

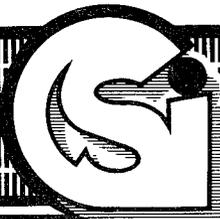
# **The 9th Australian Division Versus the Africa Corps:**

**An Infantry Division Against  
Tanks—Tobruk, Libya, 1941**

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by  
Colonel Ward A. Miller

August 1986



**COMBAT  
STUDIES  
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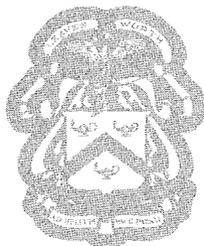
## FOREWORD

In April and May 1941, the previously successful blitzkrieg tactics of the German Army met defeat by the outnumbered Australian forces of the 9th Division at Tobruk. The Australian infantry achieved victory through a successful all-around defense against tank attacks in force. By employing all available assets in a combined arms effort, well-supported light infantry forces defeated a heavier armored force.

*The 9th Australian Division Versus the Africa Corps: An Infantry Division Against Tanks—Tobruk, Libya, 1941* provides the reader with a valuable historical context for evaluating how light infantry forces can confront armored attacks. This CSI special study also reveals how light infantry forces operated and were supported and sustained in a desert environment—a message that has continuing relevance for today's Army.



LOUIS D. F. FRASC   
Colonel, Infantry  
Director, Combat Studies Institute



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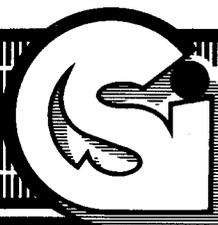
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Colonel Ward A. Miller

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U.S. Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027-6900



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# CONTENTS

Illustrations .....	v
I. Tobruk: The Context of the Battle .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Background .....	4
Combat Organization of Friendly Forces .....	12
Combat Organization of Enemy Forces .....	15
II. The Battle .....	19
The Easter Battle Chronology .....	19
Critical Events .....	33
III. Conclusions .....	35
Analysis of German and Australian Capabilities .....	35
Lessons Learned .....	44
Appendix	
A. Tobruk Fortress Order of Battle, 14 April 1941 .....	51
B. The North African Campaigns .....	55
C. German Offensive Tactics .....	57
D. British Antitank Operations .....	61
Notes .....	65
Bibliography .....	69

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# ILLUSTRATIONS

## Figures

1. Tobruk strongpoint ..... 10

## Maps

1. The eastern Mediterranean ..... 2
  2. The western desert ..... 5
  3. Rommel's first offensive ..... 7
  4. Fortress Tobruk ..... 9
  5. Tobruk defense lines ..... 11
  6. Rommel's line of advance—1941 ..... 19
  7. German attack, 13—14 April ..... 24
  8. Friendly unit dispositions, 14 April ..... 29
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# I. TOBRUK: THE CONTEXT OF THE BATTLE

## Introduction

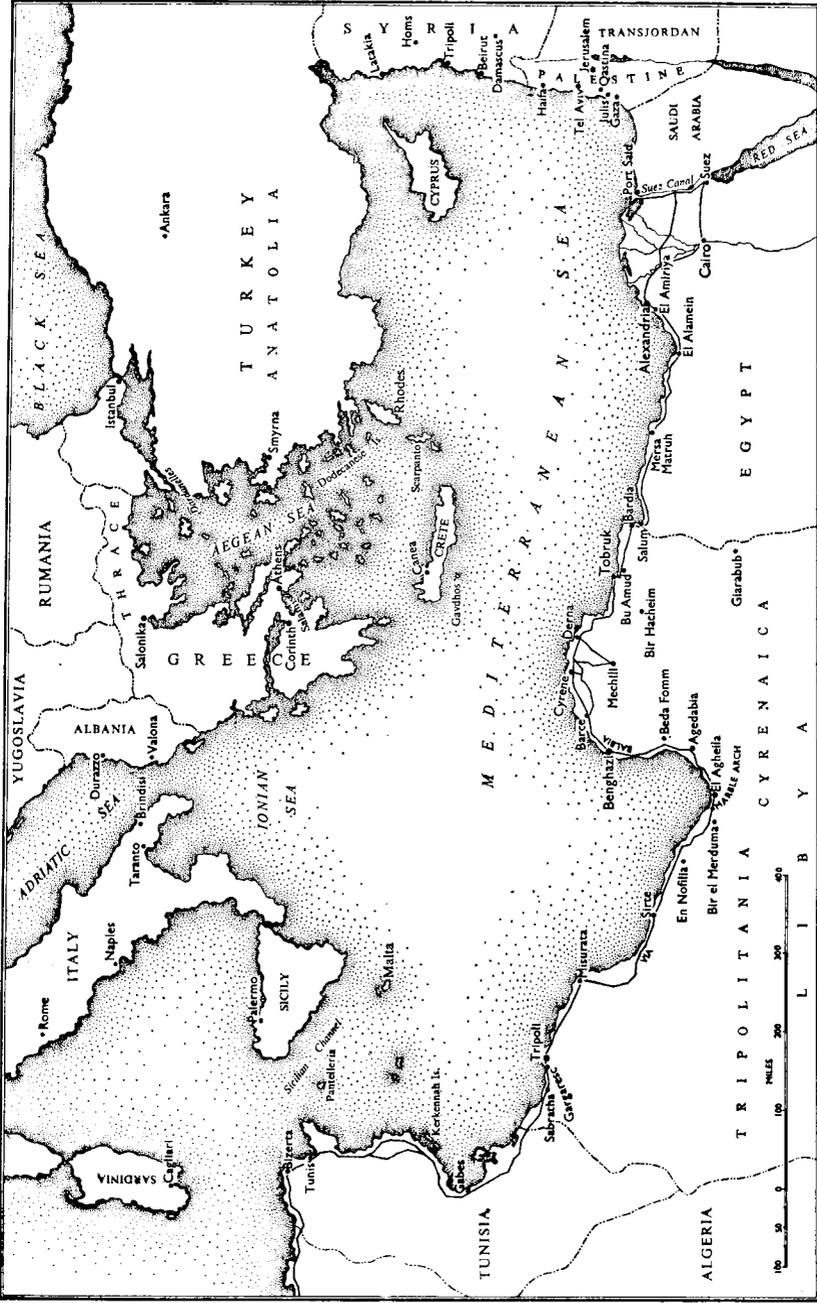
The North African theater during the early stages of World War II provided British and American forces with valuable battlefield experience and training in the tactical employment of units and weapon systems. The desert war was also a deadly proving ground for the development of new weapons and techniques and demonstrated the need, as well as the methods, for ensuring close coordination between ground, air, and naval forces. In addition, the infantryman in North Africa learned to fight against tanks in a desert environment.

During 10–14 April 1941 and from 30 April to 4 May 1941, the newly formed 9th Australian Division repelled two major German Africa Corps tank assaults against their defensive positions around the strategic fortress at Tobruk, Libya. The 9th Division, although relatively untried, rushed from Palestine to North Africa in order to help delay the German attack on Egypt (see map 1).

During both engagements, the Australians fought from a static defense in depth. Australian infantrymen occupying the first line of defense allowed the German tanks to pass through their initial perimeter into extensive minefields. British and Australian artillery and antitank gunners, deployed well to the rear of the infantry and supported by British tanks, then engaged the German tanks with devastating direct fire. As the German infantrymen, artillerymen, and machine gunners following the tanks passed through the perimeter, the Australian infantry, lying in wait on the flanks, moved in behind them with rifle fire and bayonets. At the same time, British fighter planes overhead, supported by anti-aircraft artillery, attempted to fight off the attacking German dive-bombers and fighter aircraft.

At the conclusion of the Easter Battle, known German and Italian losses were 150 killed in action (KIA), 250 prisoners of war (POWs), 29 tanks destroyed out of 112 available,<sup>1</sup> and 17 aircraft destroyed.<sup>2</sup> The Tobruk garrison losses were twenty-six KIA, twenty-four wounded in action (WIA), four tanks destroyed, one aircraft destroyed, and one artillery gun disabled.<sup>3</sup>

In the second action, the Battle of the Salient, known German and Italian losses were 167 KIA, 574 WIA, and 213 missing in action (MIA). Out of eighty-one tanks available,



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 5.)  
Map 1. The eastern Mediterranean

twelve tanks were destroyed and thirty-two were damaged but recovered. The garrison had 59 KIA, 355 WIA, and 383 MIA.<sup>4</sup>

In both battles, the German's combined arms attack featured tanks, infantry, engineers, artillery, and close air support. Their armaments were superior to Australian weapons in all categories except artillery, where the Australians possessed a marked advantage. Because of their edge in arms, the Germans were stunned by their defeat at the hands of the Australians. The Germans had rarely failed before, never encountered such defensive tactics, nor faced such a determined opponent. The accuracy and efficiency of the British artillery and antitank gunners and the discipline of the Australian infantry—who held their ground and fire until the German infantry and gunners advanced into a killing zone—had defeated the German blitzkrieg tactics.

