

The seal is circular with a decorative border. Inside, the word 'TOBRUK' is written in a large, stylized font at the top, and '1941' is written below it. The background of the seal is filled with intricate, repeating patterns.

EDUCATION SERVICES

2011



Tobruk Ray Ewers and George Browning, 1954-56 AWM ART41035

Book a facilitated program for 2011 and we will provide a much deeper learning experience.



TOBRUK 1941 – A GALLANT AND TENACIOUS DEFENCE

The whole empire is watching your steadfast and spirited defence ... with gratitude and admiration.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill



The fate of the war in North Africa hung on the possession of a small harbour town in the far corner of the Libyan desert – Tobruk. It was vital for the Allies' defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal to hold the town with its harbour, as this forced the enemy to bring their supplies from the port of Tripoli, 1500 km away across the desert.

1941 began with a series of impressive British and Commonwealth successes against the Italians in Libya. Australian troops led the advance, but a rapid German offensive quickly reversed these early victories. All that stopped the Germans' march on Egypt was the defiant garrison at Tobruk.

For eight long months, surrounded by German and Italian forces, the men of the Tobruk garrison, mostly Australians, withstood tank attacks, artillery barrages, and daily bombings. They endured the desert's searing heat, the bitterly cold nights, and hellish dust storms. They lived in dug-outs, caves, and crevasses. The men were short of supplies, short of manpower, ammunition, food and water. The harbour was regularly bombarded, and the supplies that did make it through were brought in by vessels running the gauntlet of German bombs.

The diorama captures a moment in time illustrating the beleaguered port town and its defenders manning an anti-aircraft gun. The harbour is strewn with wrecks and debris, and Stuka dive-bombers of the *Luftwaffe* (German air force) have turned their attention on the town itself.

This small North African port was, and still is, a symbol of Australian tenacity and determination. The diorama records the site where, despite limited battle experience and inferior equipment, Australian soldiers gave the German army its first defeat in the Second World War and in so doing, created an Australian legend.

What's happening in the diorama?

Look at the terrain. What can it tell us about the climate and conditions?

Conditions for the defenders in this arid, treeless country were tough and dirty. They lived amid heat, dust, flies, lice, and rats, in tunnels, caves, and the bomb-damaged rubble of the town. Drinking water was always in short supply; dark and tasting of sulphur, it was carefully rationed. These miserable conditions led the German propagandist William Joyce, better known to the troops as "Lord Haw Haw", to dub the defenders the "Rats of Tobruk" – a name they quickly adopted as a badge of honour.

The area around Tobruk is an almost flat plateau, and provided no cover for an attacker. The defences built to

protect it ran in a rough semicircle across the desert from coast to coast, and consisted of dozens of concrete-sided strong-points protected by barbed-wire fences and anti-tank ditches.

Where are the enemy?

By April 1941, General Rommel's *Afrika Korps* had already swept the British and Commonwealth forces from nearly all of Libya, and was set to continue its advance towards Egypt. All that stood in their way was the "fortress" of Tobruk.

The Germans launched their ill-fated attack on 13 April 1941. The familiar *Blitzkrieg* pattern was to use tanks to break through the defences, and then the infantry would pour through the gap. In Poland, France, and Belgium these tactics had never failed. This time, however, the tanks were let through virtually unopposed, and the Australians attacked the following infantry. Once they were eliminated, the tanks, lacking ground support, were easy targets. During the *Luftwaffe* bombing raids, the Australians hid in the network of tunnels. They were soon able to go on the offensive, attacking enemy positions and stealing German artillery.

How significant is the port?

During the siege, Tobruk could only be supplied from the sea. Ships brought in food, ammunition, petrol, and other urgently needed supplies, and evacuated the wounded. Enemy aircraft regularly attacked this "Tobruk ferry service", and ships were frequently sunk. The entrance to the harbour was known as "bomb alley".

The diorama depicts the town and the wreck-strewn harbour. Light anti-aircraft gunners defend the port against German dive bombers. The harbour is littered with the hulks of both Allied and Axis ships. Some were sunk while the port was in Italian hands, others by enemy raids during the siege. The destroyer HMAS *Ladybird*, though aground in the shallow harbour, remained manned as a makeshift anti-aircraft gun platform throughout the siege.

