
THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FORGETTING

**The Rats of Tobruk and the legacy of the Second
World War**

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EARLIER COMMEMORATION

Australia a prolific builder of war memorials after WWI

4,000+ in the National Register of War Memorials

Variety of forms: often traditional cenotaphs, obelisks, or statues, but also pillars or columns, cairns, flagpoles, parks, and gardens

Acted as “surrogate graves” for Australians buried or missing abroad

HOW TO COMMEMORATE THE WAR?

1943: Gavin Long appointed as official historian to write the history of Australian involvement in the war

Primary focus not on commemoration

Task of post-war reconstruction prioritised—an “inescapable consequence”

Change in public opinion—not the same desire for memorialisation, favoured utilitarian memorials

VETERANS' VIEWS

01

Underlying
fear of being
forgotten
with the
passing of
time and the
fading of
memory

02

Memorials a
preferred
site of
memory

03

A salve to
the “anxiety
of erasure”

04

Offered the
appearance
of
permanency

05

A permanent
landmark
that would
remain after
the veterans
themselves
were lost

RATS OF TOBRUK ASSOCIATION

- First branch opened in Sydney in late 1944
- Victorian branch established the following year
- Followed by proliferation of branches and sub-branches across the country
- Large membership base: around 8,000 by 1947
- Sought a space for veterans to gather and reminisce, and to promote the commemoration of the siege
- Saw the Rats as inheritors/torchbearers of Anzac
- Sought to link Tobruk with Gallipoli
- Worked to carve a unique identity separate from the broader veteran cohort



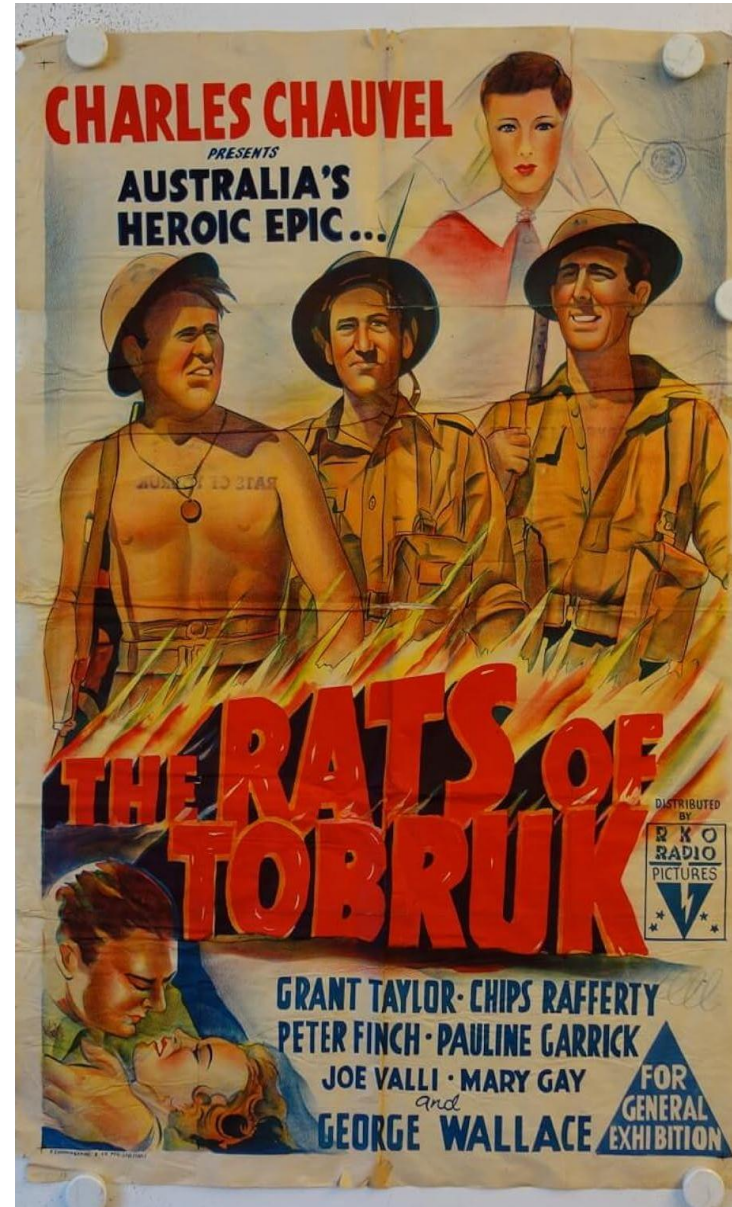
THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