A captured veteran of the early European campaigns stated: "I cannot understand you Australians. In Poland, France, and Belgium, once the tanks got through the soldiers took it for granted that they were beaten. But you are like demons. The tanks break through and your infantry still keep fighting."<sup>5</sup>

A German battalion commander wrote:

The Australians, who are the men our troops have had opposite them so far, are extraordinarily tough fighters. The German is more active in the attack but the enemy stakes his life in the defense and fights to the last with extreme cunning. Our men, usually easy going and unsuspecting, fall easily into his traps especially as a result of their experiences in the closing stages of the Western [European] Campaign.

The Australian is unquestionably superior to the German soldier:

1. in the use of individual weapons, especially as snipers
2. in the use of ground camouflage
3. in his gift of observation, and the drawing of the correct conclusions from his observation
4. in every means of taking us by surprise. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Lt. Gen. Erwin Rommel was also impressed by the Australians. He said:

Shortly afterwards a batch of some fifty or sixty Australian prisoners were marched off close behind us—immensely big and powerful men, who without question represented an elite formation of the British Empire, a fact that was also evident in battle. Enemy resistance was as stubborn as ever and violent actions were being fought at many points.<sup>7</sup>

After the Battle of the Salient, Rommel reflected on the difference between mobile and positional warfare in the desert. He stated:

In this assault we lost more than 1,200 men killed, wounded and missing. This shows how sharply the curve of casualties rises when one reverts from mobile to position warfare. In a mobile action, what counts is material, as the essential complement to the soldier. The finest fighting man has no value in mobile warfare without tanks, guns, and vehicles. Thus a mobile force can be rendered unfit for action by destruction of its tanks, without having suffered any serious casualties in manpower. This is not the case with position warfare, where the infantryman with rifle and hand grenade has lost little of his value, provided, of course, he is protected by anti-tank guns or obstacles against the enemy's armour. For him enemy number one is the attacking infantrymen. Hence, position warfare is always a struggle for the destruction of men—in contrast to mobile warfare, where everything turns on the destruction of enemy material.<sup>8</sup>

The Australians held out for almost eight months against the German siege at Tobruk. The siege was abandoned by the Germans after 242 days, when on 7 December 1941, Rommel made the decision to fall back to Gazala. However, on 21 June of the next year, Rommel began a second offensive that finally captured the fortress.

At the time, the Australians' epic stand at Tobruk had a major impact on the war because the Germans suffered a serious and unexpected reversal. The Tobruk garrison demonstrated that the hitherto successful German blitzkrieg tactics could be defeated by resolute men who displayed courage and had the tactical and technical ability to coordinate and maximize the capabilities of their weapons and equipment in the defense.

This historical battle study can serve to illustrate the capabilities of a World War II infantry division in combating a heavier armored force. When compared to present-day scenarios, both the 9th Australian Division and the German Africa Corps could be classified as World War II rapid deployment contingency forces, and the battle at Tobruk should be studied in this context. In providing an in-depth description of the techniques and tactics used by the 9th Australian Division in battle, only the Easter Battle will be discussed.

## **Background**

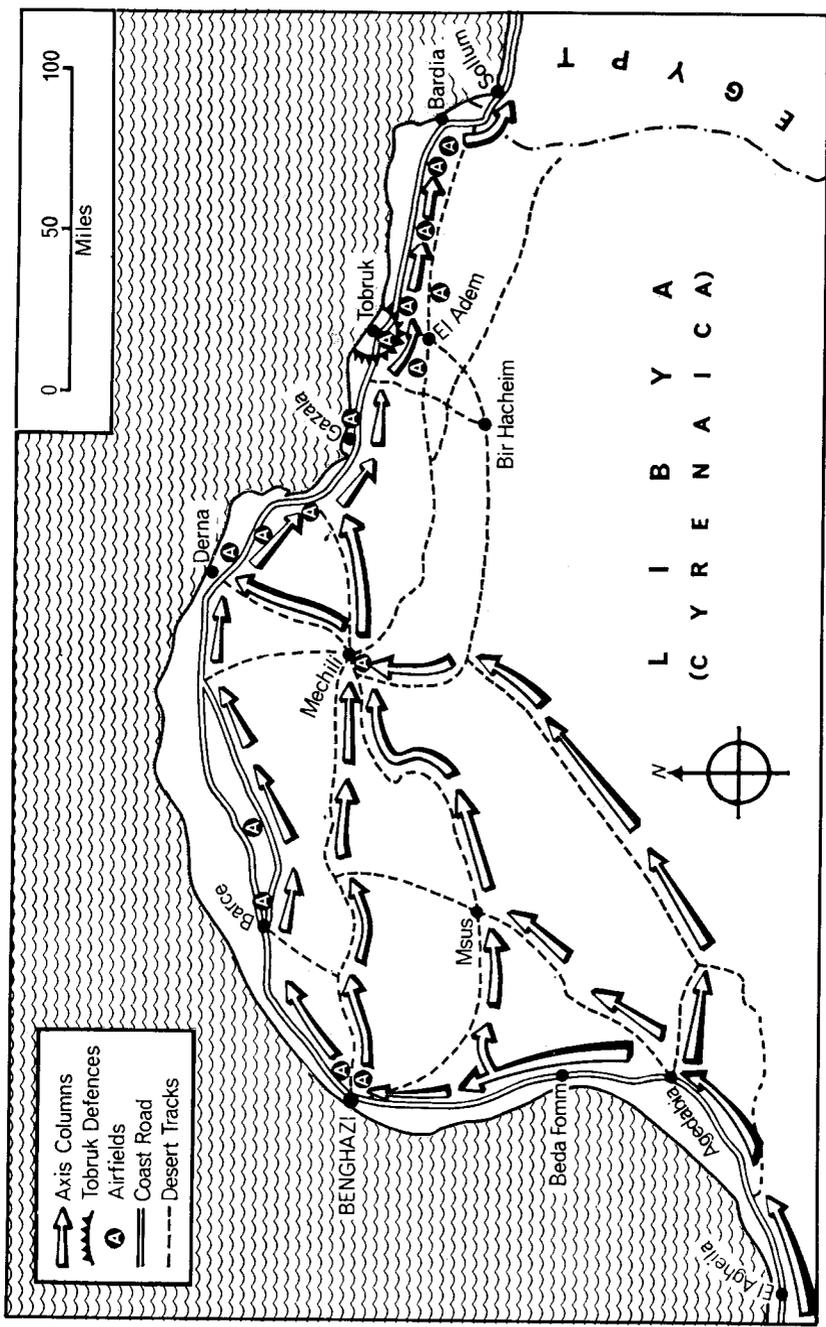
By 10 February 1941, British forces in the western desert had swept the Italian Army from North Africa to beyond Benghazi (see map 2). However, prior to reaching Tripoli and



the final eradication of Axis forces in North Africa, British efforts were shifted to meet Hitler's invasion of Greece. With British troops diverted to Greece, the newly formed 9th Australian Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. L. J. Morshead, moved on 8 March from Palestine to take over the task of holding the Cyrenaica frontier in Libya. Simultaneously, the German Africa Corps, under the command of Lieutenant General Rommel, arrived in Tripoli, Libya. On 31 March 1941, Rommel began an offensive to drive the supply- and equipment-constrained British forces—already overextended and with their armored vehicles badly in need of overhaul—eastward across the desert past Derna and Tobruk and eventually to the Egyptian frontier (see map 3). Rommel's objective was to seize the Suez Canal, but by the time he reached the port of Tobruk, he had overextended his lines of communication, being 900 miles from his base at Tripoli. The Germans, therefore, desperately needed an intermediate supply base. Additionally, Tobruk blocked the only high-speed avenue of approach to the Egyptian frontier. The desert sands south of the coastal road through Tobruk were extremely difficult to traverse. Thus, it became critical for the Germans to capture the port of Tobruk in order to replenish their forces and to sustain the offensive. On 6 April, the Australian 9th Division was ordered to pull back from Derna along the coast to Tobruk.

General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief of the Middle East and North Africa, decided that Tobruk must be held for at least two months to allow time for British reinforcements to be brought in to augment the defense of Egypt. Wavell's concept was to establish a strongpoint at Tobruk, while employing a mobile armored force to harass the enemy in the desert outside the perimeter.