How did the campaign end?

By December, most of the Australian forces had been relieved and transported to Egypt on warships. While they were being withdrawn, they were replaced by British, Polish, and Czech soldiers. The 2/13th Infantry Battalion remained until the siege was lifted on 10 December 1941. The Australians suffered about 3,000 troops killed and wounded during the siege, with another 941 taken prisoner. After the Australians were evacuated, Tobruk was again besieged when German forces counter-attacked in January 1942. The British and South African garrison was forced to surrender.

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

Book a facilitated program for your school group; a program will provide a much deeper learning experience. New programs, aligned to the Australian Curriculum for History, are now available.

The Australian War Memorial provides a wide range of educational programs aligned with the new Australian Curriculum for History. These programs are designed to suit your classroom and curriculum needs.

When you visit the Memorial, and book a facilitated program, students gain a much deeper learning experience. Our trained educators draw on personal stories represented by the displays in the galleries and real artefacts. The educators tell amazing tales of Australian wartime history, making the most of your students' time.

Bookings are essential for all school groups visiting the Memorial, whether you are choosing a facilitated program (led by Memorial staff) or a teacher-guided tour.

All school bookings are made at www.awm.gov.au/education/bookings

For further assistance, and for your school password to book online, please email the Memorial's Bookings Officer at school.bookings@awm.gov.au

Teacher's checklist

- Log on to www.awm.gov.au/education and read about the Memorial's curriculum-based programs and choose which program best suits the needs of your students.
- Book your visit online and record your booking reference number.
- Arrange your transport; collect permission forms and money. A risk assessment guide is available from the NCETP website www.ncetp.org.au
- Arrange adequate supervision by teachers and parents. Ensure a supervising adult accompanies each group of 15 students and remains with them at all times.
- Talk to your students, parents, and accompanying teachers, about behaviour that is appropriate for a special place of remembrance and commemoration.
- Link your classroom activities with your impending visit.
- Bring your PACER paperwork for validation and stamping.
- If your group numbers change, please email your increase or decrease to school.bookings@awm.gov.au, quoting your booking reference number. Cancellations should be made no less than five working days prior to your scheduled visit.
- When you arrive at the Memorial, please enter via the Schools' Entrance, which can be found on the map on our website. Remember to leave school bags on the bus.



PRIMARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

The following worksheets, answers to questions, and further activities can be downloaded for classroom use from www.awm.gov.au/education

What was life like in Australia in 1941?

Students record some of these differences.

	1941	Now
Food	<i>Eg. tripe</i>	<i>lasagne</i>
Clothes	<i>Eg. swimming trunks</i>	<i>board shorts</i>
Cars		
Public transport		
Toys		
Entertainment		

Supplying Tobruk in 1941

For over eight months, the harbour at Tobruk was the only lifeline linking the Australian troops with their friends and allies. Using the table below, list some of the supplies "the Tobruk ferry" would bring to the troops.

SAFETY: items that the men would need to protect themselves	HEALTH: items that would keep the men fit and healthy
> <i>Helmets</i>	> <i>Fresh water</i>
DEFENCE: items that would help the men defend the town and most importantly, their mates!	MORALE: things that would cheer the men up and improve their willingness to fight (or keep them from giving up)
> <i>Ammunition (bullets) for the men's rifles</i>	> <i>Letters from home</i>

Word box

The following key words and explanation are jumbled up. Students are asked to match up the word to the appropriate explanation to enhance their knowledge and understanding.

siege	countries that join together with a shared goal
ration	port town situated in Libya, North Africa
allies	spreading information or rumour for a particular purpose
shelling	a prolonged, persistent stand to overcome resistance

garrison	fearless and brave
courageous	a fort or stronghold
Tobruk	a fixed official allowance of food
propaganda	bombardment from enemy fire

Cloze exercise

Students select a word from the list to fill in the blanks

town tough "Rats of Tobruk" Nazi heat lice dirty Conditions caves flies honour rationed dust

_____ for the Allies in this dry, treeless country were _____ and _____. They lived in tunnels, _____ and the bomb-damaged rubble in the small _____ of Tobruk. Drinking water was always in short supply and carefully _____. The men lived amid _____, _____, _____ and rats. These miserable conditions led the _____ propagandist William Joyce, to dub the defenders the _____. Rather than be upset with this name, the men quickly adopted it as a badge of _____.

