

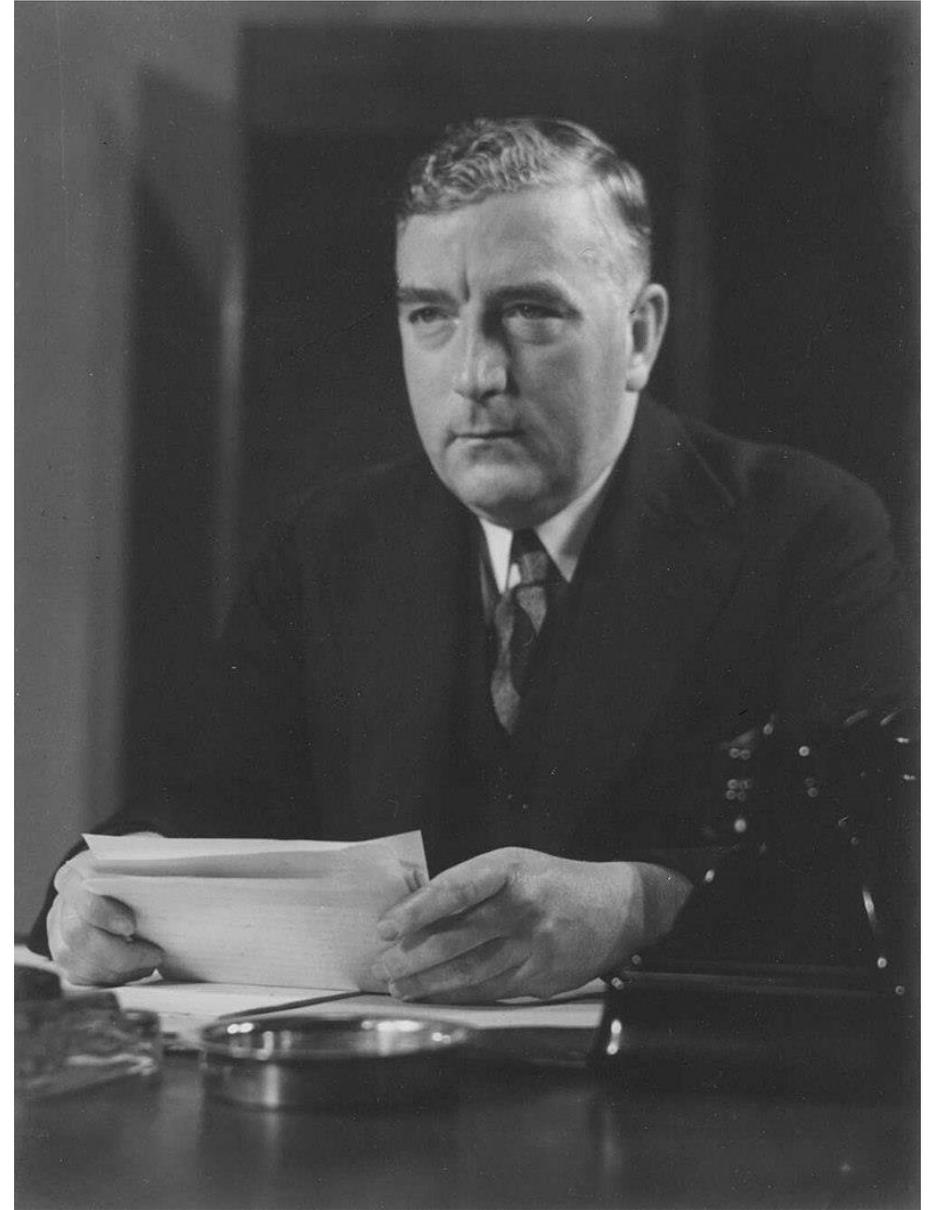
Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

20 January 1941



21 January 1941- Melbourne

- The Prime Minister left Sydney by air for London on 21st January for consultations in Britain on matters relating to the war policy of the British Commonwealth.