After the Germans captured General Neame, British commander in chief in Cyrenaica, on 6 April, General Wavell appointed Major General Lavarack, commander of the 7th Australian Division, to replace him, at the same time giving Lavarack the mission to hold the enemy's advance at Tobruk. General Lavarack divided his available forces into three groups. The first group, under Major General Morshead, comprised mainly of the 9th Australian Division and four British artillery regiments, was to defend Tobruk fortress. The second group, a mobile force under Brigadier Gott, was composed of reconnaissance vehicles, artillery, and antitank guns. It was to operate outside the perimeter to harass the enemy south of the main



(Source: John Strawn, *The Battle for North Africa* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons], p. 50.)

Map 3. Rommel's first offensive

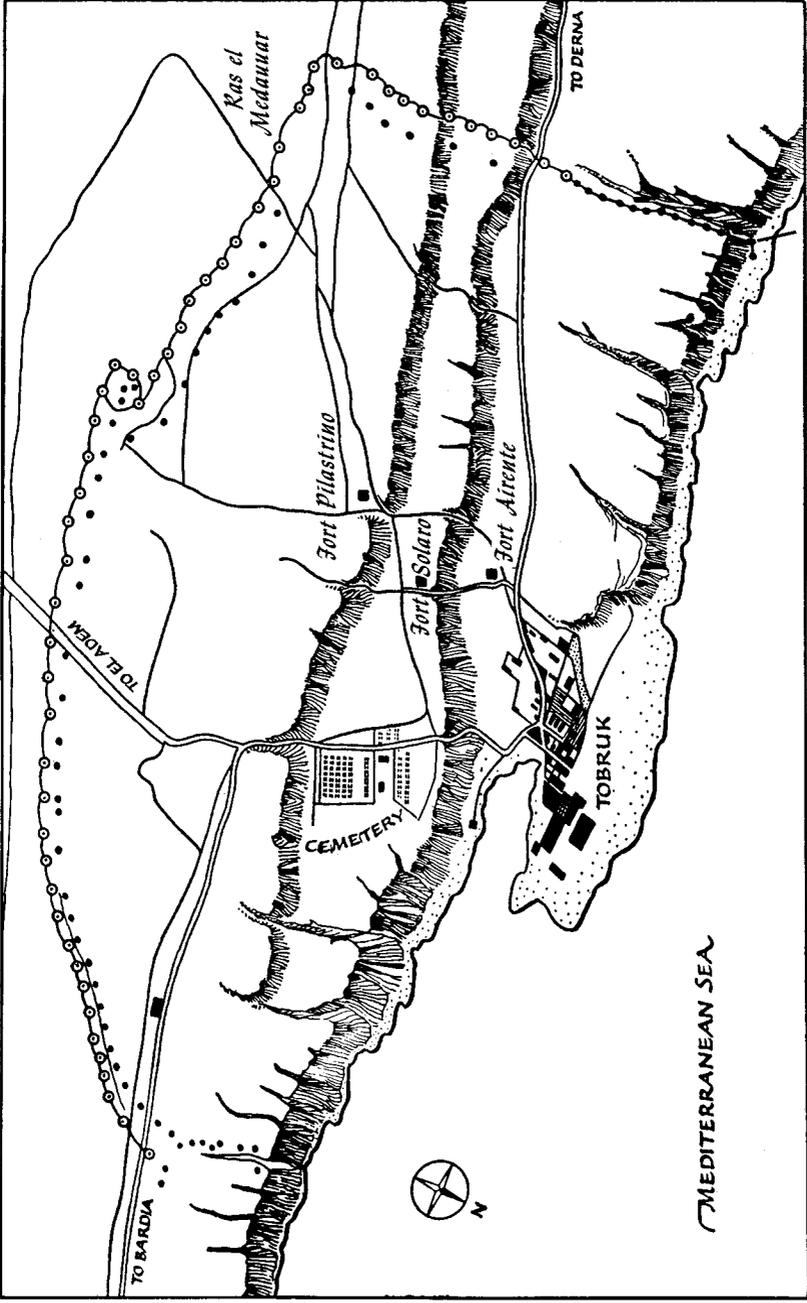
coast road that ran through Tobruk. The third group, which would constitute the Cyrenaica command's force reserve, was Lavarack's own 18th Brigade, with a battery of antitank guns and all available tanks.

The perimeter on which Lavarack and Morshead agreed to base their forward defense ran in a wide arc, twenty-eight miles in length. The width of the perimeter at the intersection of the coast road was about seventeen miles. The average distance of the perimeter from Tobruk was nine miles (see map 4). The bay provided a deep natural harbor. The coast, except near the harbor, was broken by a succession of narrow inlets. A plain about three miles wide west of the town was bordered on the south by an escarpment at the top of which was a ledge of land leading to a second escarpment. South from the second escarpment, the terrain flattened out toward the perimeter, except in the southwest where the Pilastrino ridge extended toward the most dominant feature in the area of Ras el Medauar. In the east, the two escarpments came together on the coast short of the perimeter boundary.

Except at the perimeter's extreme eastern and western flanks, where the wire descended the escarpments to the coast, the perimeter defenses spread across a plateau some 400 to 500 feet above sea level. Beyond this, the terrain ran in ridges to the west and southwest but was almost flat to the south and southeast. The arid desert ground was bare except for chance occurrences of dwarf camel thorn shrubs and a few fig trees located near desert wells. From the coast road to the sea, on both extremes of the perimeter, the terrain was generally an effective obstacle to tanks. However, south of the coast road, the flat terrain neither hindered frontal assault nor provided cover and concealment.

During their earlier occupation of Tobruk, the Italians had surrounded most of the perimeter with a box wire obstacle or concertina wire.<sup>9</sup> In some places forward of the perimeter, there was an antitank ditch that was incomplete and varied in depth from two to twelve feet. The antitank ditch was partly covered with light boards and a thin layer of sand and stones, so that its outline could not be distinguished even at close range.<sup>10</sup> Forward of the ditch was more concertina wire. Also, a thin line of antitank and antipersonnel mines had been laid in front of the perimeter wire.

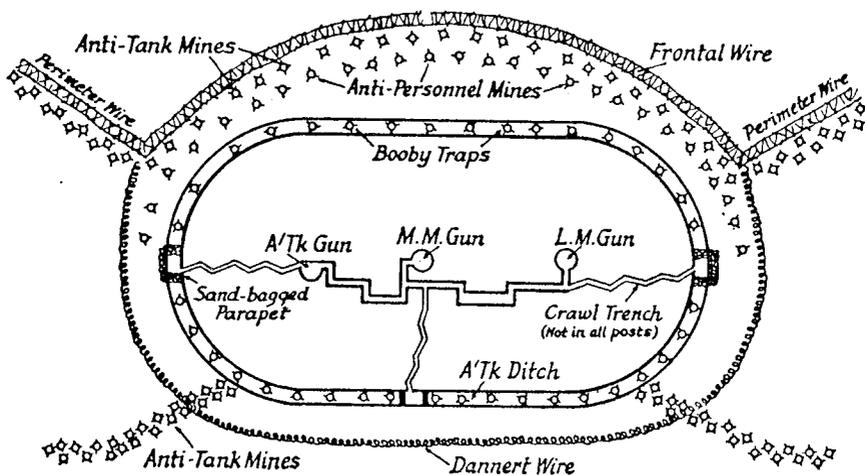
The 150 individual strongpoints along the perimeter had been placed in a zigzag pattern, with the posts one forward



(Source: Wolf Heckmann, *Rommel's War in Africa* [New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1981], p. 71.)