What was it like?

Students imagine that they are Australian soldiers hiding underground from the constant bombing attacks at Tobruk in 1941. Students give their character a name and note their responses to the following questions:

- How did you get to Tobruk?
- Why are the Australians at Tobruk?
- How long have you been at Tobruk?
- What is your job? How difficult is it?
- What are the conditions like at Tobruk?
- What do you miss from home?
- What has been your most exciting experience so far?
- What has been your saddest experience so far?

Students share their findings.

Demonstrate your findings

Working in their groups, students present findings from their research project (described above). Presentation can take the form of a diorama, sandpit model, collage, newspaper article, oral presentation, puppet play etc. Students share the synthesised ideas of their group with the class.

SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

The following worksheets, answers to questions, and further activities can be downloaded for classroom use from www.awm.gov.au/education

Getting started

Using the information from the text provided, students record their responses to the following:

Where is Tobruk?	List the nations involved in the fighting at Tobruk.	Why was Tobruk important?

Research project

Divide the class into groups, allocating each group one of the following army units serving in Tobruk in 1941. Students investigate their unit, including:

- The role of their unit
- How they supported the Allied force
- What they need to carry out their job
- 5 ways in which their job would assist the Allied force

Corps	Description
Artillery	fire long-range weapons such as cannons and rockets at the enemy
Engineers	the tradesmen of the battlefield building roads, bridges and tunnels, providing infrastructure
Field Ambulance	collect wounded soldiers and provide medical attention
Infantry	the fighting soldiers; they seek out the enemy, then capture and hold ground
Intelligence	compiles and analyses information about the terrain and weather; also about the enemy and their positions, movements and equipment
Signallers	maintain communications between units: despatch riders, radios and telephones
Transport	provide all supplies to army units

Activity

Students design a colour patch and a mascot for their unit.

Taking it further

Students read the text about the siege of Tobruk during the Second World War, then assess the following statements and rate them as True, False, or Not Sure.

- The siege of Tobruk began in 1940 with the advance of the Australians into the town.
- 1941 began with a series of impressive British and Commonwealth successes against the Germans.
- The Australians at Tobruk withstood tank attacks, artillery barrages and daily bombings.
- The diorama depicts several major Italian ships that were destroyed in the fighting.

- The defenders in the diorama are manning a Stuka anti-aircraft gun.
- The Australians at Tobruk lived in dug-outs, caves and crevasses.
- William Joyce, "Lord Haw Haw", called the defenders the "Rats of Tobruk".
- The Germans used blitzkrieg tactics. The tanks would break through the defences, and the infantry would pour through the gap.
- The terrain surrounding Tobruk provided the Germans with good cover, and enabled them to conduct devastating blitzkrieg tactics.
- The "Tobruk ferry" service refers to the ships that would bring in food, ammunition, petrol and other urgently needed supplies.

Stimulus questions

- Why were the Allies (Australian/British) and the Axis (German/Italian) forces fighting in the North African desert? What was significant about the region and Tobruk in particular?
- How did the Australians survive the blitzkrieg attacks? Provide details describing how the men survived ground and air attacks.
- List the dangers or problems faced by the defenders at Tobruk. What are the problems or dangers listed in the text and visible in the diorama?
- As the siege dragged on, "Lord Haw Haw" used a propaganda broadcast to describe the Australians as the "Rats of Tobruk". What was his intention in making this broadcast? What was the result?
- The German commander, Erwin Rommel, became well known as "the Desert Fox" during the fighting. Why was he so feared and respected? Provide three reasons.
- Major General Leslie Morshead, the Commander of the Tobruk garrison, said "We're not here to 'take it', we're here to 'give it'". What did he mean by this statement? What duties did he order the Australians to undertake?
- Morshead was referred to by his own troops as "Ming the Merciless", implying that he was a tough and strict commander. Why do you think it would be important to be tough in this role?
- What was the "bush artillery"? Why do you think the men adopted this name?
- "The Rats of Tobruk" became a household name during the Second World War. Why was their story so important to people in Australia and Britain in 1941?
- What is significant or important about the "Rats of Tobruk"? What values can we learn from the stories of the Australians at Tobruk?