

Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

27 January 1941

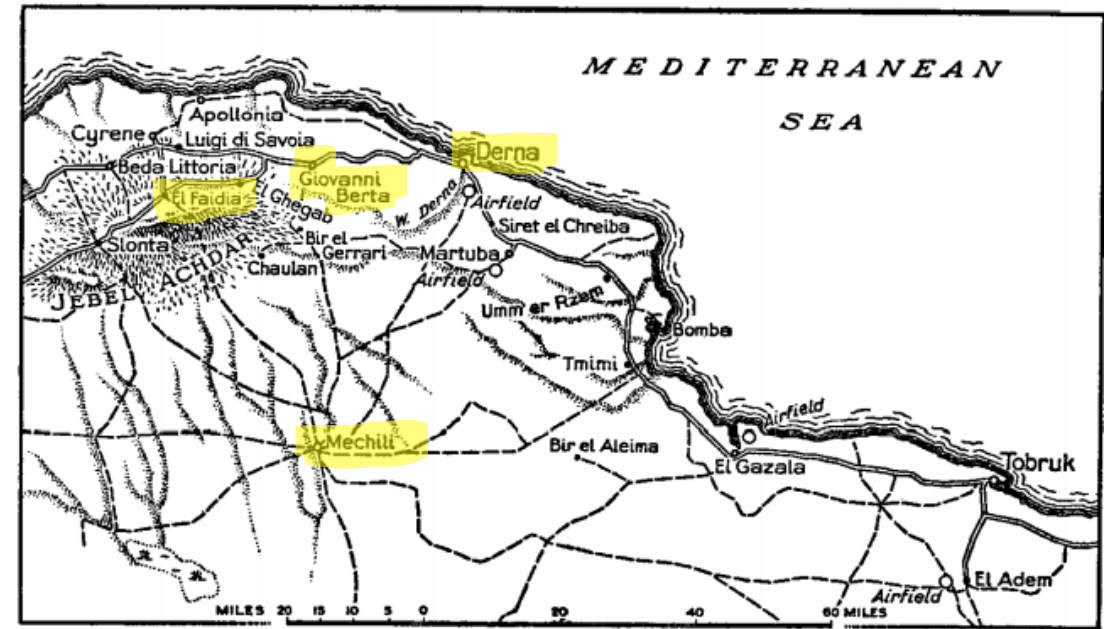


27 January 1941 - Libya

- The New Zealanders had not been allocated combat roles in these operations because their division was still awaiting the return of one of its brigades from Britain but all their signals, engineer and transport units had been supporting the operations.
- The first New Zealanders into Tobruk were engineers.
 - On 22 January Lieutenant Pollock, who commanded 10 Light Aid Detachment, now attached to 5 Field Park Company, entered behind the Australian infantry to establish an Advanced Ordnance Workshop.
 - The following day a detachment from 5 Field Park Company was working beyond Tobruk with the British engineers who were lifting mines from the main highway.
 - The rest of the company entered the town with 10 Light Aid Detachment on 25 January. The engineers set about lifting mines, salvaging Italian vehicles and repairing the town's water system;
 - the LAD men salvaged trucks and then went forward two days later to Tmimi, close by the seaplane base at Bomba.
- 4 NZ RMT Company had been withdrawn from the Sollum area and kept standing by for orders, which came immediately after the capture of Tobruk and sent it to carry first 19 Australian Brigade and then 17 Australian Brigade to the outskirts of Derna.

27 January 1941 - Libya

- At daybreak on the 27th patrols of the 7th Armoured Division found that the Italian force at **Mechili** had vanished in the night.
- The main body of this Italian force was discovered from the air to be moving north-west towards **El Faidia**.
- O'Connor now decided that, while reinforcements and supplies were brought forward, the 6th Division should press on towards **Derna** and **Giovanni Berta** where there were still, apparently, some 6,500 Italian troops.
- During 27th January the Italians resisted strongly on the heights above Derna. However, Shanahan's company of the 2/11th captured Fort Rudero, taking 290 prisoners and five field guns in and round the fort, which they held until Italian artillery fire in this open area became so heavy and accurate that Shanahan temporarily withdrew his men to the shelter of near-by wadis.
- During the night patrols of the 2/11th succeeded in clearing more enemy posts and some field guns from the top of the escarpment.