Map 4. Fortress Tobruk

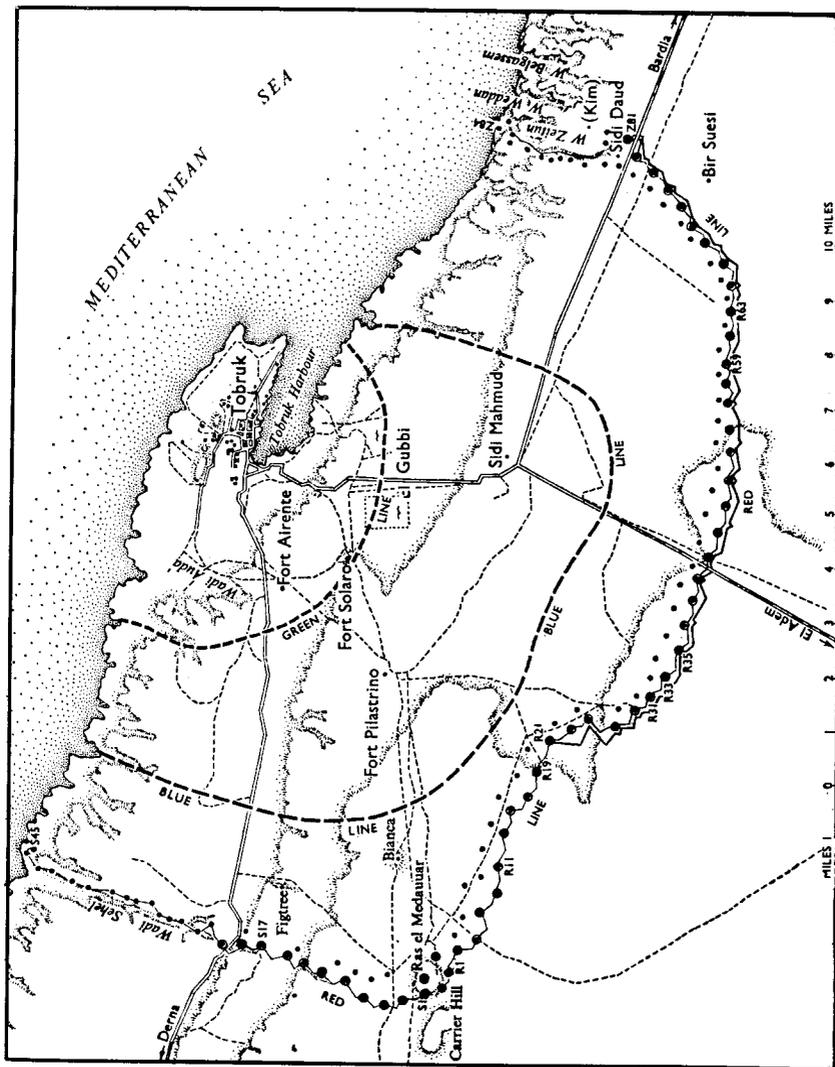
and one in the rear, with intervals of about 750 yards between forward posts. The effect was of two parallel rows of posts, the second row 500 yards behind the first and filling in the gaps between the forward posts. The posts were numbered consecutively, the odd-numbered posts being on the perimeter, the even posts behind them. A typical post was eighty meters long and contained three circular concrete weapons pits emplaced flush with the ground and connected by a concrete communications trench.<sup>11</sup> This trench was about 2 1/2 meters deep and covered over with boards and a thin layer of earth. Around the post was an antitank ditch. Observation from the posts was excellent, the fields of fire good, and the perimeter wire well placed. A forward post, in most cases, could enfilade both arms of perimeter wire leading out from it, the fire forming a beaten zone forward of the next post (see figure 1).<sup>12</sup>



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 131.)

Figure 1. Tobruk strongpoint

Behind the first line of defense, called the Red Line, anti-tank mines were placed in depth to prevent deep penetrations. Two miles behind the Red Line was the Blue Line, occupied by the three reserve battalions. General Morshead's instructions were that if the enemy penetrated the Red Line, the forward posts were to hold at all costs, while the Blue Line absorbed the attack. If the enemy penetrated the Blue Line and the Cyrenaica command's mobile reserve was unable to stop them, then every support element left would make a last effort at the Green Line (see map 5).



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 126.)

Map 5. Tobruk defense lines

## Combat Organization of Friendly Forces

The 9th Australian Division had been formed on 23 September 1940. When Major General Morshead took command on 5 February 1941, little did he realize that his division would be heavily engaged in two months. The 20th Brigade, formed in May 1940, had been in Palestine three months; the 26th, formed in July 1940, had been there one month. None of the brigades had received a full issue of weapons, yet each had fired automatic weapons in range practice. Individual training was well advanced, and there had been some subunit training. However, battalions and regiments had not conducted unit exercises, and the training of brigades as battle groups had not begun. In short, the individual soldiers had been trained to fight, but the officers and staffs had not yet been trained in the complex techniques of battlefield management and the integration of combined arms formations.

Brigades in the 2d Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) contained three battalions, each recruited chiefly on a regional basis. For the sake of tradition, battalions took the numbers of their counterparts in the World War I 1st AIF, with the prefix 2- preceding the new unit designations. In addition to its headquarters and support companies, the battalion consisted of four rifle companies, each composed of three 30-man platoons. The strength of an Australian infantry battalion varied, but in the Middle East it contained 32 officers and 750 to 770 men. The total strength for an infantry division was about 14,000, to include its headquarters, three brigades, an antitank regiment, field artillery regiment, engineers, and signal.<sup>13</sup>

By 10 April 1941, the garrison at Tobruk consisted of the 9th Australian Division with its three brigades of infantry—the 20th, 24th, and 26th—together with the 18th Brigade of the 7th Australian Division and several thousand British and Indian troops. Altogether, 14,270 Australian troops; 9,000 British troops; about 5,700 troops of mixed Australian, British, and Indian origin; and 3,000 Libyan laborers defended Tobruk.<sup>14</sup>

General Morshead's concept of defense was based on four principles: no ground should be given up; garrisons should dominate no-man's-land by extensive nightly deep patrolling; no effort should be spared in improving the defensive positions and obstacles; and the defense should be organized in depth, with a large mobile reserve.<sup>15</sup>

The twenty-eight miles of perimeter were occupied by the division's three brigades. From west to east, they were the 26th, 20th, and 24th Brigades, respectively. Part of the garrison's reserve, the 18th Brigade, was located in Wadi Auda, near the sea west of town, and the 3d Armored Brigade had the responsibility for covering the approaches to Pilastrino extending to the El Adem-Bardia road junctions. Six battalions manned the forward perimeter, and one battalion in each brigade sector was positioned to the rear, as brigade reserve. Each battalion on line occupied an average of five miles, with more than two companies plus maintained as a reserve dug in one-half mile to the rear. Ten to fifteen infantrymen occupied each post.

The 2-24th Battalion with one company of the 2-23d Battalion occupied the right-hand sector from the coast to the escarpment, a distance of six miles. On their left, covering the highest point on the perimeter, Ras el Medauuar (Hill 204), was the 2-48th Battalion. Farther on the left was the 2-17th Battalion, which covered the southern approaches to Fort Pilastrino, where the division headquarters was located. Next was the 2-13th Battalion astride the El Adem road, then the 2-28th Battalion. On the 2-28th's left, covering from the main east-west road to the coast, was the 2-43d Battalion. With field artillery and antitank artillery being the garrison's main defense against an armored attack, all guns were sited in an antitank role. Gun pits were made large and shallow to enable rapid traverse and to assure clear fields of fire in all directions.

The forty-eight 25-pounders of the three Royal horse artillery (RHA) regiments and the twelve 18-pounders and twelve 4.5-inch howitzers of the 51st Field Regiment were organized into three groups to cover the three infantry brigades on line.<sup>16</sup> The 51st Field Regiment was in direct support of the 26th Brigade in the west; the 104th RHA was in support of the 24th Brigade in the east. In the central (southern) sector held by the 20th Brigade, the 1st and 107th RHA were formed into a tactical group of thirty-two guns. The guns were mainly employed at the escarpment below Pilastrino and near Sidi Mahmud.

With the exception of the 8th Battery of the 3d Light Anti-aircraft (AA) Regiment, which was Australian, all the anti-aircraft guns were manned by British troops. The 4th AA Brigade consisted of the 153d and 235th Heavy AA Batteries from the 51st Heavy AA Regiment; the 14th Light AA Regiment; and the 39th, 40th, and 57th Light AA Batteries from the 13th Light AA Regiment.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of the siege, the anti-

aircraft artillery in Tobruk consisted of sixteen mobile 7-inch guns (heavy) in action and eight unmounted guns not yet brought into action; five mobile and twelve static 40-mm Bofors (of which six static guns were not in action); and forty-two captured 20-mm Italian Bredos. As soon as four of the static 3.7-inch guns were brought into action, four heavy mobile guns were released for perimeter defense to deter enemy dive-bombers and observation aircraft. However, whenever Allied ships were unloading in the port, the mobile guns were returned to the harbor area.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, captured Italian 75-, 100-, and 149-mm guns were employed by the so-called Australian "bush artillery" (infantrymen without gunner training who manned and fired guns from their battalion positions). By 9 April, all remaining armored units were organized into the 3d Armored Brigade. These included the 1st Kings Dragoon Guards, with thirty armed Mormon-Harrington scout cars; the 3d Hussars; and the 5th Royal Tanks, forming a composite unit of four cruisers and eighteen light tanks.<sup>19</sup> The 1st Royal Tank Regiment was composed of nineteen cruisers and fifteen light tanks; and the 4th Royal Tank Regiment was comprised of a troop of four Mark II Matilda (infantry) tanks.<sup>20</sup> In all, about sixty tanks were operational with another twenty-six undergoing repairs.