- 10 April to 7 December 1941
- 242 days
- Most Australian troops evacuated before the end of the siege
- 2/13 Battalion remained until the siege was lifted
- Casualties for 9th Division and attached troops: 832 killed, 2,177 wounded, 941 taken prisoner
- Defenders adopted the moniker “Rats of Tobruk”



“Tobruk has become a tradition. In history it will surely stand as starkly and poignantly as a cenotaph of stone”

The Goondiwindi Argus,
14 April 1950



EARLY REPRESENTATION

- Media reporting in 1941 heralded Tobruk as the successor to Anzac and Gallipoli
- *The Rats of Tobruk* film released in 1944 (right)
- Later released in the US in 1951 (left)

ANXIETY OF ERASURE

Paul Gough's "anxiety of erasure": the fear among veterans and their families that their contributions in war will be forgotten with the passing of time and the fading of memory

Physical memorials offered the "appearance of permanency"

Marked events as "so significant to be 'beyond time'"

THE TOBRUK MEMORIAL

- Built during the siege
- Unveiled by LTGEN Leslie Morshead, the garrison commander, in October 1941
- Survived the war, but could only be a temporary memorial
- Not designed to be permanent (though the Rats expected it to stand long after the war)
- By 1945, it showed “serious signs of deterioration and collapse” and was “marred by surface cracking”



WAR CABINET

- Imperial War Graves Commission sought to replace it
- Approached the Australian government, led by PM Ben Chifley, to raise its concerns
- War Cabinet didn't question the importance of Tobruk—"one of the first" to be commemorated
- Still, the memorial needed fixing

**"An outstanding
Australian achievement"**

— Department of the Interior

ROTA BACKLASH

- War Cabinet approved replacement of the memorial
- Would retain the “essential characteristics” of the original
- Also bring it in line with the IWGC’s design for the broader Tobruk war cemetery
- ROTA’s view: “tantamount to an act of sacrilege”
- Viewed the memorial as “hallowed ground” and “sacred ground”
- Echoed anxieties from WWI surrounding the disappearance of battlefields and memorials
- Outcome: replacement went ahead

NEXT STEPS

- ROTA changed tack—if it must be replaced, ROTA wanted to be involved
- Sought to extend the official unveiling party's visit to include Gallipoli
- Request denied by Federal Cabinet
- Decision to have Aus high commissioner in London unveil it added insult to injury
- Morshead considered the “logical choice”
- Rats took it as a personal affront
- Seen as “a job for the Rats”, not a politician without military service in the Middle East or Tobruk

THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

- ROTA went public, along with the RSSAILA
- Sought to mobilise and shape public opinion in their favour
- VP of ROTA Victoria derided the decision
- AHC Jack Beasley's selection was a violation of the Rats' "sacred duty" to unveil the memorial
- Outcome: the delegation was reduced in size, but would go to Gallipoli

**“A slight on the men
whose sacrifices the
memorial at Tobruk
commemorated”**

— Vice President ROTA Victoria

AFTERMATH

- Rhetoric employed highlights the centrality of the Anzac link to the Rats' conceptualisation of themselves
- Framed themselves as inheritors of Anzac—echoed by Vietnam and Afghanistan veterans
- Government's decision not to support Gallipoli pilgrimage framed as disregard for Anzac and Gallipoli
- But, also seen as a sign of things to come

“If the Australian Government forgets Gallipoli in 24 years, how long will it be before Tobruk is forgotten and overlooked?”

— General Secretary RSSAILA,
in *Daily Telegraph*, 39 September 1947



LEGAL PROTECTION

- Sought similar protection to that afforded to the word “Anzac”
- Wanted to protect “Tobruk” before it was subject to “frivolous and widespread” commercial use
- Government view: without evidence of commercialisation, it couldn’t act—“purely hypothetical”
- Secretary of the AG’s Department thought the likelihood of commercialisation would “progressively diminish” with time

CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The matter was discussed in Parliament

Then Attorney-General Doc Evatt gave “quite general and tentative” support

ROTA took it as a green light

Began issuing demands against institutions it believed were using Tobruk commercially

Included the RSSAILA, which used “Tobruk” in some of its clubhouses’ names

Ordered North Bondi Sub-Branch to cease using the name for its building, Tobruk House

AFTERMATH

- Government continued to refuse the request
- Eventually, ROTA accepted defeat
- Attempt to differentiate Tobruk from other WWII engagements
- Also, to link it with Gallipoli and Anzac once again
- Claimed ownership of Tobruk
- First instance of conflict as a result
- Example of “competing frames of memory”

TOBRUK SUNDAY

- Next target: a national day of commemoration
- Sought national recognition for Tobruk Sunday
- Marked on the first Sunday after Easter Sunday each year
- Government sought advice from the service departments

Tobruk Sunday Commemoration

In commemoration of Tobruk Sunday, which will be observed throughout Australia to-morrow, members of the A.C.T. branch of the Rats of Tobruk Association will lay a wreath at the War Memorial.

