



This conference will examine the contribution of Australia's Army, Navy and Air Force to Allied operations and campaigns in the Mediterranean Theatre over 1940-1945. From Libya, Greece, Crete, Syria-Lebanon, Egypt, and Malta, in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, southern France and the Balkans, Australians in units or as individuals were active in the theatre.

## Conference Chair

### Professor Peter Edwards, AM – MHHV Vice-Patron

Dr Edwards has published extensively on the history of Australian foreign and defence policies. As the Official Historian of *Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1975*, he was the author of the volumes dealing with politics, strategy and diplomacy, *Crises and Commitments* (1992) and *A Nation at War* (1997), and general editor of the nine-volume Official History.

He is also the author of *Australia and the Vietnam War* (2014); *Robert Marsden Hope and Australian Public Policy* (2011); *Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins* (2006); *Permanent Friends? Historical Reflections on the Australian-American Alliance* (2005); and *Prime Ministers and Diplomats* (1983); the co-author of *A School with a View* (2010); the editor of *Defence Policy-Making* (2008) and *Australia through American Eyes 1935-45* (1979); and the co-editor of *Facing North Vol 2* (2003) and the initial volumes of Documents on Australian Foreign Policy.

A Rhodes Scholar, Dr Edwards has held a Harkness Fellowship, based at Duke University in the United States, a Harold White Fellowship at the National Library; a Research Fellowship and a Visiting Fellowship at the Australian National University; a Visiting Scholarship at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library; a Visiting Professorship at the University of New South Wales, Canberra; and a part-time professorship at Flinders University.

Dr Edwards has worked extensively with a number of Commonwealth Government agencies, including the Australian War Memorial, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Defence, the National Library, the National Archives, and the Office of National Assessments. He is a long-standing member of the editorial advisory board of the Historical Documents Project in DFAT, and the Army Military History Advisory Committee.

Dr Edwards's publications have been awarded the Queensland Premier's Prize for History, the WA Premier's Book Award for Non-Fiction, the Colin Roderick Award and H.T. Priestley Medal, the George Watson Prize and a short-listing for the National Biography Award. He is a Member of the Order of Australia, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, and a former Trustee of the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne.

## Conference Convenor

### Dr Andrew Kilsby

Dr Kilsby has experience in military and diplomatic service both in Australia and overseas (Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand), public relations, marketing & corporate communications, in history and heritage, and

property management. He is an independent historian (Connect-History) and published author. His current history project which includes the story of Master Builder and Gallipoli veteran Jock Simmie, whose building company constructed the Australian War Memorial, the wartime US Embassy and the forecourt of the Shrine among other military related works.

Dr Kilsby has convened MHHV one-day conferences *A Hot Cold War: Korea 1951-1953*; *The Great Debate: Conscription and National Service in Australia 1912-1972*; *Choppers: Helicopters and the Vietnam War*; and *In the Shadow of War-Australia 1942* MHHV's 1<sup>st</sup> biennial two-day conference. Dr Kilsby also co-convened MHHV's *By the Seat of their Pants: Australian Airmen and their Aircraft 1915-1918* and *In the Bag: POWs 1915-1945* as well as the NVVM's *Phantoms: Australia's Secret War in Vietnam*.

His military history publications include *The Reservists: the Defence Reserves through the Eyes of its Association 1970-2020*, with a foreword by the Governor General of Australia, General David Hurley AC DSC FTSE, for publication 2022; *The Case of Eichengruen-Edwards and Continental Tyres 1904-1919* (Commendation, Victorian Community History Awards 2020); a cont. chapter 'The Rifle Clubs' in Stockings, C & O'Connor, J (ed), *Before the Anzac Dawn; The Riflemen – A History of the NRAA 1888-1988*; *On the Field and in the Field: a History of Army Rugby Union*; and *The Forgotten Cruiser: HMAS Melbourne 1913-1928* with G. Swinden.

Dr Kilsby holds a BA (Mil) from UNSW at RMC Duntroon, a LitB from UNE and a PhD from UNSW@ADFA. He was a founder of MHHV in 2010.