There were only 113 antitank guns in the garrison, half of which were captured Italian Bredo 47- and 32-mm guns—weapons that could penetrate 30 millimeters of steel plate at 1,000 yards but had a traverse of only 60 degrees.<sup>21</sup> Antitank units were the Australian 2-3d Antitank Regiment with four of its six batteries—the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th; the three brigade antitank companies; and the British 3d RHA Antitank Regiment, with its M and J Batteries but minus D Battery. Antitank regiments were normally organized with three battalions, each having two 8-gun batteries. Each battery had two 4-gun troops, and each troop had two sections of two guns. The principal British antitank gun at the time was the British 2-pounder. However, British antitank guns suffered badly in comparison with German guns because, in most cases, they did not have the weight, penetrating power, or range that the German 50-, 57-, 75-, and 88-mm weapons possessed. The 2-pounder was outranged and nearly ineffectual, as it could not penetrate the Mark III and IV beyond 500 meters.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the 25-pounders, with a direct-fire range of 1,000 yards, bore the brunt of the antitank defense. The total number of 2-pounders at

Tobruk is not known, but there was a critical shortage of such weapons.



Australian troops dug in, North Africa\*

All Royal Air Force (RAF) units in the desert were under No. 204 Group. Reconnaissance, close air support, and air interdiction were provided by a forward command post of the No. 204 Group along with the No. 73 Squadron (Hurricane) and the No. 6 Squadron (Hurricane and Lysinder), which were under the fortress commander. Bomber support was provided by Blenheim IV bombers of Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons, which could rearm at the Tobruk airfields. Fourteen Hurricanes were kept at Tobruk during daylight hours for immediate response.<sup>23</sup>

### **Combat Organization of Enemy Forces**

The German 5th Light Division faced the Australians at Tobruk. The 5th was a light armored division, somewhat weaker in force structure than the usual German armored division. The

\*The source of all photos in this work is Australian War Memorial, Canberra, *Pictorial History of Australia at War 1939–45*, vol. (Canberra: [S.N.]), 1959.

German High Command was preoccupied with equipping its forces for the coming invasion of the USSR, so Rommel's initial mission was defensive rather than offensive. The 5th Division, consequently, had only three-quarters of its allocated motor transport and was short some 50 tanks of the 200 authorized to it. However, it was far stronger than the battle-depleted 2d Armored Division that it initially opposed. The German 5th Light Division consisted initially of a headquarters; the strong and partly armored 3d Reconnaissance Unit with its company of about twenty-five armored cars; the 5th Armored Regiment with its 1st and 2d Battalions containing a total of seventy light Mark II tanks and eighty medium Mark IIIs (with 50-mm guns) and Mark IVs (with 75-mm guns);<sup>24</sup> a fully motorized machine-gun regiment with the 2d and 8th Battalions; the 1-75th Artillery Regiment with a twelve-gun field artillery battery; and the 605th Antitank Regiment, with the 33d and 39th Antitank Battalions (thirty-three 37- and 50-mm antitank guns in each, plus several 88-mm anti-aircraft guns in the 33d).<sup>25</sup> Though these units had no desert training, most had operational experience in the campaigns in Poland and France. Additionally, in the German's favor, the Mark III could penetrate the armor of British tanks at 1,000 yards due to its superior ammunition and optics.<sup>26</sup> The Mark IVs could shell the British armor and anti-tank guns at 3,000 yards with impunity.<sup>27</sup>

Rommel's German Air Force support came from Fliegerkorps X, commanded by General Frohlich. Fighter and dive-bomber units worked in conjunction with Rommel but were not under his control. The total strength of Fliegerkorps X varied between 400 and 450 aircraft, of which only about 250 were serviceable at any one time. This included thirty single-engined fighters, thirty twin-engined fighters, approximately eighty dive-bombers, and fifty to sixty long-range bombers.<sup>28</sup>

Rommel continually task organized the German and Italian forces to fit the mission. New groupings and new commands were set up almost daily, with the major units, the 5th Light Division and the Italian Ariete and Brescia Divisions, constantly shifting units.

The Italian forces, operating with their German allies, consisted of elements of three divisions: the 27th (Brescia) Division, the 102d (Trento) Motorized Division, and the Armored 132d (Ariete) Division. The two infantry divisions mustered slightly more than six infantry battalions each. The armored division had some eighty tanks, mainly of the M-13 variety, but

possessed few antitank guns.<sup>29</sup> The combined German-Italian forces consisted of around 25,000 combat, combat support, and combat service support troops (although these figures are not fully documented).

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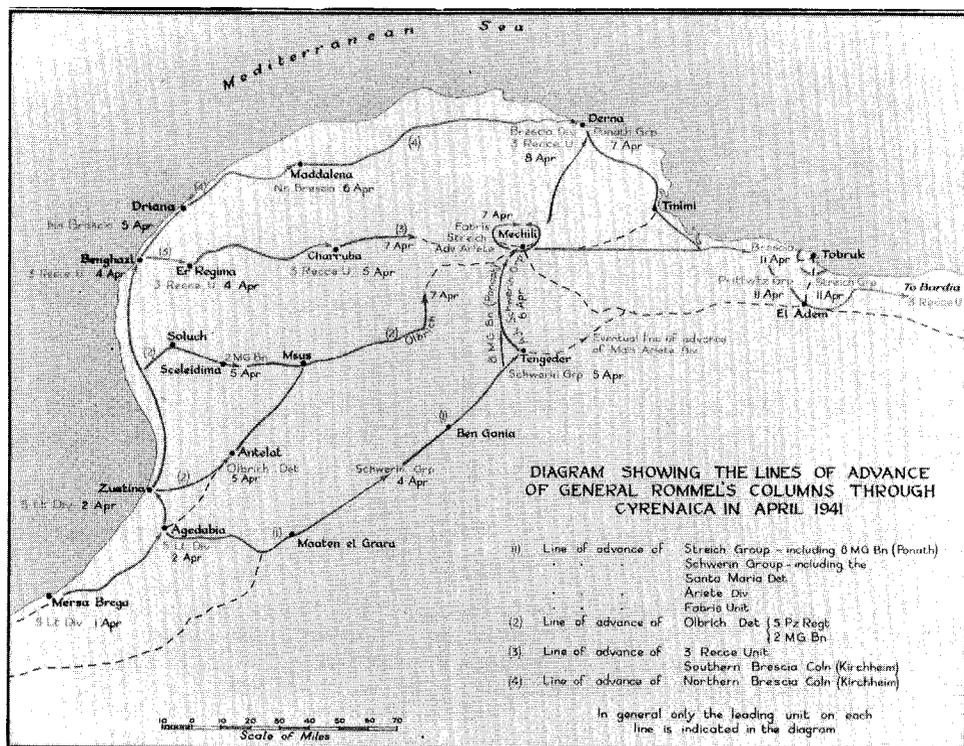


## II. THE BATTLE

### The Easter Battle Chronology\*

10 April

In less than 3 weeks, the Africa Corps had fought and marched over 600 miles through sandstorms and over mountains and difficult trails, pushing the British ahead of them. At last Tobruk was to be cut off (see sketch map 6). Rommel announced that his next objective was the Suez Canal and that the British must not be allowed to break out of Tobruk. Meanwhile, General



(Source: I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East* [London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956], p. 25.)

Map 6. Rommel's line of advance—1941

\*Except where noted, the following is a summary of Barton Maughan's narration of the battle in his book, *Tobruk and El Alamein: Australia in the War of 1939—1945*.

Prittwitz was killed by antitank fire as his group probed the Australian perimeter along the Derna road, and Lieutenant Colonel Schwerin replaced him.

### 11 April (Good Friday)

The Tobruk fortress was surrounded, but the Germans were widely scattered after a two-day sandstorm. Streich Group was too far to the east; Prittwitz Group, now the Schwerin Group, moved in from the south; and the Brescia Division was to the west.

*1200 to 1300 (hours).* The Germans shifted to get into position for the attack. The 5th Panzer Regiment, from the Streich Group, began its first reconnaissance against the southern sector of the perimeter, probing with tanks and infantry against Posts R59 and R63. Five German tanks were destroyed 1,000 yards in front of R59.

*1500.* Overconfident and in defiance of the Australian defenses, 700 enemy infantry advanced to within 400 yards of the 2-13th's positions. The Australians engaged them with small arms and machine guns. Seven enemy tanks appeared in front of Post R31 and advanced toward the perimeter, where the RHA engaged them.