27 January 1941 - Tokyo

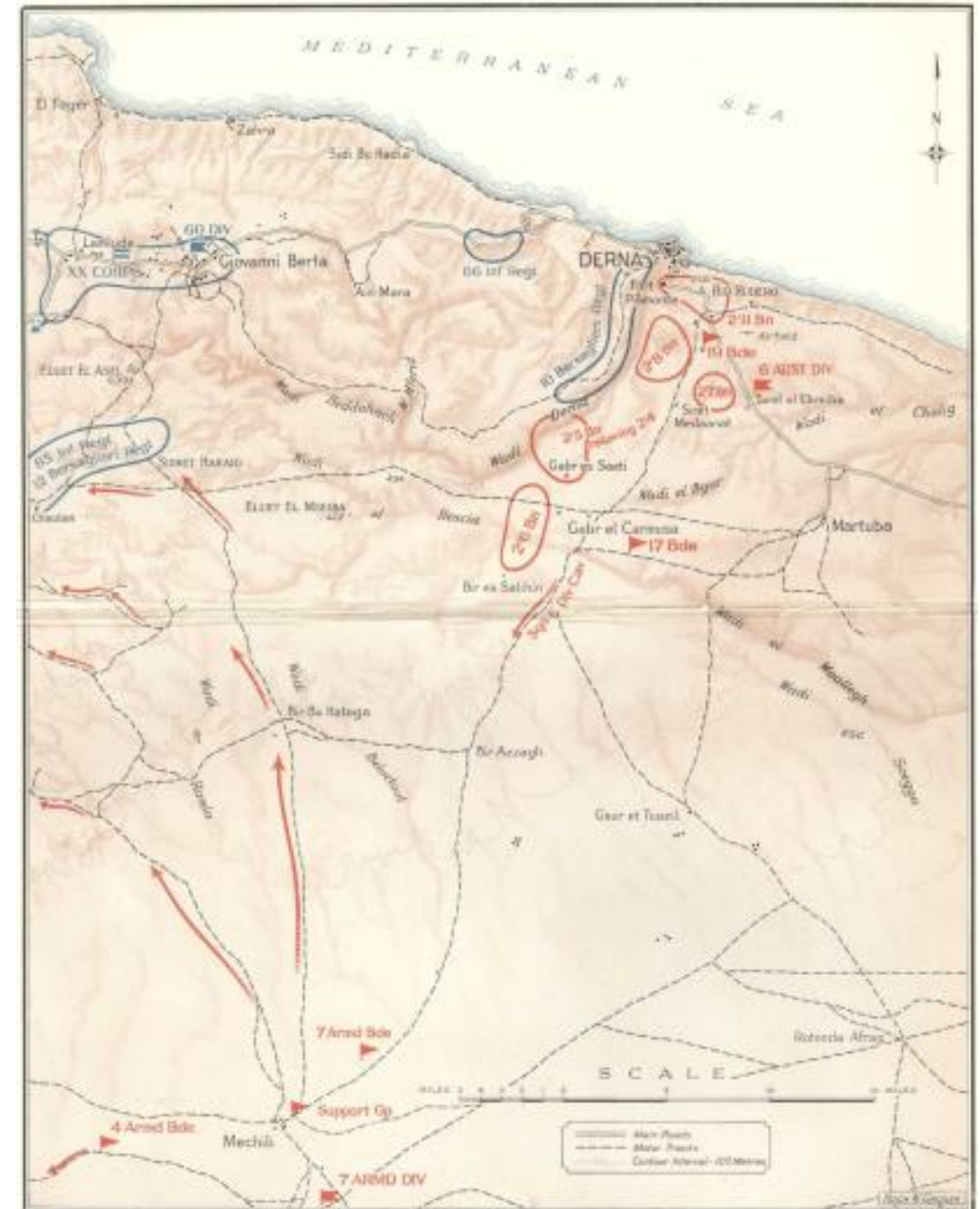
- Joseph Grew, the US Ambassador in Tokyo, cabled Secretary of State, Hull, on 27th January 1941 that there was talk in Tokyo that a surprise mass attack on Pearl Harbour was planned by the Japanese military forces in case of "trouble" between Japan and the United States.
- This was passed on to the War and Navy Departments.