## Contact:

Please address all conference inquiries to [hardfought@mhhv.org.au](mailto:hardfought@mhhv.org.au)

## Speaker Bio and Abstracts

### Ms Nicole Townsend

*Affiliation:* The University of New South Wales, Canberra

*Biography:* Nicole Townsend is a PhD candidate at the UNSW Canberra. Her thesis focuses on Australian involvement in the Mediterranean theatre. Nicole currently works as a researcher on the Official History of Australian Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. She has published and presented on the Second World War more broadly across Australia and internationally. Her first book, *Australian Perspectives on Global Air Power*, is set to be published by Routledge, and a chapter on Australian involvement in the Mediterranean is forthcoming with the University of Kentucky Press.

*Paper:* Stream (1) Strategy, politics, and diplomacy

### **Fuelling the nation: Australia's economic imperative in the Mediterranean theatre**

This paper examines the economic significance of the Mediterranean and the Middle East to Australia during the Second World War. It seeks to explore how the defence of the Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern oil reserves was crucial to Australia's domestic economy and its ability to wage war, as well as the broader imperial war effort. Using archival material from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, this paper shows that Australia was almost completely reliant on imported fuel to meet its needs and argues that the Mediterranean campaigns were significant in securing access to these vital supplies when Japanese expansion severed its traditional sources of supply in the Dutch East Indies. Focusing on both crude and refined forms of petroleum, it examines Australia's reliance on imported fuel. It contends that the Mediterranean played an important role in sustaining Australia and the broader Allied war effort throughout the critical period in the first half of the war, especially after the Japanese sweep through Southeast Asia, which stripped Australia of its traditional fuel supply.

## Mr Greg Pierce

*Affiliation:* Independent researcher and writer with support from the Sea Power Centre - Australia

*Biography:* Greg Pierce is an independent researcher and writer who has embarked upon a unit history of the Destroyer H.M.A.S. Stuart 1939-1941. Inspired by his grandfather's service aboard the ship during this period, Greg's insights are informed by primary source documents, family oral history, his own military service, and his travel to locations significant to *Stuart's* story in Malta, Southern Greece and Crete. Greg has been supported in his research by the Sea Power Centre – Australia. His most recent article

was published in *Wartime* Issue 95, 'Tired broken but still dangerous: HMAS Stuart sought out battle with the submarine *Gondar*'.

*Paper:* Stream (4) First Shots II: Air, Sea and Land Campaigns 1941

### **HMAS *Stuart*: The ebb and flow of capability 1939-1941**

H.M.A.S. Stuart made significant contributions in the Mediterranean theatre during 1939 – 1941 enabled and inhibited by her capability. Accounts of *Stuart* and the 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' written in the immediate post war period - though contemporaneous to events - were published over 25 years before pertinent classified documents were released under the Official Secrets Act. In the intervening years naval folklore evolved based upon these early writings and oral histories. This folklore does not place *Stuart's* achievements and setbacks within the context of her capability as a military unit. In this paper I will examine the impact of *Stuart's* capability upon a selection of key events using the Fundamental Inputs to Capability model which considers Command and Management, Personnel, Collective Training, Organisation, Major Systems, Supplies, Facilities and Through Life-Support. The Officer's and men of *Stuart* sank enemy submarines and surface ships, salvaged damaged merchant vessels, evacuated troops from beaches, provided escort to numerous convoys and ran desperately needed supplies into Tobruk harbour in the face of intense enemy air attacks. By better understanding the capability enablers and limitations in place during these actions we gain a greater appreciation for what ordinary men achieved in extraordinary circumstances.

## Dr David Sutton

*Affiliation:* Australian War Memorial

*Biography:* Dr David Sutton is a Senior Historian at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, where he specialises in Australia in the Second World War and Australian peacekeeping operations, 1947 to present. His book *Syria and Lebanon 1941: The Allied fight against the Vichy French*, was published in February 2022.

*Paper:* Stream (7) Syria and Lebanon 1941

### **Operation Exporter: The Allied campaign against the Vichy French**

In June and July 1941, Allied forces streamed into Vichy French held territory in Syria and Lebanon. Operation Exporter, as it was known, was expected to be a quick and easy victory against a demoralised enemy. In reality campaign took far longer than expected and required the devotion of far more resources than originally allocated. It was an Allied victory, but it was not the easy victory Allied commanders had anticipated.

The 1941 Allied campaign in Syria and Lebanon occupies an unusual place in popular understanding of the Second World War. Over the years, it has been assessed as a poorly commanded and unnecessary campaign. In Australia, it has often been described using clichés such as 'the forgotten campaign', and if remembered at all, as an almost exclusively Australian affair. More than 80 years since the campaign came to a conclusion, it is time to assess how true these assumptions and assessments really are.