*1615.* Artillery observers reported enemy infantry approaching the 2-17th's sector in the vicinity of Post R33. The artillery stopped the infantry, but seventy German tanks passed through the British barrage heading toward the Australian perimeter in front of D Company, 2-17th. Captain Balfe, the D Company commander, later described the action:

About 70 tanks came right up to the antitank ditch and opened fire on our forward posts. They advanced in three waves of about twenty and one of ten. Some of them were big German Mark IVs, mounting a 75-mm gun. Others were Italian M13s and there were a lot of Italian light tanks too. The ditch here wasn't any real obstacle to them, the minefield had only been hastily rearmed and we hadn't one antitank gun forward. We fired on them with antitank rifles, Brens, and rifles and they didn't attempt to come through, but blazed away at us and then sheered off east towards the 2/13th's front.<sup>30</sup>

The German infantry came forward again, 700 of them en masse, shoulder to shoulder through the gunfire.

When the infantry were about 500 yards out (Balfe said later) we opened up, but in the posts that could reach them we had only two Brens, two antitank rifles and a couple of dozen ordinary rifles. The Jerries went to ground at first, but gradually moved forward in bounds under cover of their machine guns. It was nearly dusk by this time, and they managed to reach the antitank ditch. From

there they mortared near-by posts heavily. We hadn't any mortars with which to reply, and our artillery couldn't shell the ditch without risk of hitting our own posts.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the 1st Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) with its eleven cruiser tanks moved up in the direction of the El Adem roadblock. After skirting the 2-17th's front, the enemy tanks moved along the 2-13th's perimeter, firing to suppress the forward posts as they passed. Along the El Adem road, gunners of the 2-13th's mortar platoon, manning two Italian 47-mm anti-tank guns, knocked out one Italian medium tank and hit several others. Another Italian light tank, disabled by small-arms fire, was knocked out by one of the antitank guns and its crew was captured.

At the El Adem road, enemy tanks halted before a minefield and turned away just as the 1st Royal Tank Regiment arrived. Both sides engaged at long range. Three light tanks and one medium Italian tank were knocked out by British tanks, and one German medium tank was destroyed by antitank fire. Two British medium tanks were lost. The enemy withdrew to the south, having lost seven tanks.

In the late afternoon, combat patrols from the 2-17th's reserve company found the enemy had withdrawn from the antitank ditch in front of D Company. That night, more tanks probed along the ditch in front of the 2-13th looking for a crossing. They were followed by pioneers with demolitions and bangalore torpedoes, whose mission it was to break the wire and bridge the antitank ditch. The breaching party was driven off by the Australians, however, and abandoned their demolition equipment.

General Morshead issued orders for vigorous day and night patrolling to be conducted in all sectors. Engineers with the three forward brigades spent the night improving the perimeter defenses. Overnight, the 2-3d Field Company layed more than 5,000 mines, covering the entire 24th Brigade sector.

After the probing attacks, aerial reconnaissance reported road movement from the southwest, an attempted breach at the anti-tank ditch, and continued movement outside the perimeter in the southeastern sector. All indications were that the enemy would attack at first light on the 12th, near the boundary of the 20th and 24th Brigades.

**2300.** General Lavarack ordered the 18th Brigade to move from its reserve position at Wadi Auda, to the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads.



Patrolling along the antitank ditch at Tobruk

### 12 April

Throughout the day, the Germans continued their reconnaissance, but no attack developed as their tank and motor transport concentrations were bombed by the RAF and heavily shelled by artillery. The Germans also sent dive-bombers against the harbor, only to have them repelled by the RAF's Hurricanes and heavy anti-aircraft fire. In addition, British gunners shot down four Stukas.

Fully presuming the garrison to be worn down and in the process of evacuating by sea, the Germans expected to take the defenders without a fight. They were shocked and taken aback, however, by the violent response against their reconnaissance units, the British artillery's pounding of their panzer troops, and their first encounter with Australian bayonets.

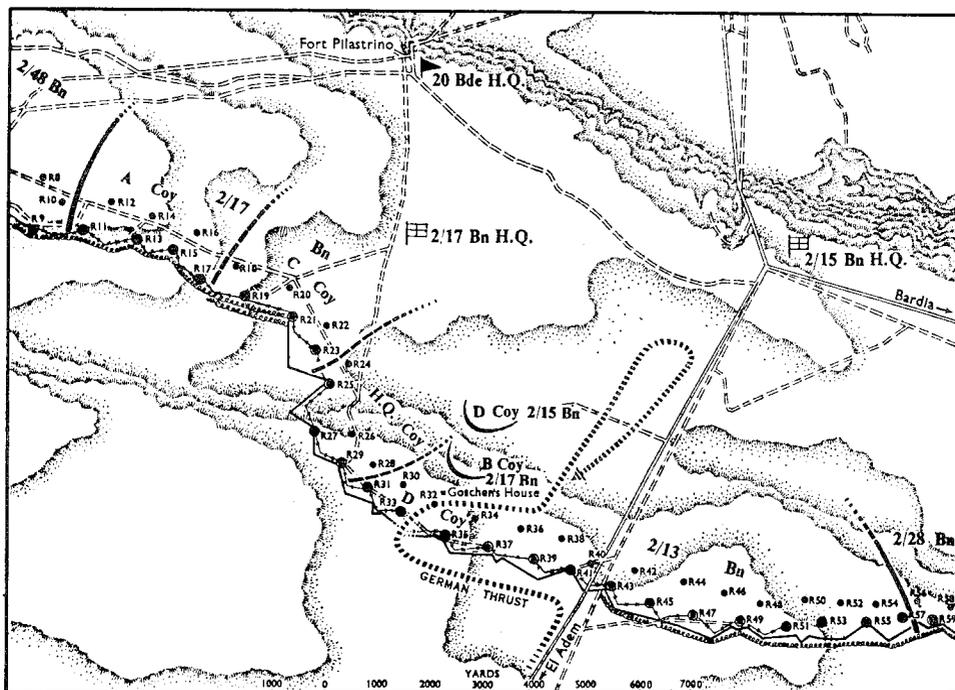
### 13 April (Easter Sunday)

Axis forces were now in position to attack. The Schwerin Group was in the eastern zone, opposite the 24th Brigade sector. Streich's 5th Light Division, the main assault force, was in the south on both sides of the El Adem road opposite the 20th Brigade. On its left was the Italian Ariete Division and farther to the left, a regiment of the Trento Division around Carrier Hill, west of Ras el Medauuar. The Brescia unit sat astride the Derna road to the west, opposite the 26th Brigade's sector.

The original German plan called for the 5th Light Division to break the Australian perimeter defenses on the evening of the 13th at the El Adem road and then to penetrate five miles to the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads, while the Brescia Division conducted a demonstration to the west (see map 7). The initial breach, to be conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Ponath's 8th Machine Gun Battalion, was to be supported by artillery at 1700. The vanguard of the attack was to be the 5th Panzer Regiment, whose mission was to push through the gap with two battalions in column, continue two miles north, then split off, with the lead battalion pushing on to the crossroads, while the trailing battalion drove northwest toward Fort Pilastrino. Early on the 14th, the attack was to be continued toward Tobruk (city), with the 5th Panzer Regiment leading, the Italian Ariete Division following, and elements of the 8th Machine Gun Battalion securing the penetration area.

Australian alertness and an aggressive defense, however, denied the enemy a thorough reconnaissance of the perimeter. In addition, the Italian maps used by the Germans were outdated and inaccurate. Furthermore, there were no photographs or aerial reconnaissance reports available from the *Luftwaffe*.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, the German engineers chose to make the crossing just south of R33. This was some two and one-half miles west of the planned crossing site on the El Adem road. This would cause delay and confusion later. At the point chosen, the anti-tank ditch was continuous and for the most part twelve feet deep. Unknown to the Germans, the ditch was not continuous



(Source: Barton Maughan. *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 131.)

Map 7. German attack, 13-14 April

throughout the sector. There was no ditch from posts R11 to R21, which would have given direct access to the vital Pilastrino ridge. Additionally, just north of R33, between R27 and R29, the ditch was only two and one-half feet deep, with a solid rock bottom.

On the afternoon of the 13th, men of the 2-17th saw motorcycles and a staff car in front of their sector. Soon after, a Heinkel reconnaissance aircraft made a low-level pass over this part of the perimeter. Later, other enemy aircraft scattered leaflets over the garrison that read:

The general officer commanding the German forces in Libya hereby requests that the British troops occupying Tobruk surrender their arms. Single soldiers waving white handkerchiefs are not fired on. Strong German forces have already surrounded Tobruk, and it is useless to try and escape. Remember Mekili. Our dive-bombers and Stukas are awaiting your ships which are lying in Tobruk.<sup>33</sup>

“Remember Mekili” referred to the British surrender there the week before on 8 April, when the Germans took some 3,000 prisoners, including 102 Australians. As for the white hand-

kerchiefs, there were no such luxuries at Tobruk with the dust and shortage of water.