21 January 1941 - Tobruk

- From midnight to 2 a.m. the Terror, with two gunboats and a minesweeper, bombarded the inner defences, while destroyers stood ready to intercept the cruiser San Giorgio should she try to break out.
- From 3 to 6 a.m. on January 21st Wellingtons of Nos. 37 and 38 Squadrons were over the Tobruk area, bombing and drowning the noise of the assembling tanks and artillery.
- At 5.40 a.m. the 2/3rd Battalion, strongly supported by the artillery, crossed their start line and advanced to the attack; the engineers, having disarmed the booby traps earlier in the night, now cleared the mines and made passages through the wire and over the ditch. Within an hour the 16th Brigade with eighteen 'I' tanks had punched a hole a mile wide and a mile deep against resistance which varied from the negligible to the very stubborn.



21 January 1941 - Tobruk

- The 19th Brigade marched through the gap which they had made and moved from its start-line 5,000 yards inside the perimeter at 8.40 a.m.
- Behind the fire of seventy-eight guns the three battalions moved fast and in open order. The barrage advanced 200 yards each two minutes and the men had been schooled to keep close to it.
- On the right the 2/11th Battalion reached its objective on the top of the escarpment beyond the Bardia road without a casualty.
- The 2/4th, forward of the other battalions, with a detachment of the divisional cavalry on each flank came under machine-gun fire from Italian positions near the road junction and Captain Pinniger, commanding the left forward company, was hit.
- The Vickers guns with the battalion temporarily subdued the enemy fire and the battalion went on, captured the sector headquarters which was established in dugouts about 1,000 yards beyond the road and established itself on the upper shelf of the escarpment while patrols descended on to the next shelf.



21 January 1941 - Tobruk

- The fire from the left, however, hit the 2/8th Battalion far harder. The troop of cavalry with carriers and one tank which was leading the 2/8th on the left came under this fierce fire and answered it.
- Campbell's "C" Company following behind swung left towards the fire while the other three rifle companies kept moving to the objective. Campbell could see that he faced ten or more tanks which had been dug in hull down and were firing with their twin machine-guns.
- The company lay waiting for an artillery concentration to be brought down on the tanks, but seeing a platoon from "D" Company, which had become split during the left wheel, going straight into the attack on the right so that artillery fire was impossible without endangering them, Campbell attacked too.
- There followed a series of fierce fights between the infantrymen with their small arms, anti-tank rifles and grenades and the Italian tanks. Lieutenant Gately's platoon took three of them, then lay and fired while Lieutenant Anderson's platoon leap-frogged forward and overran another group. Lieutenant Russell's platoon on their left fired two anti-tank rifles with good effect.
- Then Gately and Anderson attacked in turns along the line of tanks, each fifty to 100 yards from the other, the line extending west for about 1,500 yards. In each fight the crews fought with determination, and did not give in until the attackers were at close quarters. Sergeant Burgess ran forward to one of the tanks and was trying to heave up the lid to drop in a grenade when he was hit by several bullets. "His last effort before he died, was to struggle to put the pin back and throw the grenade clear of his comrades."
- Fourteen tanks were stormed, few prisoners being taken, and the remaining eight surrendered. Captain Robertson and Lieutenants Anderson and Russell were wounded, Anderson mortally; only one sergeant in the company remained unwounded when the fight was over.
- The remaining two companies, which had wheeled and were now in the centre of the battalion's advance also came under fire from dug-in tanks and had hard fighting to reach the edge of the escarpment from a point north of the road junction to a distance of two miles to the west.

