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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

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Subject BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK.

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AUTHORITY—

Chester Wilmot's "TOBRUK".

TOBRUK.

Tobruk, like Gallipoli, is a name that means much in the war annals of Australia. A parallel can also be drawn between Tobruk and Milne Bay. At Milne Bay the hitherto invincible Jap suffered his first defeat - at Tobruk the all-conquering German forces received their first set-back - in each case at the hands of Australians.

January, 1941, saw the British forces, with the Australian 6th Division in the fore, sweep the Italians from the Western Desert all the way to Benghazi and beyond. An extended supply line and the committal of British forces, (including the 6th Division) to honour our pledge to Greece, made our position precarious and with the arrival of General Rommel and his Afrika Corps on the scene it was now our turn to retreat.

The 6th Australian Division was relieved by the newly-formed 9th Australian Division under Major-General L.J. Morshead on the 8th of March, 1941, and their role of garrisoning the Western Desert soon changed when Rommel launched his counter-attack. In the face of superior armour, something the British forces lamentably lacked, retreat was inevitable. The Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Archibald Wavell, decided however, that Tobruk must be held for, as he said when he handed over the Cyrenaican Command to General Lavarack, "There is nothing between you and Cairo".

Tobruk's strength as a fortress lay in the fact that for an attacker there was no cover around the perimeter as the area is an almost perfectly flat plateau. With the harbour as the heart of the fortress, the defences built to protect it ran in a rough semicircle across the desert from the coast eight miles east of the harbour to the coast again nine miles west of it. The defences had been hewn from the desert and consisted mainly of dozens of strongpoints. These posts were protected by barbed-wire fences and anti-tank ditches. Supplemented by captured Italian weapons the strength of the garrison lay in its fire-power, and the extensive use of minefields offset to some extent the weakness in infantry.

This was the position when the Germans launched their ill-fated attack on April 13th, 1941. Known as the "Easter Battle", the Germans had confidently expected a walk-over - instead it had ended in their being completely routed. The spirit of co-operation, trust and comradeship between the men of the garrison, consisting of two thirds Australian and one third British, was the real strength of Tobruk. No other Middle East front saw understanding between the men of these countries so complete.

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On Easter Sunday the enemy made his attack with infantry action against the perimeter. The vigorousness of his attack was matched however by the vigour of our defence, and his success in this phase was very limited.

On the morning of Easter Monday the Germans launched their attack by tanks. The familiar pattern employed by these "Blitzkrieg" experts was to have the tanks break through the defences - a deep armoured thrust - and through the gap would pour the infantry. In Poland, France and Belgium these tactics had never failed. Once the tanks had broken through it had always been the beginning of the end and the rolling up of the defences had been a matter of course - until Tobruk.

Here the enemy's tanks did not so much break through as they were let through. The Australians lay low until the German infantry appeared in the wake of the tanks. These were engaged by our fire with the result the tanks were left to advance without the support they had expected, and the further they advanced the more intense became the fire they encountered. For here was the secret of our defence - a defence in depth. The combined force of our artillery and tanks lay waiting for them. They were hit with every calibre weapon at our command capable of damaging them. The fire of our 25-pounders at point-blank range was particularly devastating. As the enemy armour in retreat poured through the gap they had made in our lines, they came under the fire of Brens, mortars, rifles and shells and terrible confusion resulted.

Thus ended the Afrika Corps' first attempt to capture the garrison. Tobruk was a nut they could not crack and further attempts such as the Battle of the Salient in April-May had little more success. While Rommel gained a small amount of territory with his far superior forces, the men of the Fortress inflicted such heavy casualties he did not seriously attack Tobruk again in 1941. Under the inspired leadership of General Morshead the actual defensive task of holding Tobruk was, in reality, held by offensive tactics.

This then was the pattern of Tobruk. A thorn in the side of the German army, upsetting his plans for an attack on Egypt, and giving us time to build up our forces for a counter offensive.

For over six months Australians had defied and denied him possession of the area, and although they were evacuated by sea in October for a "rest", having been relieved by the Polish Carpathian Brigade, one battalion, the 2/13th remained to fight its way out and join up with the advancing British Eighth Army on the second advance westwards.

The heroic defence of Tobruk is a notable military achievement and a worthy addition to the long list of deeds of valour performed by Australian soldiers. At the unveiling of the Memorial in the Tobruk War Cemetery, the late Chester Wilmot, in a description of the ceremony, concluded by saying "Their real monument is their name and their most honoured resting place is in the grateful hearts of their fellow men".

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