The ceremony has been arranged for 9 o'clock to-morrow morning. It is hoped all veterans of Tobruk will attend.

DEPARTMENT OPINIONS

- No opposition from Department of the Navy
- Departments of the Army and Air expressed reservations
- First, recognition would create a precedent for other such requests
- Second, it would “detract from the importance of Anzac Day and Remembrance Day”
- First explicit statement of perceived competition between Tobruk and Anzac
- Government took this view, and informed ROTA

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FORGETTING

- 1960s to 1980s saw the “memory boom”—but also, the perceived decline of Anzac in Australia
- Academics convinced war commemoration would “shrink and die” with the veterans of WWI and WWII
- Withering of Anzac didn’t eventuate as expected
- But fear remained for veterans, as their numbers increasingly dwindled, and the war became more distant
- Future generations seen as the key to posterity

NATIONAL MEMORIAL

- ROTA campaigned for a memorial on Anzac Parade from the 1960s to the 1980s
- Initially rebuffed—government recommended alternative siting in Canberra
- Main issue: proposed memorial was a replica of the one at Tobruk
- National Capital Development Commissioner doubted the replica would have relevance to future generations

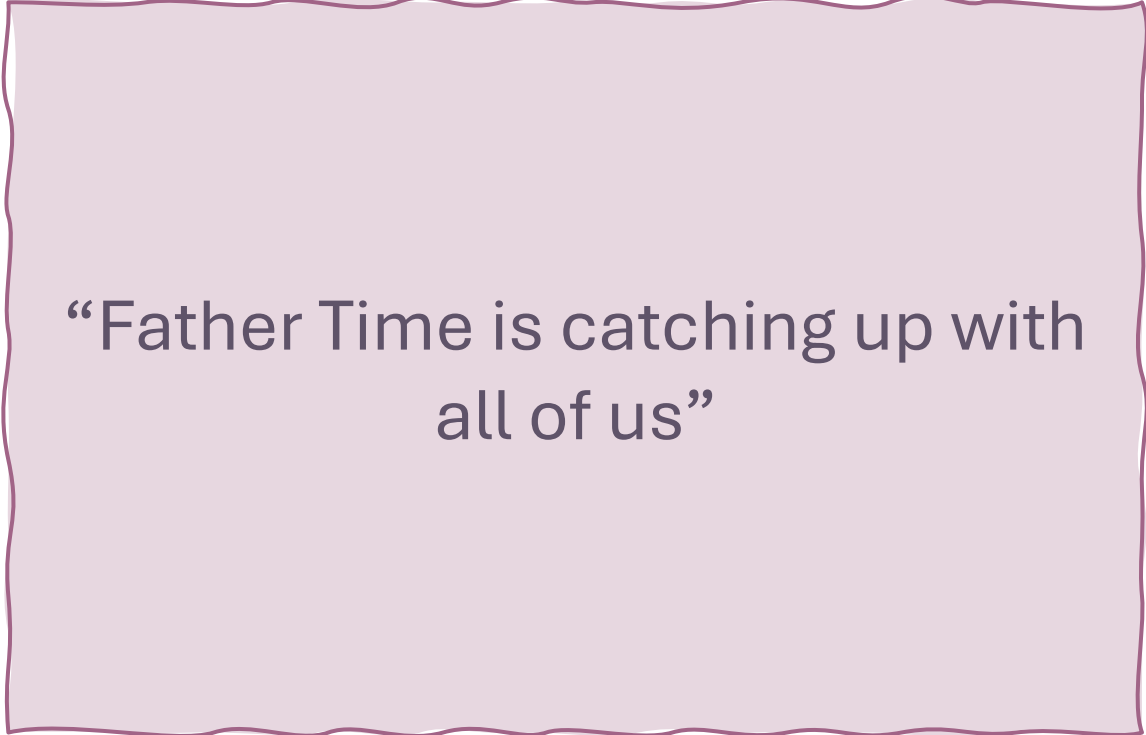
“One of the most significant events involving Australian troops ... [and] therefore worthy of a place in Anzac Parade”.