Japanese Ambassador Admiral Nomura (left) and Special Envoy Kurusu (right) meet Secretary of State Hull on 17 November 1941.

28 January 1941 - Libya

- By morning of the 28th, the ridges on top of the final slope leading down to Derna were in the hands of the West Australians, who could then look down into the town and see every movement on the roads below them.
- The fact that the ridges had been cleared of the enemy did not, however, reduce the volume of artillery fire which the Italian guns, firing from west of Derna, continued to bring down along the road.
- "The shelling, judged by 1918 European standards is really heavy," Louch reported to Robertson. "He has more guns and far more shells than we have..."
- The Australian artillery were limited to ten rounds a gun a day.
- Louch was convinced that an effective attack on Derna from the southeast could not be made without greater artillery support.



28 January 1941 - Libya

- No. 3 RAAF flew only forty-four patrols up to 28th January, cover being provided either over the 19th Australian Brigade near Derna or the armoured division in the Mechili sector.
- On 25th January, when five Gladiators were patrolling at 2,000 feet, eight miles south-east of Mechili, they were attacked by an equal number of G-50 fighters which dived from 10,000 feet.
- The advantage in height proved decisive. Four Australians escaped in damaged aircraft but Flying Officer Campbell was shot down and killed.



Fiat G.50

29 January 1941 - Greece

- On 29th January Metaxas (photo), the prime minister and effective dictator of Greece, died.
- He was succeeded by M. Koryzis, Governor of the National Bank who, though a good administrator, had no political background.