## Adam Lunney

*Affiliation:* Independent researcher and historian

*Biography:* Adam Lunney is an independent historian and researcher and holds a Master of Arts (Military History) from UNSW at the Australian Defence Force Academy. *Ready to Strike: The Spitfires and Australians of 453 (RAAF) Squadron over Normandy* (2018) was his first book and this was followed by *We Together: 451 and 453 Squadrons at War* (2020). Adam is currently writing and researching several future projects relating to RAAF operations in the Second World War.

*Paper:* Stream (10) Final Shots – In the Air and at Sea 1943-1945

### Just the right amount of war? The operations of 451 (RAAF) Squadron from Corsica, 1944

451 (RAAF) Squadron was a 'for war only' formation. After operating in the North African Desert flying Hurricanes in late 1941, they were redeployed to Cyprus, Lebanon and Syria, far from the front line for more than a year. It wasn't until January 1943 that they returned to North Africa, but even then, they were denied frontline operations. In October 1943 they re-equipped with Spitfires, but this did not settle the restlessness within the squadron – if they couldn't fight, shouldn't they just be sent home to Australia and fight there? In March 1944 the squadron finally moved to the front and was based on Corsica. From there they flew fighter sweeps, bomber escorts and armed reconnaissance sorties to Italy, and later the south of France during Operation Dragoon in August 1944. The front line was where they wanted to be, and they'd have to deal with everything that it entailed: excitement, fear, injury, capture and even death.

## Stephen Hutcheon

*Affiliation:* Australian Broadcasting Corporation

*Biography:* Stephen Hutcheon has been a journalist for almost 40 years. He spent most of his career at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where he was a reporter, foreign correspondent and editor. In 2017, he joined the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as supervising producer of the Digital Story Innovation team. He has written widely across many topics including politics, technology, science and history. He has also been a casual lecturer in online journalism at two universities, a fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Centre on Press, Politics and Public Policy and the winner of several journalism awards for work both at the Herald and the ABC.

*Paper:* Stream (9) Prisoners of War, Escape & Evasion, and Resistance

### The digger from Shanghai

*Abstract:* This paper is based on a story and single-episode podcast produced for the ABC in 2020 that recounts the war experiences of Private J.R. Greaves of the AIF's 2/2nd Battalion. Greaves, who is Stephen's late uncle, saw action in North Africa and Greece in 1940-41. He was subsequently captured by the Germans in Greece, later escaping via Turkey back to Egypt. The story is based on diaries and papers left by Greaves and augmented by documents discovered in Australian and New Zealand archives as well as by personal papers provided by the relatives of two New Zealanders who were part of Greaves' escape party. This story is not only an account of a doomed campaign and a remarkable escape, but also a timely reminder of the many unsung heroes among the people of Greece who risked their lives to assist Allied escapers and evaders to return to their lines.

## Brent Taylor

*Affiliation:* Military History & Heritage Victoria Inc.

*Biography:* Brent has had over twenty-five years professional experience evaluating leadership. Included in that experience was four years as research director for KPMG during which time he applied many analyses similar to those applied to Blamey's record. Brent has also had published two books about leadership in business and has

completed *Leadership in Crisis: Blamey at War*, to be published in 2022. Brent holds a BEng (Hons) and BA (Psych.Hons).

*Paper:* Stream (11) Courage and Leadership

### **Leadership in Crisis: Blamey at War**

*Abstract:* At the start of WWII, Blamey was ready for war having learnt great leadership as chief of staff to General Monash in the First World War. He was aware of the problems of being a junior partner in coalition warfare under the British. He had experienced the British habit of interfering with unity of command and that he needed to be vigilant to prevent his Diggers becoming cannon fodder. He wasn't ready for the side deal between the two Prime Ministers Menzies and Churchill to send an Australian division to fight in Greece. It required all his persuasive powers to effect evacuation to save the three division Allied force from the 27 division German onslaught. Always concerned with the welfare of his men, he battled constantly with British command to protect the Diggers. He fought to relieve the 9th AIF Division from Tobruk before they failed due to battle fatigue and to improve the strategy for the 7th AIF Division in Syria and Lebanon. This paper explores the pressures Blamey was put under by British command and the means by which he generally succeeded, achieving Allied war objectives and minimising losses.

