

# Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

## 6 January 1941



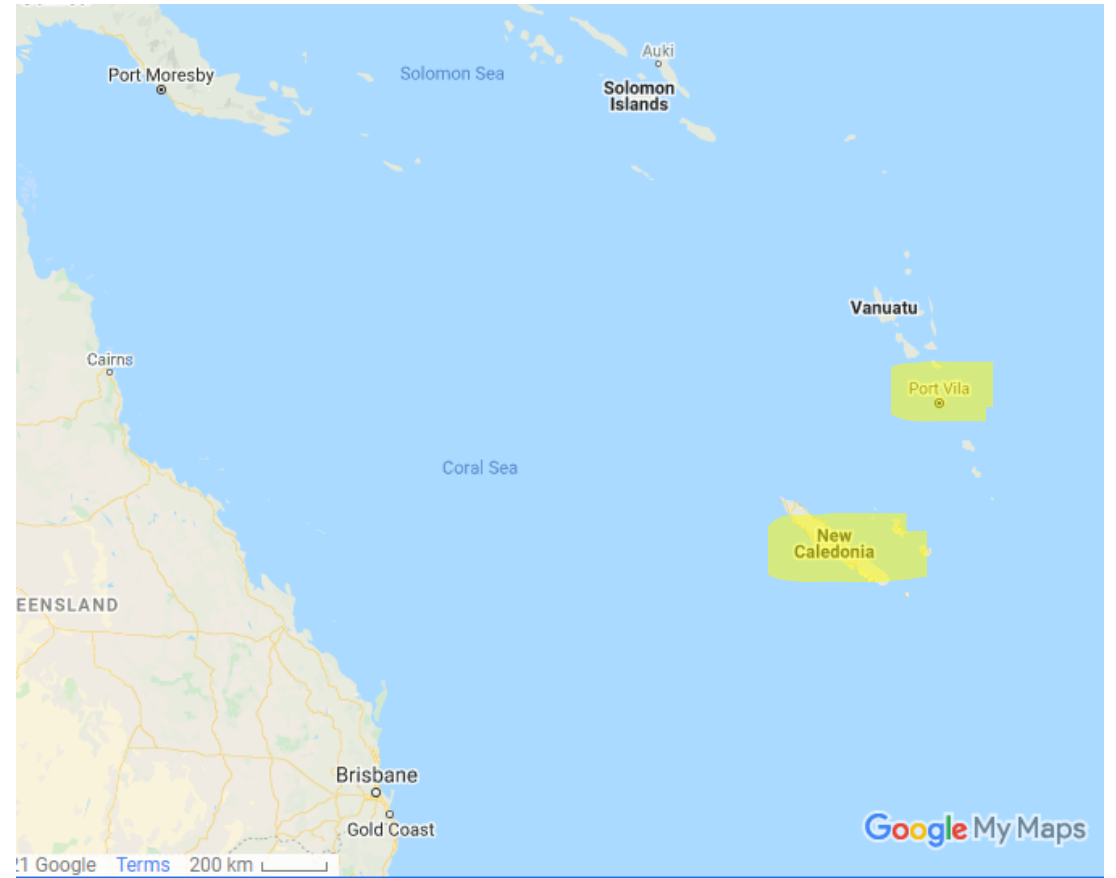
# 6 January

- Britain's dollar supply was dwindling rapidly and loans by the United States to foreign powers for the purchase of weapons were prohibited.
- President Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address to Congress on 6th January, provided the answer: Lend-Lease.

