

# Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

## 17 March 1941



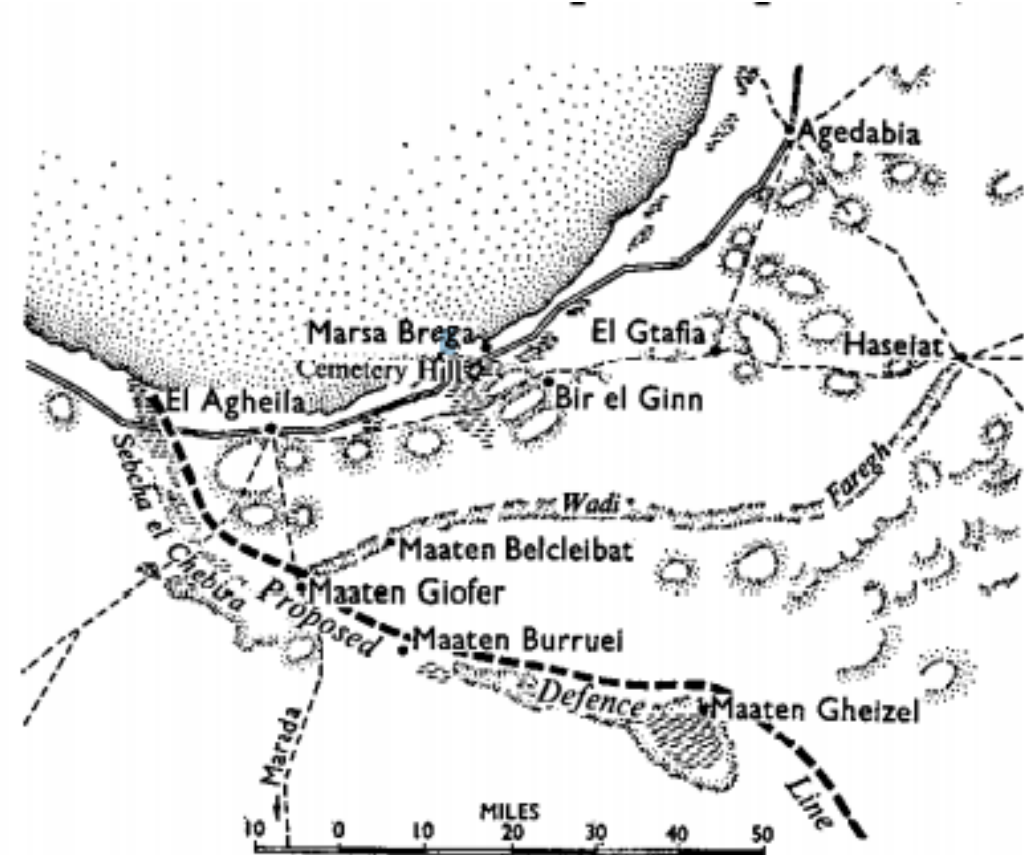
# 17 March 1941 - Libya

- In a memorandum written on 17th March addressed to General Neame he reviewed the current situation and defence policy, and requested that the 20th Brigade should be relieved.
- The brigade's armament, he pointed out, was far from complete.
- Against a mobile armoured enemy it would be practically immobile. If a German armoured formation advanced, the brigade's presence in the forward area would only embarrass the 2nd Armoured Division by restricting its mobility and liberty of action.
- He submitted that it should be moved to the Benghazi-Barce area to execute work on defences already contemplated there.



# 17 March 1941 - Libya

- On the day that Morshead wrote this memorandum he was unexpectedly summoned to meet General Dill and General Wavell, who had flown to Neame's headquarters.
- As soon as Dill and Wavell met Morshead near Beda Fomm, Wavell asked him for his appreciation. This he gave in the terms of the memorandum he had just composed, urging that the frontier defence should be based on the line of salt lakes from El Agheila to Maaten Gheizel and requesting that his unmotorised infantry should be withdrawn.



Morshead's proposed defence line

# 17 March 1941 - Libya

- Dill commented that he understood that the Marsa Brega position was well suited to the defence. Morshead replied that there were no more features in the surrounding country than on a billiard table.
- Wavell, turning to Neame, asked him to relieve the 20th Brigade in accordance with Morshead's request. Neame said that it could be arranged in about a week.
- "In a week," Morshead replied, "it cannot wait a week. Not a day can be lost."
- Back in Cairo next day, Dill telegraphed similar views to London. The outstanding fact, he said, was that between El Agheila and Benghazi the desert was so open and so suitable for armoured vehicles that, other things being equal, the stronger fleet would win; there were no infantry holding positions.