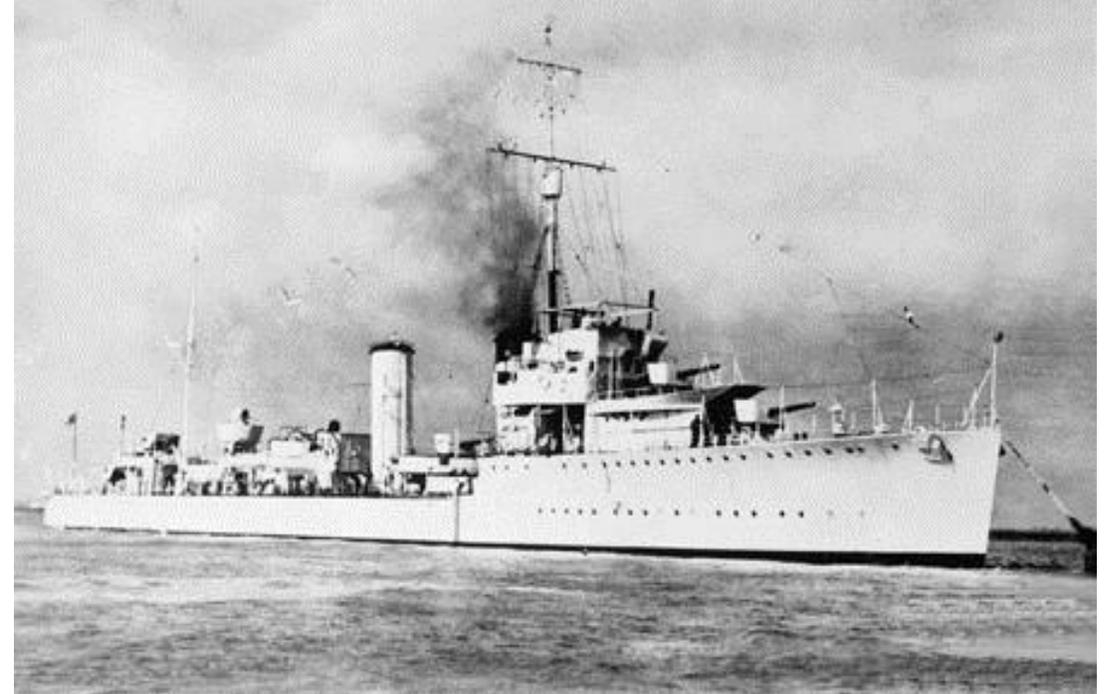
21 January 1941 - Tobruk

- As soon as the 2/8th became committed to this long fight Robertson decided to carry out the second phase of his advance—to exploit westward to Forts Pilastrino and Solaro.
- The 2/8th was to take Fort Pilastrino, the 2/4th Solaro, and the 2/11th to seize the escarpment overlooking Tobruk Harbour from the south. The attack would begin behind artillery fire at 2 p.m.
- The 2/8th encountered an Italian counterattack with tanks and infantry had to fight hard until two Matildas came up in support.
- The 2/4th and the 2/11th encountered less resistance and advanced to their objectives where they captured the fortress commander.



22nd January 1941 - Tobruk

- Stuart, her refit in Malta completed, reached Alexandria on the 10th January ready to rejoin the 10th Flotilla. His ship again available, Waller was relieved as Senior Naval Officer, Inshore Squadron.
- On the 19th (January) Cunningham reported to the Admiralty that in the last ten days the Inshore Squadron had ferried 35,000 Italian prisoners of war to Alexandria, besides supplying stores to Salum and Bardia at the rate of 500 tons daily; and that preparations were in hand for using the harbour at Tobruk as soon as possible after its capture.
- Stuart, Vampire and Voyager were back with the Inshore Squadron in time for the assault on Tobruk.
- At 4 a.m. on the 22nd of January Stuart and Vampire, patrolling north of Tobruk to intercept the Italian cruiser San Giorgio should she attempt to leave there, met instead the schooner Diego bound for Benghazi with barrels of lubricating oil. She was searched and her total complement of eight removed, after which Vampire sank her by gun fire.



HMAS Stuart

22 January 1941 - Tobruk

- Leading Aircraftman Parr was the only British prisoner in Tobruk.
- On the morning of 22 Jan he took charge of the gendarmerie barracks where he was being held and when the troops entered the town he was virtually in control of the local police.
- No. 3's Gladiators, maintained fighter patrols over and to the west of the battlefield. The Australians flew twenty sorties but were not engaged.