### **Janet Roberts-Billett**

*Affiliation:* Independent Historian

*Biography.* Jan Roberts-Billett MA is an historian specialising in oral history in the area of Commemorations. Her first book, *Memories of War: Members of the Naval and Military Club recall World War II - Fifty Interviews*, was published in 2004. She also assisted the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne in researching the background for the Changi Flag, which was unveiled 11 February 2005. Based on her MA thesis, *The Yachtsmen Scheme: Australian Volunteers in the Royal Navy 1940-45*, was completed in 2007. Janet is a committee member of MHHV Inc. and is also local historian for the Naval Historical Society of Australia (Victorian Branch).

*Paper:* Stream (11) Courage and Leadership

### **The Dominion Yachtsmen Scheme: 'Hot Shot' Australians in Combined Operations in the Mediterranean 1942-45**

*Abstract:* The Yachtsmen Scheme was promoted by the Admiralty through the Yacht Clubs in the Dominions and some five hundred Australians were selected and drafted to the United Kingdom from 1940-42, to be trained as officers. Combined Operations was a new special area of warfare, commanded by Lord Louis Mountbatten, Captain RN, who personally recruited many of these young 'hot shot Australians'. The majority were posted, many of them in command, to the 'little ships', specifically designed for amphibious operations – the very fast motor gun boats (MGBs), motor torpedo boats (MTBs), motor launches designed for carrying infantry or tanks (MLIs or MLTs) and specific landing craft (LCIs or LCTs). These ships provided a variety of tasks from supporting the amphibious landings to covert operations, an area in which the RN became very successful. The 'Yachties' served in the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPPs), assisted the Resistance movements in France, the partisans in the Adriatic and Aegean and the Long-Range Desert Group in North Africa. These Australians served with distinction and the 'Yachties' believed that they were the most highly decorated group of World War II.

### **Chief Petty Officer Peter Cannon, CSM**

*Affiliation:* Royal Australian Navy

*Biography.* Peter Cannon has served as an Electronics Technician in the Royal Australian Navy since 1993, having seen operational service in both the Persian Gulf and the Pacific. Specialising in the late inter-war and early Second World War periods, his articles covering RAN force structure, battle analysis and technical appreciations have been published in both Australia and the United Kingdom. A former Naval History instructor at the Royal Australian

Naval College, Peter is currently serving in Sydney's Naval Training Systems Centre – Randwick. He is researching and writing a book on the naval and air operations of the Battle of Crete.

*Paper:* Stream (6) Battle for Crete

### **At all Costs: The Royal and Royal Australian Navies in the Defence of Crete, 1941**

*Abstract:* The Battle of Crete represents the Mediterranean theatre's hardest fought naval action. Crete was the final stand of the British Commonwealth's ill-fated Greek campaign, the culmination of a high-stakes strategy of amphibious power projection against the continental might of Germany. Admiral Andrew Cunningham's Mediterranean fleet lifted the Army into Greece and subsequently evacuated it before defending the island of Crete against both seaborne and overwhelming aerial assault before finally affecting another evacuation.

Crete saw the Navy put its fighting efficiency, intuitional ethos, reputation and ultimately morale on the line to support the Army at all costs despite the risk of crippling losses; an outcome potentially fatal to the Allied position in the theatre. Particularly for Australia, the naval operations of 1940-41 represented the apogee of three decades of policy direction towards the seamless integration of RAN assets and personnel into the order of battle of our major security partner.

This paper will serve as a case study of the Mediterranean campaign's most dangerous hour. The prosecution of the British Commonwealth effort to take the war to the Axis in the Mediterranean was first and foremost a maritime strategy entirely dependent upon seaborne logistics protected by an acutely stretched Royal Navy. In May 1941, Cunningham's fleet risked it all to uphold its finest traditions in not letting the British, Australian and New Zealand defenders of Crete down.

### **Brett Courtenay**

*Affiliation:* 2nd Division Randwick and St. Vincent's Hospital, Sydney.

*Biography:* Associate Professor Brett Courtenay is an orthopaedic surgeon, appointed to St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. He was initially a resident of Sydney Hospital, and then he entered to orthopaedic training program, and then returned to St Vincent's on the clinical staff – initially as a surgical assistant and then as a VMO, and he is still present there today. He did trauma call for a period of 35 years and is now working in the private hospital.