General Sir John Dill, CIGS, in Egypt, 18 February 1941.



# 17 March 1941 - Egypt

- On 8th March when the first "flight" of Lustre Force was landing at Piraeus, the 16th Australian Brigade was at Tobruk, the 19th near Tobra in western Cyrenaica, the 17th in position on the Tripolitanian frontier beyond Agedabia.
- That day the 16th travelled back to Mersa Matruh.
- From Matruh the brigade moved to its old camp at Amiriya, where the men were given leave in Alexandria.
- Hundreds were still on leave in Alexandria on the night of the 17th when an order arrived that the brigade would embark early next day.
- Military police, who were hurried into the city to summon the holiday-makers to their units, entered cafes and, disregarding secrecy, shouted that all men of the 16th Brigade must return to camp because they were to move next morning.
- Posters were placed in the streets announcing the news.
- All night men streamed back to Amiriya, in taxi-cabs, gharries and on foot; by dawn few were missing.
- For example, when the 2/2nd Battalion embarked only two were absent without leave.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT. 1941-06. SISTER JEANNE FREEMAN, AUSTRALIAN ARMY NURSING SERVICE, IN A GHARRI WHICH WAS USED TO TRANSPORT THE HOSPITAL STAFF.

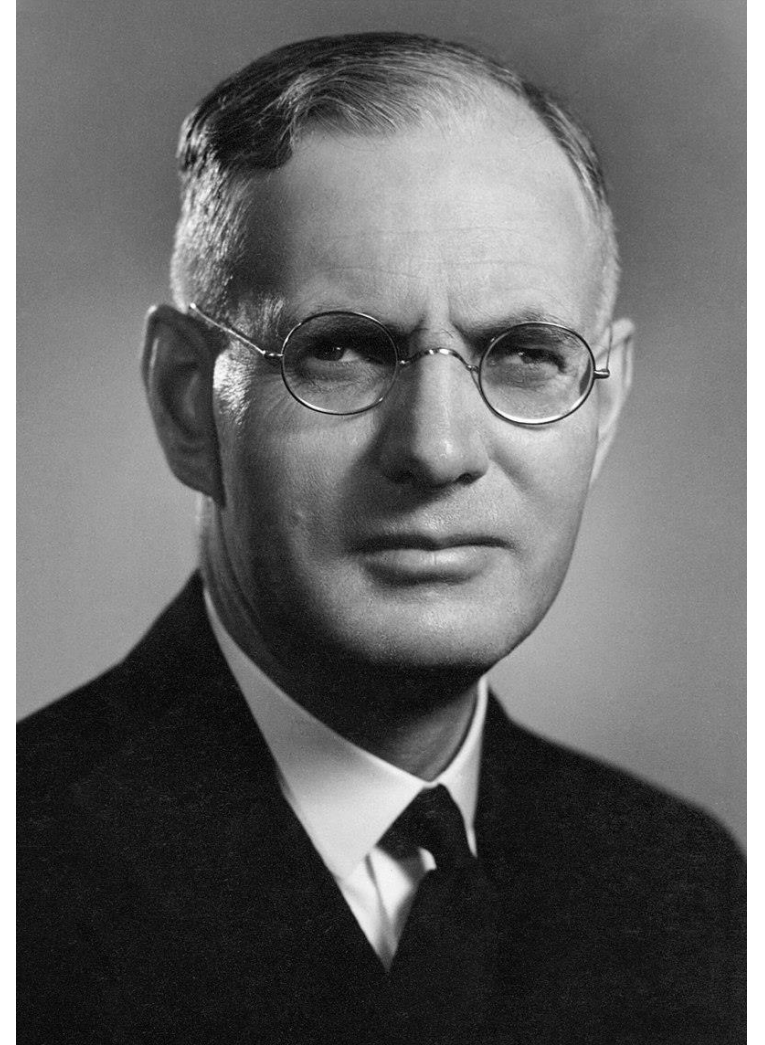
# 17-18 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- On the 17th March Perth, Orion, and Ajax again left Alexandria with troops.
- This time Perth carried a total of 554 officers and men, mostly New Zealanders.
- These troops had few small kitbags, and carried blankets and landing rations, cookers, Bren guns and stands.
- Piraeus was reached at noon on the 18th, and disembarkation to the music of the ship's band commenced at 12.45.