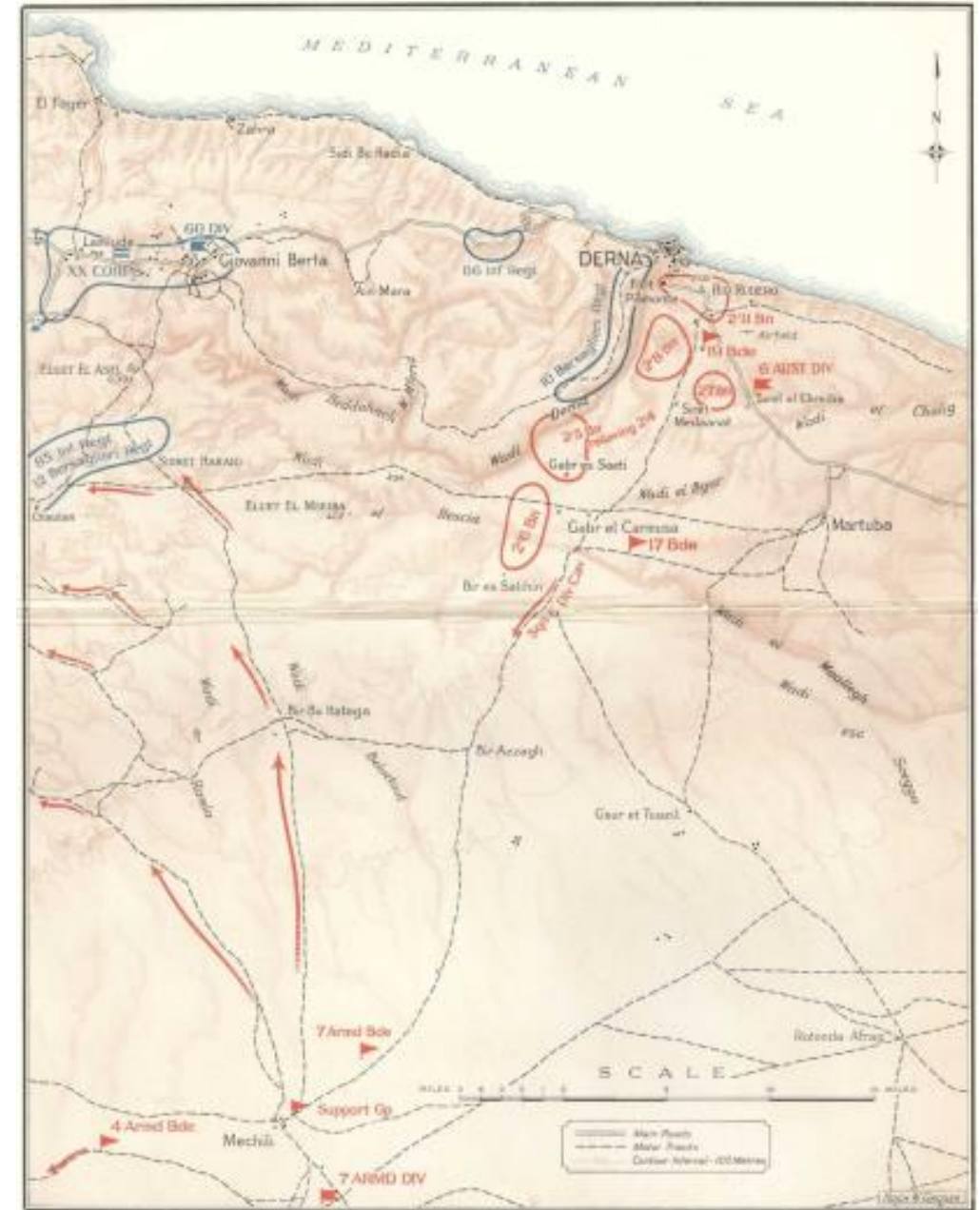
29 January 1941 -

- On 29th January No. 3 Squadron began re-arming with Hurricane aircraft and were called on very infrequently for operations during the final stages of the conquest of Cyrenaica.



29/30 Jan 1941 - Libya

- On the evening of the 28th, some armoured cars of the 11th Hussars were in the Chaulan area where they made contact with an Italian force with light guns which was evidently deployed across the tracks leading from the south through the hills to the colony area of Giovanni Berta.
- The shelling of the 2/11th's area was particularly heavy during the evening of the 29th, which had been a relatively quiet day. Louch decided this might be a "final flutter" before a withdrawal from Derna and ordered that a patrol be sent forward along the road when the artillery fire ceased late that night. The patrol was fired upon.
- In the early hours of the morning of the 30th fires were seen blazing in Derna. Lieutenant Johnson thereupon led a patrol towards the southern edge of the town but it, too, was fired on by a machine-gun.
- However, soon after daylight, a party of Libyans climbed up the scarp and informed Louch that the Italians had gone.
- Louch sent a patrol down the way the Libyans had come and, as soon as he had seen that they entered the town without opposition, he sent one company along the road, in which a large crater had been blown, and another clambering down the escarpment.



30 January – East Africa

- Towards the end of January Wavell,
 - encouraged by the success of a small mobile force under Brigadier Messervy that had been harassing the Italians in the Kassala area, and
 - by the efforts of Brigadier Sandford and Colonel Wingate, who were conducting a guerilla campaign within Abyssinia,
- instructed General Platt in the Sudan, who then had two divisions—the 4th and 5th Indian—to press on towards Asmara.



Sandford (l), Wingate (r) and Emperor Haile Selassie.

30 January 1941 - Derna

- At Derna the desert ended. A town of some 10,000 people, it was the eastern outpost of the area of the Italian colonial settlements which extended over the Jebel Achdar and included the fertile plains round Barce and Benghazi.
- The town appeared to have been deserted except by small bands of Arabs who were industriously piling loot on to the backs of donkeys—cases of food, sewing machines, tables and chairs, side - boards filled with cutlery.
- Little damage had been done by air bombardment and the houses appeared to have been abandoned in haste some days before.



30 January 1941 - Derna

- Wholesale looting by the Libyans was quickly stopped by patrols of the 2/11th and by the provosts of the 6th Division, but, as more units passed through the town, small parties both of Australian and British troops carried on the work the Libyans had begun.
- There were sharp complaints at O'Connor's headquarters that the Australians had "looted Derna".
- The facts are that the town was promptly policed from the day that the 2/11th entered. On that day twelve Australians were arrested and charged with having stolen watches, fowls or wine.
- Captain Hawker, the Australian deputy-assistant provost-marshal, knowing that his force was being maligned by itinerant staff officers, interrogated many of the Libyan townspeople and reached the conclusion that the town had already been looted on four separate occasions:
 - first, by the Italian troops when the civilians were removed;
 - secondly, when the Italian military police were withdrawn and Libyan police were left in charge;
 - thirdly, when the native police were withdrawn; and
 - fourthly, by the Arabs when the garrison left the town.
- Such looting as occurred in the almost-empty town in the twenty-four hours after the arrival of the Australians was a fifth and relatively unimportant instalment.

