patrolling Tobruk's defenders withstood a series of attacks.

When subjected to shelling and bombing, the Australians sheltered safely in Tobruk's network of tunnels. In an effort to destroy morale, German propaganda likened Tobruk's defenders to rats, a vermin that steals from the shadows. Far from being demoralised, the Allied soldiers wore the name 'Rats of Tobruk' as a badge of honour.

In their determination to defend and hold the town and port of Tobruk, the Australian forces suffered more than 3000 casualties. By the end of 1941, many of the Australians in the Mediterranean area had been withdrawn to fight in new theatres of war in the Pacific.