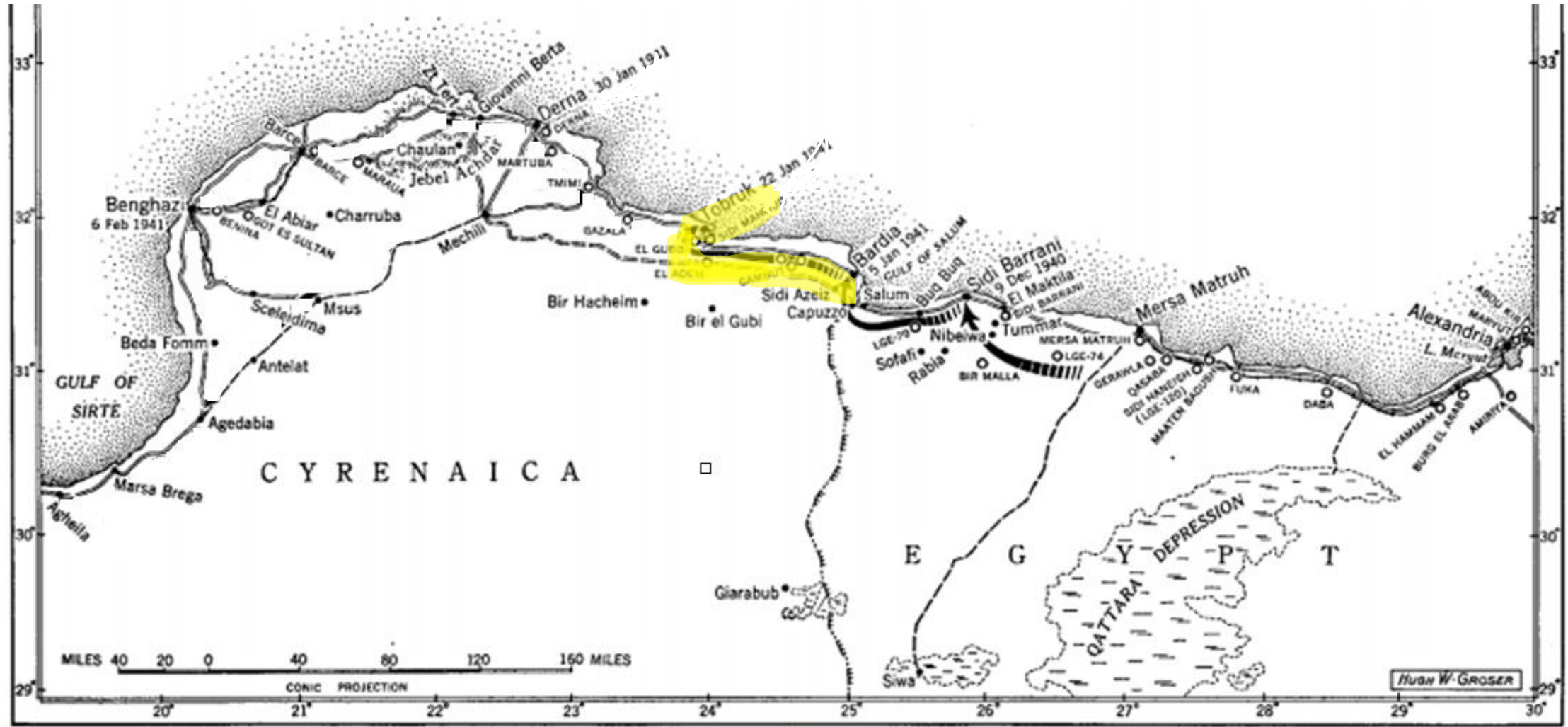


# 7 January 1941 - Melbourne

- At a meeting on 7th January 1941, War Cabinet approved financial assistance to the Free French forces in Oceania with special reference to military requirements.



# 7 January 1941 - Tobruk



Before midday on the 7th the infantry had deployed opposite the eastern face of the Tobruk defences, the 2/4th Battalion on the right with its right flank about 1,000 yards from the coast, the 2/8th in the centre and the 2/11th on the left.

# 7 January 1941 - Tobruk

- As at Bardia the Italian defences consisted of a semicircle of concreted underground posts behind barbed wire entanglements five feet high.
- Outside this was an uncompleted anti-tank ditch; patrols were to discover that for four miles east of the El Adem road it was very shallow and on the western face of the defences there was no ditch at all, though a deep wadi served the purpose.
- Again the posts were two deep, each inner post being midway between two outer posts, and each outer post protected by its own anti-tank ditch and wire. The outer posts were generally 600 to 800 yards apart and the inner line 500 yards behind the outer.
- Whereas there were eighty posts along the seventeen-mile perimeter at Bardia there were 128 along the thirty-mile front at Tobruk. Thus, as long as the armoured division could fend off the Italian forces to the west—and so far the Italian commanders had seldom attempted a counter-attack—the task of the Australian division at Tobruk might be easier than at Bardia the line being longer and the garrison smaller.



# 7 January 1941 - Tobruk

- After surrounding Tobruk, the WDF had exhausted captured Italian supplies. Concerned mostly about not having fuel and supplies for the offensive after the fall of Tobruk, O'Connor delayed the attack to accumulate more supplies.
- Sandstorms upset all calculations. One convoy carrying five days' supplies for 7th Armoured Division was lost in a storm for four days. Water was a problem, as usual, and at first had to be carried from Capuzzo to fill cisterns at Gambut: once again the allowance was down to half a gallon a day.
- The two most depleted units of the armoured division, the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars and the 6th Royal Tank Regiment, were withdrawn and their tanks distributed to the other four regiments of the armoured brigades.
- The assault on the fortress would again have to be carried out by the infantry and the greatly-reduced battalion of Matildas.
- The first wave of the attack was to be the 16th Australian Brigade and the 7th Royal Tank Regiment, followed by the 17th Australian Brigade and the 19th Australian Brigade.
- The 7th Armoured Division would make a diversion along the Western perimeter to pin down the defenders.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

006103

GENERAL O'CONNOR AND GENERAL MACKAY AT 6TH DIVISION HEADQUARTERS. (NEGATIVE BY D. PARER) (15 February 1941).