UNVEILING

- Nonetheless, the Rats' "impossible dream" came true
 - Memorial unveiled on 13 April 1983
 - A "singular honour" not enjoyed by other battles—not even Kokoda
 - RSL boycotted the unveiling
 - Took issue with continued ROTA efforts to establish identity separate to the broader veteran cohort
 - Still, ROTA's greatest success
-

AFTERMATH

- National memorial offered a degree of permanence
- Still, didn't solve the anxiety of erasure
- Increased educational program and links, especially in Queensland
- Part of the *Australia Remembers* program for the 50th anniversary of WWII
- By 2000s, the association was in its twilight years



“Father Time is catching up with all of us”

PRESENT DAY: WHAT DO AUSTRALIANS KNOW ABOUT WWII?

National survey: 1,500 respondents

~90% of respondents aware of WWII

~80% aware of Australian involvement

A majority wanted to learn about WW2, and wanted it included in school curricula

WWII the exception—respondents not particularly interested in learning more about other events in Australian military history

PACIFIC WAR DOMINATES

'I have heard of the following World War 2 events in the Pacific'

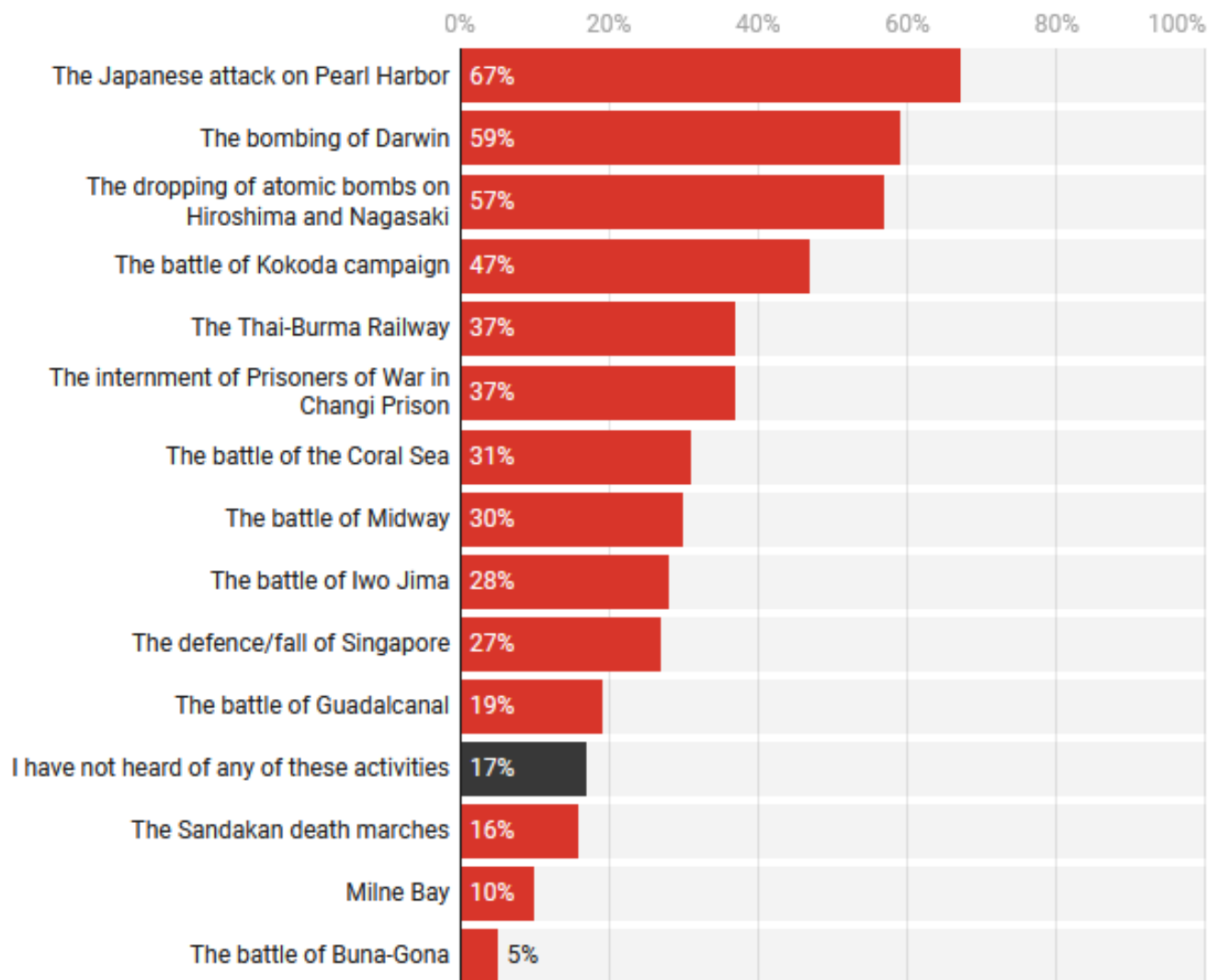


Chart: The Conversation • Source: [UNSW Canberra, N. Townsend, T. Moss, M. Booth, T. Richardson, M. Hutchison, D. Stahel, R. Crawley, and R. Dunley](#) • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST

**'I have heard of the following World War 2 military activities
in the Mediterranean and the Middle East'**

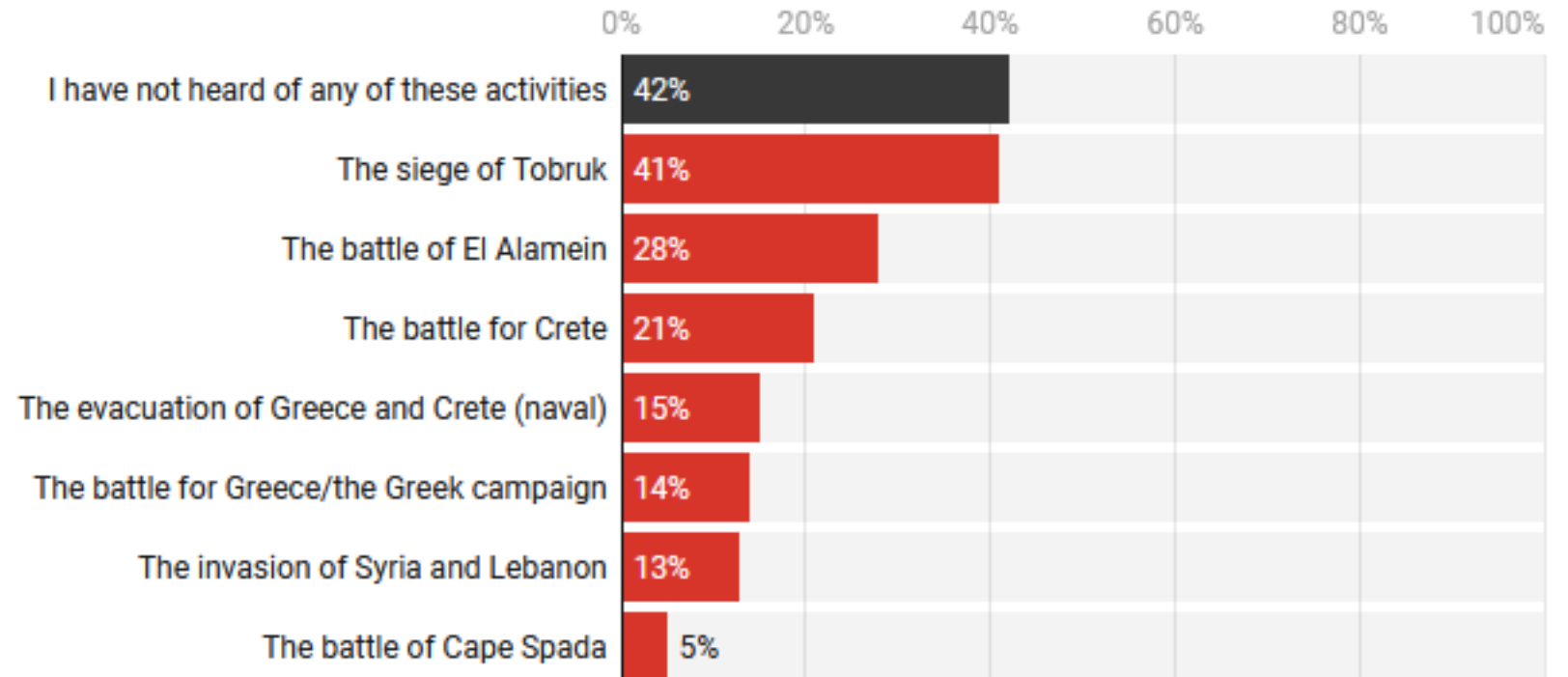


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Younger Australians are less likely to know about WWII

Showing the proportion of **younger** and **older** people who know about a WWII event.