Doubtless, the enemy was giving special attention to the 2-17th's sector. Later in the afternoon, enemy aircraft again flew over the perimeter, and armored cars began probing the southern perimeter. Enemy troops in trucks assembled 4,000 yards from the perimeter. They dismounted but made no move to disperse until brought under artillery fire. Trucks carried small detachments of German machine gunners forward within 1,500 yards of the defenses, where they engaged any Australian movement along the perimeter.



Watching a tank battle on the perimeter, Tobruk

**1600.** Lieutenant Colonel Crawford, the 2-17th's battalion commander, moved his reserve, B Company, up behind D Company, which was occupying Posts R30 through R35.

**1700.** The Germans fired heavy artillery concentrations on D Company but did not follow up with an attack.

**1730.** The Australians saw enemy infantry and several tanks about 500 yards from the wire. They were advancing under cover

of heavy small-arms and machine-gun fire. The 1st and 107th RHA engaged and stopped the advance.

RAF evening reconnaissance indicated the buildup for a major attack with a report that 300 vehicles were concentrated along the El Adem road.

After dark, three enemy tanks cruised singly along the anti-tank ditch, possibly looking for any opening in the obstacle.

**2300.** Before blowing the gap in the antitank ditch, the Germans attempted to storm R33. Thirty German infantrymen with 2 small field guns, a mortar, and 8 machine guns broke through the wire, dug themselves in 100 yards east of the post and engaged the defenders. The post returned fire, and when that failed to drive off the Germans, Lieutenant Colonel Mackell, the post commander, and six of his men counterattacked with grenades and bayonets. Twelve Germans were killed, one was captured, and the remainder fled. One of the Australian infantrymen, Cpl. Jack Edmondson, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the first such medal to be awarded to an Australian in the war of 1939—45.

On the night of 13 April, the Australians conducted deep patrolling around their perimeter. Lieutenant Colonel Crawford sent out two patrols to locate the enemy positions taken up during the afternoon near Post R33. Both patrols brought back a prisoner from the German 8th Machine Gun Battalion and also reported enemy movement in front of D Company. Crawford alerted his reserve, B Company, to be ready to make a strong counterattack at dawn from behind Post R32, which was 500 yards inside the perimeter wire.

### 14 April

**0030.** A German tank approached the still unbreached ditch, stopped as if to check the area, then withdrew. Mines taken out by the Germans were neatly stacked on both sides of the intended gap.

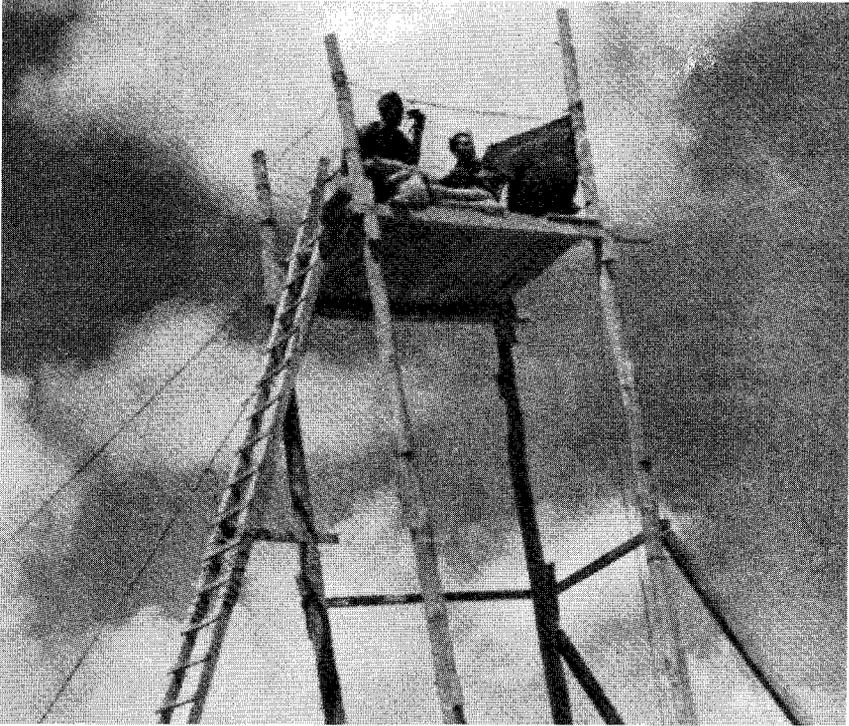
**0230.** Some 200 German infantry came through the wire near R33 and then spread out for several hundred yards inside the perimeter. Captain Balfe signaled with his Very pistol for artillery support. The 1st and 107th RHA responded, along with small-arms fire from the infantry. The Germans suffered casualties but did not withdraw. D Company, 2-15th, from the brigade reserve battalion, was moved into position in the rear of D Company, 2-17th.

**0400.** Enemy tanks were seen by moonlight assembling close to the wire near the El Adem road and were brought under artillery fire.



Members of C Company, 2-13th Battalion, on daylight patrol at outer perimeter, Tobruk

**0445.** The same tanks approached the perimeter at R41 near the El Adem road. Col. Ernst Bolbrinker, operations officer for the 5th Panzer Regiment, stated the attack was to start at 0400 with a thirty-minute artillery preparation that would shift forward at 0430. The night was dark and bitterly cold. Terrain orientation was nearly impossible because of inaccurate maps and because a compass direction had not been provided. As a result, engineer officers had to guide the units to the tank ditch. Under blackout driving conditions and radio silence, the regimental staff following the combat columns got mixed in with some logistical vehicles and lost contact with the tanks. The regimental commander halted the column and broke radio silence to reassemble the units. With all the commotion, the British started to fire in the direction of the noise. Next, the engineer guides became disoriented and led the attacking columns across the front of the British positions. By the time the attacking



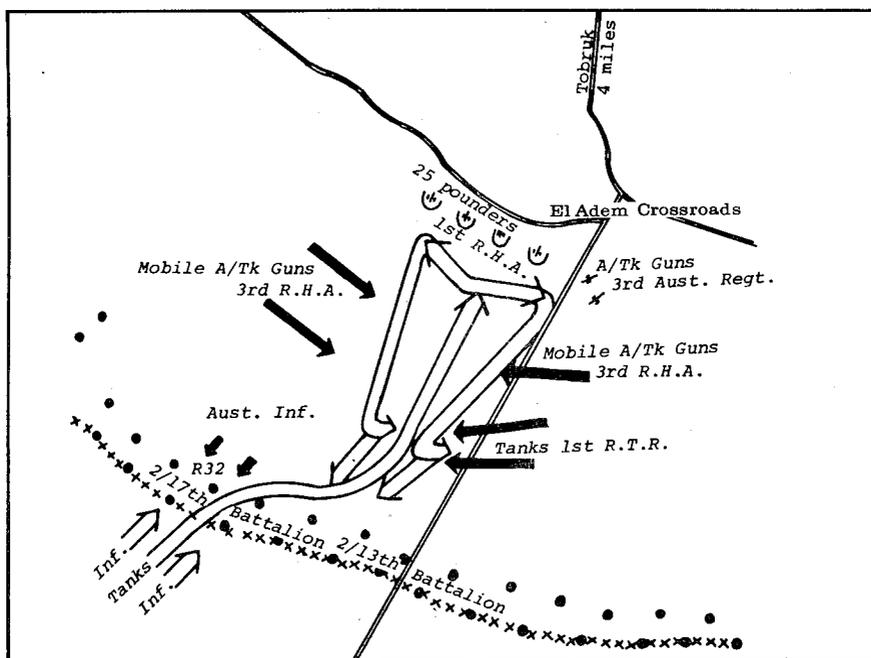
An effective artillery observation post, Tobruk

force reached the opening in the tank ditch, their artillery fires had been shifted. Because the breaches allowed passage of only one vehicle at a time, only the early morning fog prevented a disaster. Nevertheless, the mounted infantry had already incurred great losses.<sup>34</sup>

**0450.** Forty German tanks were reported moving west from R41 along the perimeter just outside the wire. The 1st RHA engaged them. Enemy 88-mm guns began to fire on the Australian defensive positions.

**0520.** The lead German tanks turned and entered the perimeter through the gap just south of post R33. As planned, the Australian infantry made no attempt to stop them but lay in wait for the German infantry. The Germans headed straight toward the D Company command post at R32. The first fifteen tanks were seen towing anti-aircraft and antitank guns. Groups of fifteen to twenty men riding on or following the tanks dropped behind them once they were inside the perimeter.