# 7 January 1941 - Tobruk

- The campaign was going so well that senior officers became worried by signs of what Mackay (photo) described as a "picnic spirit".
- In a sharp message to the units he said: "Civilianism is beginning to break out", and he complained of "promiscuous firing of rifles and exploding of bombs", of "dressing in articles of Italian uniform like clowns and not like soldiers", of "collecting of dogs and looking after dogs instead of men" and of "fraternisation with prisoners."
- "We must keep our heads and maintain perspective and poise," he concluded. "If we do not we shall quickly lose efficiency and slip to the level of the foe we are hoping to defeat."

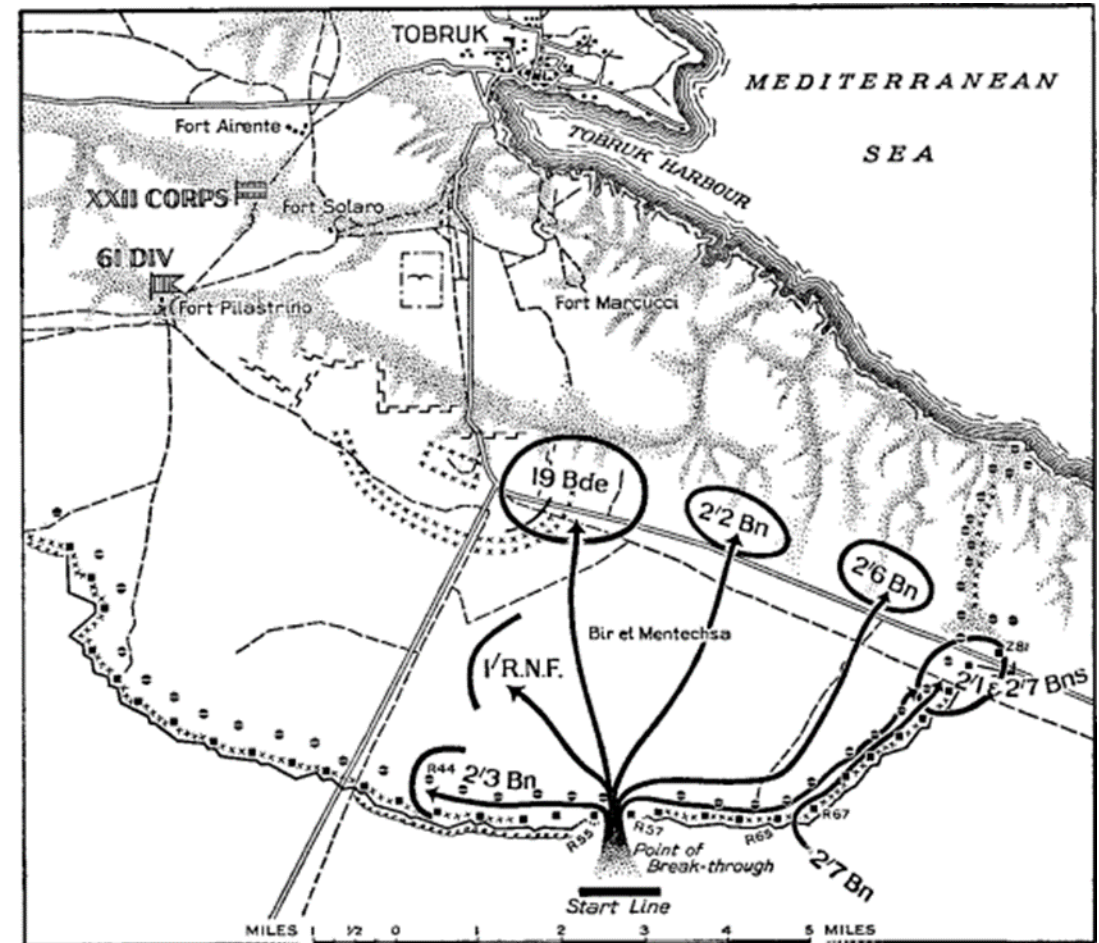


AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020048

# 7 January 1941 - Tobruk

- The men were living under extremely arduous conditions. They slept in holes dug in the stony ground, and these were their only protection against intermittent shell fire and the wind and dust.
- As at Bardia the thermos bombs which the Italians had scattered round the perimeter were a constant anxiety.
- The nights were not so cold as at Bardia, but the dust storms were far more severe. Water was rationed to half a gallon a man daily, until a supply of washing water was found at El Adem and each man was allowed three-quarters of a gallon a day for washing himself and his clothing. Mess and kitchen gear had to be cleaned with sand.
- No "canteen goods" were available to vary the monotonous food, but there was tobacco and some units had supplies of captured tinned tomato and tinned veal.
- "Desert sores" began to appear on hands and faces. Fleas and, in a few units, lice picked up in the ill-kept Italian dugouts at Bardia were a minor torment.
- The Official Historian records that: "In these weeks a few men chose to wound themselves rather than continue to endure the discomforts and dangers."



The plan of attack.



# 8 January 1941 - Melbourne

- Churchill in a cable sent in Christmas week thanked Australia for the offer of troops, equipment and ammunition for Malaya and promised that arrangements would be made to relieve the Australian troops in May 1941 by the equivalent of a division from India.
- He thought the danger of Japan going to war with the British Empire had lessened and that the growing naval and military advantages in the Mediterranean would also have their effect on Japanese conduct.
- It would be quite impossible for the British fleet to leave the Mediterranean at the present juncture without throwing away irretrievably all that had been gained there and all prospects for the future.
- Anxieties in the East must be borne "patiently and doggedly", it always being understood that if Australia were seriously threatened by invasion Britain would not hesitate to sacrifice the Mediterranean position for the sake of Australia.
- As regards the recommended air reinforcements for Singapore it was difficult, he said, to make any precise commitment as to numbers.