He was commissioned into the Australian Medical Corps in 2001, and deployed to Solomon Islands, Timor, Banda Aceh and Afghanistan during his Active Reserve career, until his retirement in 2018. He worked as a senior for the last 9 years in career advising, the Senior Medical Officer at the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and eventually the Senior Health Advisor at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Randwick. He retired with the rank of Colonel. He is now appointed as the Colonel Commandant for the Eastern and ACT regions.

*Paper:* Stream (Leadership – Medical)

### **Medical Support in the Mediterranean Theatre 1940-1945**

*Abstract:* When Australia joined with Britain's declaration of War against Germany in 1939, its medical capability was less than ideal. This had been flagged by successive Surgeon Generals and they had made whatever effort they could, sometimes behind the back door, to try and increase Australia's potential medical capability. Once war was declared, there was an urgency for this to be completed and the real problem was a shortage of equipment, as much of that needed to come from overseas. In addition, recruiting suitable people was a challenge. Many veterans from WWI immediately volunteered, but they were often not medical suitable. Australia improved its recruitment and they moved overseas.

During the Mediterranean theatre operations medical services were very diverse, and the logistics of the medical support was challenging, but effective. Essentially medical support comprised a number of stages. Today we see it as four stages. One is the initial treatment and emergency management, as close to the scene as possible. The second is emergency surgical management, again as close as can be reasonable brought forward. Once stabilised,

the injured are then moved back to a more definitive hospital setup. In the Mediterranean there were a number of these, with the majority in the UK. The ultimate strategic transfer was then either back to the active service or repatriated to Australia. The logistics of these stages was considerable and permitted many wonderful feats and development of some great personalities among medics, nurses and doctors.

It is said the only winners of war is ammunitions technology and medical technology, and WWII was no exception. This paper will also discuss some of the great advances in WWII such as refinement of blood transfusions, refinement of emergency surgery, the use of antibiotics, and again, more definitive care for non-battle injuries such as infectious diseases (such as gastro) as well as and particularly dental care.

## **Peter Monteath**

*Affiliation:* Flinders University

*Biography:* Peter Monteath was born in Brisbane and educated in Queensland and in Germany. He has taught previously at The University of Queensland, Griffith University, Deakin University, The University of Western Australia and The University of Adelaide. He has also been Adjunct Professor at The University of St. Louis Missouri and the Technical University of Berlin, where he was an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow. At Flinders he teaches modern European history. His research interests span modern European and Australian history.

*Paper:* Stream (9) Prisoners of War, Escape & Evasion, and Resistance

### **Australians and the SOE in Crete**

*Abstract:* While most histories of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) tend to emphasise the importance of sabotage and subversion in meeting Churchill's injunction to 'set Europe ablaze', this paper argues for a wider understanding of the functions of SOE by focusing on its operations in Crete. With a particular emphasis on the role and influence of Tasmanian-born Tom Dunbabin, the presentation will highlight the broad range of activities undertaken by Dunbabin and SOE during the years of the German occupation of Crete. While the battle for Crete might have formally ended by the middle of 1941, in other forms it continued – with Australian participation – until May 1945.

## **Ian R Crellin**

*Affiliation:* Independent Historian

*Biography:* Ian Crellin is a retired independent scholar living in Canberra. He served in the Australian Army retiring with the rank of Major. On his retirement, he completed a BA (Hons) degree at ANU. He earlier published in the professional fields of economic development and rural policy and is a frequent contributor to Australian railway history publications. He has wide history interests, including military history.

*Paper:* Stream (1) Strategy, Politics and Diplomacy

### **The influence of the northern threat on the conduct of the North African campaign: Australian and New Zealand Divisions' roles in development of the Syrian bastion defence line in early 1942 and in the subsequent defence of Egypt**

*Abstract:* The conduct of the North African Campaign during 1941-1942 was significantly influenced by the northern threat to the Suez Canal and the Mesopotamian oil fields. Most writers on the Mediterranean war pay little attention to Middle East Command's struggle to balance Axis threats from the west and the north, yet it is critical to understanding Western Desert operations and the tensions with Churchill. After the Syrian armistice, planners focused on the Northern Front where possible attacks through Turkey to the Levant and through the Caucasus to the oilfields. New Army Commands were created - 9<sup>th</sup> Army in the Levant and 10<sup>th</sup> Army in Mesopotamia, plus rail construction northwards. General Auchinleck developed defence plans involving a delay

zone from the Turkish border south to the Syrian Bastion, a line of five hardened fortresses, across the potential invasion routes, with a final defence line in Palestine. In early 1942, 9 Aust Div developed the western fortress at Tripoli and NZ Div developed the Bekaa Valley fortress. With the delayed German 1942 offensive in southern Russia, these Divisions became available for the Western Desert. Both Divisions, plus 18 Indian Bde redeployed from Iraq, were critical in stopping Rommel at Alamein. The northern threat receded following Russian successes in 1942-1943.