22 January 1941

- From dawn onwards came reports from all along the front that the Italians were intent on surrender.
- A gazelle ran across the front of the 2/1st and some men fired at it. Some hundreds of Italians promptly emerged 500 yards ahead waving white flags.
- Some distance past the El Adem road the line reached the edge of a two-miles wide saucer-like depression on the far rim of which could be seen a line of white flags. Eather and his adjutant, Captain Jackson, who were riding in a carrier with the front line of the battalion, drove forward and found some 3,000 Italians drawn up as if on parade with the officers in front holding their portmanteaus in their hands. The officers were shaven and wore well-tended uniforms and polished boots. The senior Italian officer looked with disdain at the dusty Eather in a drab greatcoat and over it, concealing the badges, a leather jerkin and scarf. After the Australians had taken the officers' pistols (the men carried no weapons) Eather sent the prisoners towards Pilastrino with no guards.
- On the perimeter one post fired for a while in the early morning and then surrendered, after which the 2/3rd led by two tanks began to march along the perimeter occupying post after post, most of which had evidently been abandoned the previous night.



22 January 1941

- Hennessy's carriers ran down the road until they were stopped by a barrier consisting of an iron girder supported by sandbags. Sergeant Mills and his crew pulled down this obstacle with the aid of two Italians who ran forward to help.
- A burst from a Bren gun was fired at an Italian who appeared to be about to shoot at Mills. Then Hennessy led the way into the town.
- As he was driving along the street a neat Italian officer came forward and explained that he had been sent to lead him to the naval headquarters where the commander was waiting to surrender.
- Hennessy sat him on the front of his carrier "as a guarantee of good faith" and continued to a large building facing a wide courtyard, where he was led to an Italian admiral surrounded by his staff.
- In a few minutes hundreds of Italians began to stream upstairs from sleeping quarters below naval headquarters and assemble in the courtyard.
- Although the town had been occupied, the line of five battalions continued sweeping the remainder of the fortress area but it was not until early in the afternoon that resistance collapsed in the western sector.



Members of C Company (mostly from 14 Platoon), Australian 2/11th Infantry Battalion, having penetrated the outer defences of Tobruk, assemble again on the escarpment on the south side of the harbour after attacking anti-aircraft gun positions.

22 January 1941 -Tobruk

- Again the battalion (2/Rifle Brigade) was ordered to make a diversion while the Australians put in their attack. Our diversions drew heavy retaliation from the guns in that sector of the perimeter.
- Progress in the main attack was slower than had been hoped and early on the second day the battalion was ordered to press its attacks home. This was a very different business from dodging about and drawing shellfire, to which our activities had so far been confined.
- However before our attacks began the Italians set fire to the oil by the Harbour. An enormous black cloud rose up from the town, as depressing to the defenders as it was encouraging to us.
- With evidence of Italian defeatism hanging over them, the attacks on the perimeter began. Against Medawwar Fort little progress could be made but Tom Bird, commanding S company's carriers, managed to penetrate the defences, got round behind the Fort and soon reported the capture of nine big guns, about 40 smaller guns, some 2000 prisoners and the contents of a particularly well stocked officers mess.
- He was ordered to hand the guns and prisoners to the Australians but to bring the rest back with him.