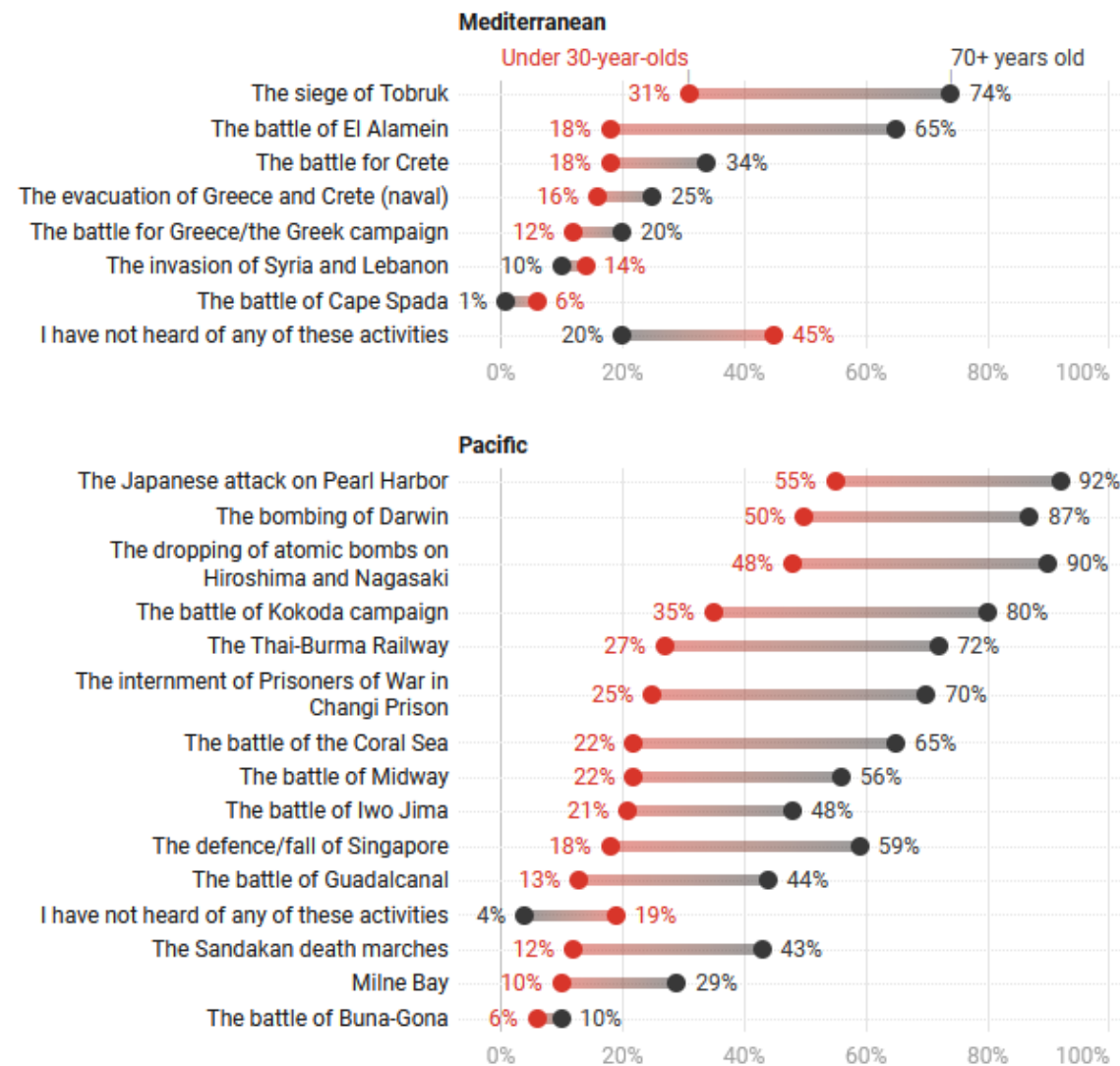


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WRAP UP

Only the campaign for a national memorial was successful

Tobruk the most well-known event in the Mediterranean and Middle East theatre

But awareness of the siege is weighted toward older generations

Raises questions about the success of ROTA's broader commemorative efforts