## Peter Ewer

*Affiliation:* Independent scholar

*Biography:* Dr Peter Ewer is an Australian historian and author. His doctoral thesis on Australian aviation and defence policy in the 1930s won a research prize at RMIT University in 2005, and his Honours thesis at Macquarie University also won a research prize in 1983. His books include *Forgotten Anzacs: the campaign in Greece, 1941*, first published in 2008 and republished in a revised edition in 2016. He is published in the *Journal of Military History*, the *Journal of Transport History* and *Australian Historical Studies*.

*Paper:* Stream (5) Battle for Greece

### The Commitment to Greece: Military Folly as Political Masterstroke

*Abstract:* This paper looks at the geo-political background to the British commitment of a land army to Greece in March 1941, the greater part of it made up of Australian and New Zealand troops. The despatch of those troops to mainland Europe is considered in the context of diplomatic negotiations between Britain and the United States over how to finance the British war effort. To strengthen his position in those negotiations, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill needed to show the American public that Britain would take the fight to the fascist dictators, in which cause helping the Greeks continue their defence against the Italian invasion launched in October 1940 was a public relations necessity. Despite knowing it was doomed to failure, Churchill committed an army to Greece in early 1941, having convinced the Australian Government that it had a reasonable chance of success. The article considers the difficulties of effective political-military decision making by a small power like Australia, when it trusts to larger allies for full access to the requisite intelligence to make informed military judgements. The costs of that imbalance were paid for by the Australian and New Zealand troops pushed out of Greece, losing all their heavy equipment in the process, leaving them ill-prepared to defend Crete against airborne invasion.

## Karl James

*Affiliation:* Australian War Memorial

*Biography:* Dr Karl James is Head of the Military History Section at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. A graduate from the University of Wollongong, his research focuses on Australia's involvement in the Second World War. He has worked on several major exhibitions at the Memorial, including as lead curator of *From the shadows: Australia's Special Forces* (2017-18), and the 70th anniversary exhibition, *Rats of Tobruk, 1941* (2011). He is co-editor of *Australia in the Second World War: on campaign and the home front* (forthcoming 2022). His other publications include *Double diamonds: Australian commandos in the Pacific War, 1941-45* (2016); *The hard slog: Australians in the Bougainville campaign, 1944-45* (2012); and, as editor, *Kokoda: beyond the legend* (2016). He has led battlefield tours for the descendants of Second World War veterans to Java and Milne Bay. In 2021 he was appointed co-chair of the Armed Services working group for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

*Paper:* Stream (4) First Shots II: Air, Sea and Land Campaigns 1941

### Rethinking the great siege: Tobruk, 1941

*Abstract:* In Libya during 1941, Australian with British, Dominion and Allied forces defended the fortress of Tobruk. They defied Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel and withstood German and Italian tank attacks, artillery barrages, and daily bombings for eight months. For much of the siege, Tobruk's garrison was commanded by Major General Leslie Morshead and included 14,000 Australians. They achieved lasting fame as the "Rats of Tobruk".

The story of Tobruk has been told and re-told many times. Yet for all the retelling and repeated narratives of daring soldier exploits, a critical reassessment of the siege of Tobruk is long overdue. In early 1941, for example, Australian troops were essentially part of a British army of occupation in Libya. How did the Australian soldiers behave towards the enemy? Italian prisoners of war, colonists and the local Arab population?

Similarly, Morshead commanded a multi-nation garrison. How did he exercise command and leadership over a force that included British, Indian and Polish units? How were language, cultural and religious differences managed? Tobruk was maintained by maritime supply lines that were regularly subjected to enemy disruption. How did this affect the garrison's operations and the organisation of logistics? At a tactical level, how did Australian infantry and British artillery and armoured units coordinate and conduct joint combined arms operations? As the siege dragged on, soldiers became fatigued and exhausted, combat and psychological casualties mounted. How did officers and non-commissioned officers manage their men's morale and welfare?

This paper will discuss some of these issues, outlining where a new study of Tobruk can offer new perspectives on the great siege.