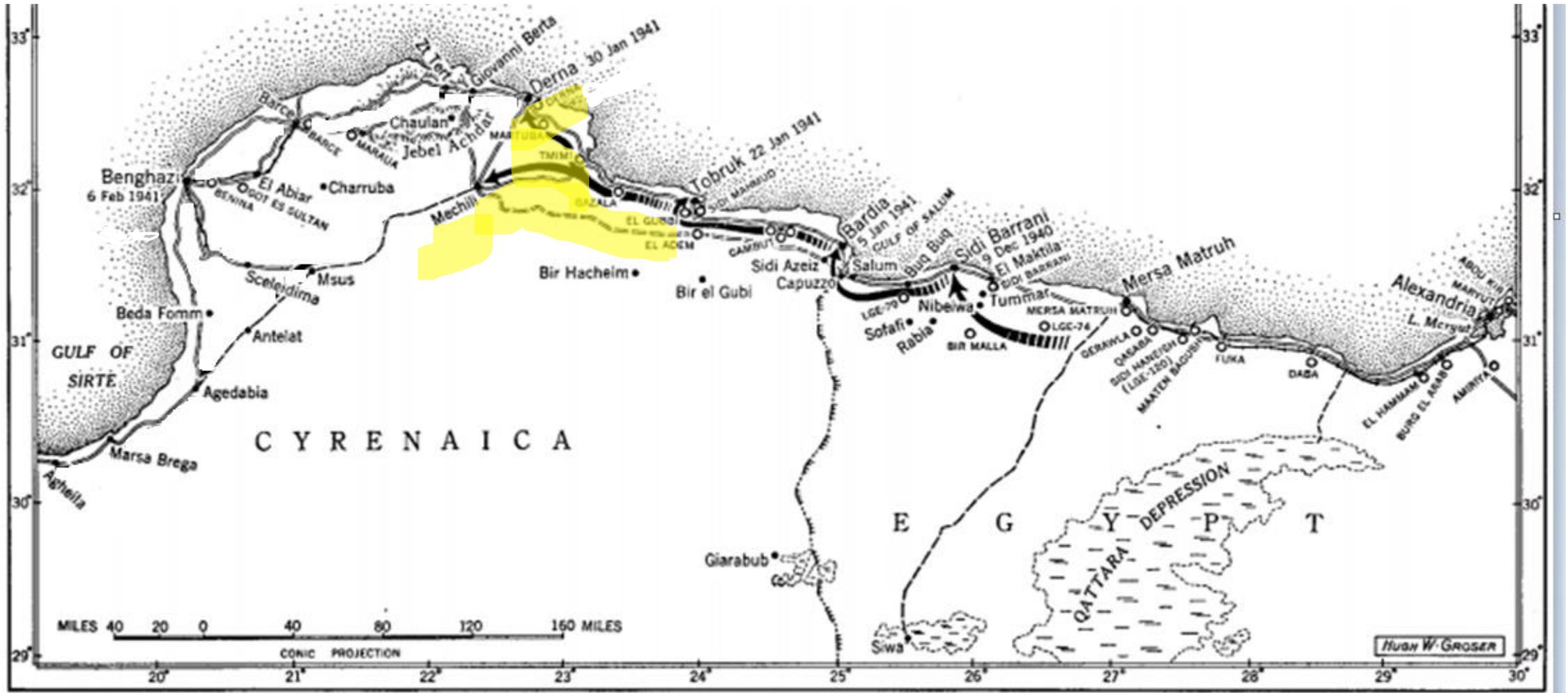
22 January 1941 -Tobruk

Some of the 25,000 prisoners captured at Tobruk. 208 field and medium guns, 23 medium tanks and 200 vehicles were captured. Water distilleries and wells able to provide 40,000 gallons of water a day were intact and there was enough tinned food to last the Italian garrison for two months.



The total casualties in 6 Div were 49 killed and 306 wounded.

24 January 1941 - Libya



By the surrender of Tobruk O'Connor's leading elements had already pressed on, the 7th Armoured Division reaching and fighting an action at Mechili on 24 January, while the 6th Australian Division had reached the Italian forward positions at Derna on the same day.

24 January 1941 - Libya

- No. 3 Squadron was ordered on 21st January to move to Tmimi as soon as possible, but although an advance party left Gambut that evening, the squadron as a whole did not reach Tmimi until 24th January by which time the Gladiators were needed at Martuba.
- On this occasion the movement was effected in less than twenty-four hours.