0545. Thirty-eight tanks of the 5th Panzer Regiment's 2d Battalion were formed up for the attack nearly a mile inside the perimeter wire. At the same time, the 1st Battalion's tanks were moving up behind the infantry, field guns, and antitank guns. British artillery fires were shifted from in front of the wire to R32 and with excellent results. The German machine-gun crews who had been riding on the tanks were mostly killed or wounded, and the tanks moved on without them. The infantry scattered and, under small-arms fire from the Australians, moved back toward the wire. The German tanks continued to move but back to the east, inside the perimeter, until they were within a mile of the El Adem road. They then turned northeast, moved for a short time parallel to the road, and then stopped about a mile and one-half from the British artillery. The thirty-two 25-pounders of the 1st and 107th RHA and the antitank guns of the 2-3d Australian Antitank Regiment were directly ahead along the Blue Line. The mobile antitank guns of M Battery, 3d RHA, were to the Germans' left, and the 1st RHA was dug in and hull down on the east side of the El Adem road, on the German right flank (see map 8).



(Source: Peter Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars* [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971], p. 230.)

Map 8. Friendly unit dispositions, 14 April

Taking fire from all sides, the German tanks began to move forward by bounds. As they closed within 600 yards, the British artillerymen, using open sights, fired their 25-pounders with deadly accuracy. Even without armor-piercing shells, their fire was effective. Five tanks caught fire and the turret was blown off of one 22-ton Mark IV. Two German tanks attempted to outflank the guns to the right but were engaged and stopped by antitank guns of the 2-3d Australian Antitank Regiment positioned to their right flank. The 2d Battalion, 5th Panzer Regiment, which had been leading the advance, then halted, turned its tanks around, and began to withdraw, only to run straight into the following element, its regiment's 1st Battalion.

The Germans had reached their high-water mark and were now engaged from all sides. At the same time, back to the south along the perimeter, the forward posts were covering the perimeter gap with fire, thus blocking the German follow-on forces. The second line of posts was covering the open ground between the perimeter and the tanks and was preventing the enemy tanks and their infantry from rejoining. As dawn approached, the firefight intensified near R32. Three German antitank guns and a small fieldpiece were brought into action, firing behind R32. Though under return fire, the D Company post killed the German crew members with sniper fire. Next, the Germans brought up a 75-mm field gun and several long-barreled 88-mm guns to the gap. Again, the Australian infantry dealt the crews a deadly blow. As dawn broke, enemy machine-gun positions were spotted and one by one suppressed.

With General Lavarack's permission, General Morshead ordered the two cruiser squadrons of the 1st RTR to counterattack the enemy tanks at first light. As the British cruiser tanks moved west across the El Adem road in the early morning light, they saw the enemy tanks grouped in front of them, one and one-half miles south of the 1st and 107th RHA. The British artillery fires had caused the enemy tanks to scatter, and they began moving forward in groups toward the gaps in the artillery positions. The Mark IIIs fired their guns as they moved, with the heavier Mark IVs stopping to fire their 75-mms. At the same time, one five-gun troop of M Battery, 3d RHA, with its antitank guns mounted on trucks (Portee), worked its way around to the rear of the German tanks, coming up on their right flank and engaging them with hit-and-run tactics.

For forty-five minutes, the British artillerymen met the enemy's advance, standing by their guns and proving themselves

more determined than their enemy. They lost one gun, ten men killed in action, and four wounded in action.

0700. The German tanks again turned to the east but again ran into antitank fire from the 2-3d and the 25-pounders of the RHA. The antitank guns enfiladed them, and the RHA fired from the front. The tanks passed and the smoke and dust cleared to reveal four immobilized tanks in front of the 2-3d. Three antitank guns were also destroyed. The 1st Royal Tanks now engaged the German tanks at one mile and began to close with them. Smoke and dust were everywhere. Farther back, near the perimeter, B Company of the 2-17th was counterattacking against 100 Germans holed up near the ruins called Goschen's house, north of R32. D Company of the 2-15th established a blocking position just to the north to assist in containing the Germans. Attacking with grenades and bayonets, the Australians killed eighteen Germans and captured eighteen. Overhead, Tobruk's RAF Hurricanes were fighting a battle with German and Italian fighters, while anti-aircraft guns fired at the weaving and turning aircraft. The Hurricanes brought down four enemy planes and lost one of their own.

Under fire from all sides, the German tanks finally withdrew, turning to the south and heading for the gap. Tank after tank was being knocked out as they ran the gauntlet. The British cruisers and two infantry tanks which had joined them gave chase.

On the perimeter, the German infantry, who had failed to widen the gap and secure the flanks of the penetration, were scattered everywhere. Enemy pockets near the gap were being suppressed by the Australians, but groups who had penetrated deeper to the rear of the perimeter posts continued to cause trouble. There was great confusion as the German tanks and infantry pushed together out through the gap. Captain Balfe, the D Company commander, described the scene:

The crossing was badly churned up and the tanks raised clouds of dust as they went. In addition, there was the smoke of two tanks blazing just outside the wire. Into this cloud of dust and smoke we fired anti-tank weapons, Brens, rifles, and mortars, and the gunners sent hundreds of shells. We shot up a lot of infantry as they tried to get past, and many, who took refuge in the anti-tank ditch, were later captured. It was all I could do to stop the troops following them outside the wire. The Germans were a rabble, but the crews of three tanks did keep their heads. They stopped at the anti-tank ditch and hitched on behind them the big guns, whose crews had

been killed. They dragged these about one thousand yards, but by then we had directed our artillery on to them. They unhitched the guns and went for their lives.<sup>35</sup>

**0730.** The Germans were in full retreat. Forty German dive-bombers appeared above the harbor to bomb the town in an attack meant to be coordinated with the lead German tank battalion. Four Stukas were shot down by British anti-aircraft gunners and two by Hurricane fighters. Seventy-five Germans were captured at Goschen's house.



Troops in a dust storm, Tobruk

**0830.** Except for sporadic fighting, the battle was over. By noon, the last of the enemy was rounded up. Rommel gave the order to attack again at 1800, but the order was canceled when sufficient forces could not be mustered. Two days later, on 16 April, Rommel, thinking the 8th Machine Gun Battalion was still within the perimeter, personally directed a new attack from the west against the Ras el Medauar sector with six medium and twelve light tanks of the Ariete Division, plus the 62d Infantry Regiment of the Trento Division. When counterattacked by the 2-48th Australian Infantry, 26 German officers and 777 men surrendered.

Continuing the attack the next day with ten tanks, the Italians reached their forward posts, but when the infantry failed to follow, they withdrew losing five tanks.<sup>36</sup> During the next

ten days, the Australians gave the Germans and Italians little rest, conducting aggressive patrolling and bringing in approximately 1,700 prisoners. The Germans didn't attack again until their second abortive attempt on 30 April.

## Critical Events

The clearly recognizable turning point of the battle was when the 5th Panzer regimental commander, Colonel Olbrich, ordered his forces to withdraw.<sup>37</sup> A mile and one-half inside the Australian perimeter, having reached a slight rise across their front, the panzers suddenly faced a line of British 25-pounders, antitank guns, and tanks on their flanks. The British fire was devastating, and seventeen panzers were destroyed. As soon as the lead panzer battalion turned to avoid the British fire, it ran into the trailing panzer battalion. With this reverse in direction came confusion and an immediate shift of momentum to the defenders. This key event was further magnified by the actions of the German 8th Machine Gun Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Ponath, the battalion commander, had tried unsuccessfully to prevent Colonel Olbrich from withdrawing.<sup>38</sup> Without tank support, the 8th Machine Gun Battalion's men were lying on the ground, with no cover, under heavy fire, and their ammunition was running short. Colonel Ponath decided to pull the battalion back, and as they made the first rush to withdraw, he was killed, a bullet through his heart. The next senior officer ordered the men to cease fire, and many then surrendered.<sup>39</sup> With this event, the Australian infantry was able to restore the perimeter, except for minor pockets of German resistance. Other key events were B Company of the 2-17th's counterattack to eliminate the German resistance around Goschen's house, thereby relieving the pressure on D Company and Post R33, which was covering the gap; there was also the failure of the German engineers to lead the attacking columns directly to the perimeter opening, causing a delay in the attack time and a loss of the effects of preparatory fires; the numerous probes and the abortive attack on 11 April against the 2-17th's sector also alerted the Australians to the imminence of an attack. Forewarned, General Morshead concentrated his artillery, antitank guns, tanks, and infantry reserves to meet the German assault. All of these major occurrences favored the Australians and certainly helped effect a decisive victory.

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