- British policy was to build up as large as possible a fleet, army and air force in the Middle East and keep this in a fluid condition, either to prosecute the war in Libya, Greece and presently Thrace or reinforce Singapore should the Japanese attitude change for the worse.
- The substance of this cablegram was communicated to the Advisory War Council by the Prime Minister on 8th January 1941.

# 8 January 1941

- By 8th January the Gladiator flights of No 3 RAAF had moved to a landing field four miles north of Gambut.



# 8 January 1941 - London

- The Chiefs of Staff in London reviewed the forces available in Malaya, and on 8th January reported that although 586 would be ideal, 336 aircraft would give a fair degree of security; and in any event no more could be provided before the end of 1941.
- They would try to form five fighter squadrons for the Far East during the year. (There were then no modern fighters there.)
- They accepted the requirement for 26 battalions and indicated that this total would be reached by June.

# 10 January 1941 - London

- On the 10th January 1941 Churchill told Wavell that nothing must hamper the capture of Tobruk, but that
- "thereafter all operations in Libya are subordinated to aiding Greece".



# 11 January 1941 – Middle East

- The Lysander flight of No 3 RAAF now re-equipped with Gladiators and by the 11th, caught up with the rest of the squadron at Gambut.
- At the request of HQ R.A.F. Middle East, the gunners, wireless operators and photographers and ground tradesmen associated with them, rendered superfluous by the conversion to single-seaters, were attached to R.A.F. squadrons which were under strength.



Gloster Gladiator



# 11 January 1941 - Egypt

- Brigadier Morshead arrived in Egypt from England in late December with the 18th Australian Brigade. General Blamey warned him that his brigade would be required to capture Giarabub towards the end of January.
- On 9th January when Morshead arrived at Siwa to reconnoitre, news reached Fergusson from Cairo that an intercepted Italian message indicated that a force from Benghazi was moving to Giarabub's assistance.
- The cavalry set off into the desert scouting on a twenty-mile front, leaving Giarabub besieged by one troop. Aircraft were summoned and they halted and destroyed the convoy.



# 11 January 1941 - Libya

- On the 9th and 10th Morshead went forward with the cavalry to examine the lay of the land. On both days the Italian artillery and machine-gun posts fired briskly, and on the 11th three Italian aircraft took part in the daily skirmish.
- On each of the following five days detachments drove forward and drew artillery fire, on one occasion escorting O'Grady's guns which shelled the aerodrome and destroyed an aircraft. Thenceforward the aerodrome was not used, but the aircraft continued to supply Giarabub by dropping their cargoes on the soft sand behind the fort.



GIARABUB, LIBYA, 1941-04-16. AN AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ITALIAN STRONGHOLD

- [Franklin D. Roosevelt "Four Freedoms" Speech - January 6, 1941 – YouTube](#)
- [FDR, "The Four Freedoms," Speech Text - Voices of Democracy \(umd.edu\)](#)
- Video of Roosevelt's State of the Union address.
- Text of Roosevelt's State of the Union address.