30 January 1941 – Suez Canal

- Aircraft dropped the first mines in the Suez Canal on the 30th January 1941.
- The resultant blockage of the canal delayed the passage of Waterhen to the Mediterranean after completion of her repairs at Port Tewfik.



HMAS Waterhen underway

31 January 1941 - Derna

- Road discipline was appalling (wrote one diarist). No attempt to police or to reserve the road. The A.S.C. are the worst offenders, closely followed by the R.A.A.F. and divisional headquarters.
- General Mackay (photo), who arrived at Derna on the 31st, was persuaded the provosts were not properly directing the traffic which now began to pour through the town.
- For a time he himself took up a position at a corner and directed the long line of trucks which carried the 19th Brigade and the units attached to it through Derna.
- Mackay sent a memorandum to all commanding officers giving detailed instructions concerning the management of road traffic. He pointed out that, despite the "record job" of the engineers in opening a road to Derna, the advance was delayed by the
- "cluttering of the road by small unauthorised captured Fiat cars burning Australian Government petrol and driven by officers and others," by drivers stopping their vehicles on the road instead of drawing to the side, by Arabs with donkeys, by signal-laying vehicles and other transgressors.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020048

January 1941 - Melbourne

- The latest intelligence on the performance of Japanese carrier aircraft was given to the Australian War Cabinet by the Minister for Air in January.
- Of chief interest was a new naval single-seater fighter. Its armament was said to be two 20-mm cannon and two 7.7-mm machine-guns and its top speed was given as 300 miles an hour.
- The Minister for the Army referred to the impression that the Wirraway would generally be able to counter Japanese seaborne aircraft. This information suggested that the Wirraway would not be able to compete with them.
- Burnett (photo), the CAS, who was present, replied that he thought the high-powered Japanese aircraft referred to would be relatively few in number. Having regard to the type of Japanese aircraft that would be used in an attack on Australia he believed that the Wirraway would be able to make "quite a good show". It was an obsolete type, but it had some fighting value.



January 1941 - UK

- No 10 Squadron at Mount Batten suffered heavily from enemy air raids during January.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

SUK10476

PLYMOUTH, ENGLAND. DAMAGED BUILDINGS IN RUINS AT RAF STATION, MOUNT BATTEN. SMOKE SEEN IN THE BACKGROUND IS RISING FROM THE TURNCHAPEL OIL TANKS. (Actually 1940-11-28.)

1 February 1941 – English Channel

- An R.A.A.F. pilot, Flight Lieutenant Oakley, began to operate with No. 217 Squadron R.A.F. from St Eval during January.
- The squadron was flying security patrols, anti-shipping reconnaissance, and strikes against French harbours and airfields.
- Oakley made several offensive sorties during his first week on duty.
- On 1st February, flying in advance of the main force on an attack against the cruiser Hipper at Brest, in appalling weather he sent a message (presumably after attacking) that he would attempt to return with only one engine functioning.
- The wind was blowing at forty knots from the north and the other aircraft had already been recalled.
- He failed to return.
- Air-sea rescue searches failed to locate any trace of Oakley or his aircraft.



Two RAF Bristol Beauforts of 217 Squadron patrolling the British coast near St. Eval, Cornwall.

2 February 1941 – English Channel

- On 2nd February the Sunderlands, of No 10 Squadron, were finally called upon to institute a blocking patrol of Brest where a German heavy cruiser had been located.
- This surface raider had already attacked one convoy routed to Sierra Leone and as it was apparently ready to sail on a similar operation Birch was dispatched in extremely adverse weather to conduct a night patrol near Ushant to locate and shadow the vessel should it indeed sail.
- He was relieved at dawn by another aircraft piloted by Flight Lieutenant Havyatt, but neither crew made any enemy sighting, and the cruiser was later identified from photographs as being still in harbour.



