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 By the end of 1941, many of the Australians in the Mediterranean area had been withdrawn to fight in new theatres of war in the pacific.
Websites and References

Publications

Websites
- Department of Veterans’ Affairs:  
- Australian War Memorial:  

Teaching Activities

Use the websites and references above to research the answers to the following questions.

1. The Siege of Tobruk resulted in one of the North African campaign’s major confrontations. Give reasons why it was important to the Commonwealth Forces.

2. Look at a map of North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. How important was the port of Tobruk to the enemy? List the features of the physical environment that would have made fighting difficult for the Australians.

3. Given the location of Bardia and Tobruk, how important do you think the Royal Australian Navy was in this campaign? Why was the Navy referred to as the ‘scrap iron flotilla’? What role did the navy play in the town’s defence?

4. The men of the 9th Division and the 18th Brigade of the 7th Division were known as the ‘Rats of Tobruk’. Who coined this name and why? Did the Australians dislike being known as rats?

5. Look at the photograph ‘Rats to you’ on the *Australia’s War 1939–1945* website. What does it show about the spirit and sense of humour of the Australian men?

6. Corporal Jack Edmonson was the first Australian in the Second World War to be awarded the Victoria Cross, for his actions on 13 April 1941. Use the information on the *Australia’s War 1939–1945* website to write an article for the local Wagga Wagga newspaper outlining the circumstances, his bravery and the reasons for his citation for this medal honour.

7. Look at the scrapbook of Mrs Edmondson on the website. What more can you learn about her son Jack by reading her collection of clippings and photographs?

8. Watch the video of Private Richard Gordon Hughes on the *Australia’s War 1939–1945* website. Write several diary entries of his experience, taken from his comments about serving at Tobruk.

9. Look at the images of the Rats of Tobruk Memorial on Anzac Parade, Canberra. From your reading about the campaign do you think it is a good representation and design? Do you think it commemorates those who fought at Tobruk? Why or why not?

10. Go to the Australians at War Film Archive and search under the topic of Tobruk and read about the experiences of one of the army, naval or airforce personnel serving during this campaign.