Plymouth, England. C. 1940-07. Portrait of Flight Lieutenant H. Birch and Flying Officer A. G. H. Wearne (left), pilots of No. 10 Squadron RAAF, based at RAF Station Mount Batten.

Early February 1941

- A reinforcement of one officer and seventy-five airmen arrived at Mount Batten from Australia early in February and enabled some easing of the strain under which maintenance crews had been working.



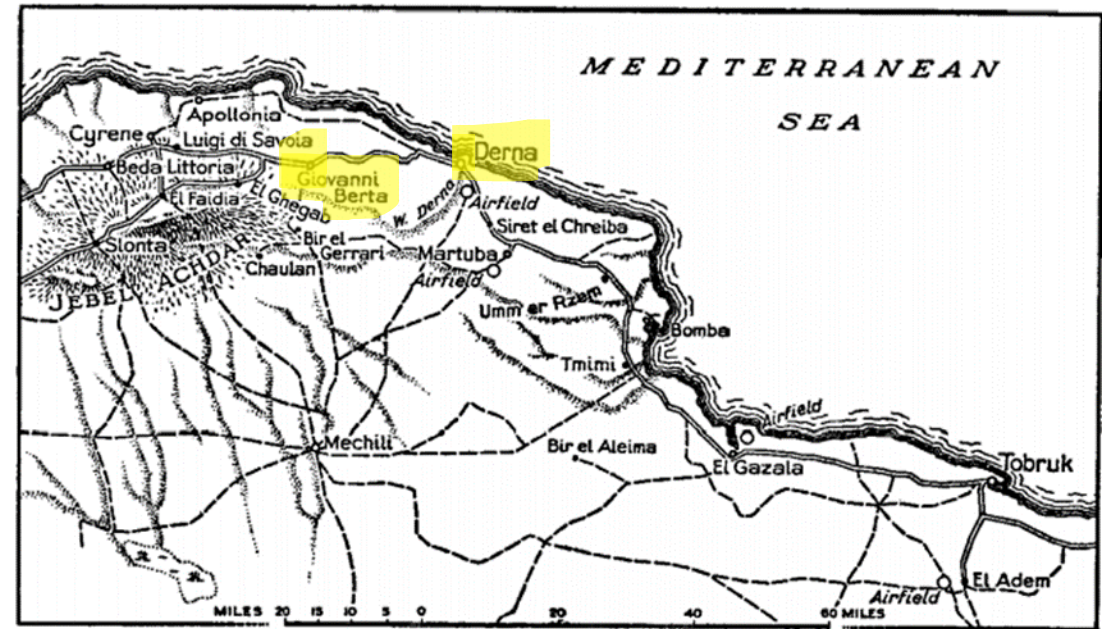
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

SUK15135

Plymouth, England. C. 1941-02. Group portrait of the Maintenance Section of No. 10 Squadron (Sunderland) RAAF at RAF Station Mount Batten.

1/2 February - Djebel Achdar

- On the 1st and 2nd of February the 6th division, advancing mostly on foot pursued the retreating Italians to Giovanni Berta.
- The Italian rearguard cratered and mined the road as they went and defended strong positions with artillery and machine guns until forced out.
- The Italians made no attempt to hold Giovanni Berta and the carriers of the 2/7th Battalion and Onslow's cavalry carriers entered the town in the afternoon of the 2nd February.
- Mackay ordered a continued advance on the 3rd.



2 February 1941 - Gaza

- Menzies reached Palestine on 2nd February. He spent most of his time in Palestine visiting Australian troops in Gaza.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

043259

INSPECTION OF THE 2/1ST AUSTRALIAN GENERAL HOSPITAL AT GAZA RIDGE, 1941-02. LEFT TO RIGHT: BLAMEY, MATRON FALL, MENZIES, MATRON WILSON, MATRON-IN-CHIEF, AND LT-COL ADEY, CO 2/1ST.

January 1941

- [Derna action, 1941 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](https://www.awm.gov.au/collect/C188691)
- <https://www.awm.gov.au/collect/C188691>
- On 23 January 1941, members of the Australian 6th Division started their advance towards Derna.
- On 30 January, 1941, an Australian patrol entered Derna.
- 4 Minutes