# 18 March 1941 - Melbourne

- The Advisory War Council was not consulted on the expedition to Greece, but on 18th March, when effect was being given to the decision, they were informed in detail of what had taken place, Fadden stating that the Government accepted full responsibility for the decision.
- Curtin took the view that, as the decision had been given, it was not now a subject on which the Council should offer an opinion.
- If the policy of the Labour Party had been followed, Australians would not have been serving in the Middle East and would therefore not have been available to have been despatched to Greece.
- He appreciated the factors that influenced the Government but all the Council could do was to note the decision that had been made.



# 18/19 March 1941 - Greece

- The 2/3rd Battalion embarked next day, 18<sup>th</sup> March, on the cruiser Gloucester, and Brigadier Allen's headquarters and the 2/1st and 2/2nd Battalions and attached troops in merchantmen.
- Waterhen sailed on 18 March as one of the escort of "AN.21", which included thirteen "Lustre" ships.
- The Gloucester arrived at Piraeus on the 19th, having left the merchant ships and their escort far behind.
- As their ships steamed into the gulf towards Piraeus the shores seemed to the New South Welshmen strangely like home.
- "What a contrast! Instead of awaking with eyes, ears and noses full of sand we breathed pure crisp air with the scent of flowers. Flowers!—we hadn't seen them since leaving Australia."
- The troops who were given leave in Athens acquired an increasing respect and sympathy for the Greeks. "Greeks gloriously happy to see us . . . worth fighting for and with," wrote one young officer in his diary.
- By that time the 1st Armoured Brigade and about half the New Zealand Division were in Greece.



Australian troops on leave in Athens



# 18 March 1941 - Libya

- The force which had now arrived to carry out the attack on Giarrabub included the 2/9th (Queensland) Battalion, a company and the mortar platoon of the 2/10th, and some other infantry detachments.
- In addition to O'Grady's troop of 25-pounders there was a battery of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery, making sixteen guns in all.
- Wootten's initial instructions to Lt-Col Martin, of the 2/9th, were that he was, with two companies, to make a reconnaissance in strength and secure, first, a line running north-east to south-west astride a track about 1,000 yards forward of Daly House and, secondly, by dawn on 20th March, a parallel line from the centre of the western lobe of the Giarabub depression to Tamma, which would place him about 1,000 yards from the edge of Giarabub town.
- Martin and Daly reconnoitred the ground on the evening of the 18th.

19 March 1941 - Brisbane

# Yugoslavs, Turks In Army Talks

*Courier-Mail Special Service and  
Australian Associated Press*

Coinciding with a message from Berlin that a special Turkish emissary has arrived there with the President Inonu's reply to Hitler's recent message, comes a report that within a week Turkey and Yugoslavia will discuss military preparations to resist Germany.

It is suggested in this report, from the New York Times' correspondent at Berne (Switzerland), that they have decided to defend the approaches to Salonika.

The correspondent states that the commander-in-chief of the Turkish army (Marshal Chakmak) has gone to Yugoslavia.

The Berlin correspondent of the New York Times says that apparently there has been a radical change in German and Greek relations. Spokesmen hitherto have readily declared that Germany and Greece were friendly. Now they decline to comment. The change appears to be based on the report that British troops have landed in Greece, although the Nazis say that they prefer to believe their own sources of information on that.

# 19 March 1941 - Libya

- On the 19th, Lt-Col "Jock" Campbell, the CO of the 4th Royal Horse Artillery, told Wootten that he had grave doubts whether the guns could get through the swamp area to the southern track by the present route, which was proving difficult even for trucks.
- Wootten was also perturbed because of his lack of knowledge of the approaches along which he proposed to attack.
- To test them, therefore, he decided to attack and capture the first line (1,000 yards ahead of Daly House) in daylight and exploit thence to the Tamma knolls.
- The cavalrymen were to make a demonstration north of Giarabub all the afternoon and until late at night to distract the attention of the defenders.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Lieutenant Colonel Jock Campbell of the 4th RHA (in the truck), talking with officers of the 6th Australian Divisional Cavalry Regiment at Giarabub. 19 March 1941

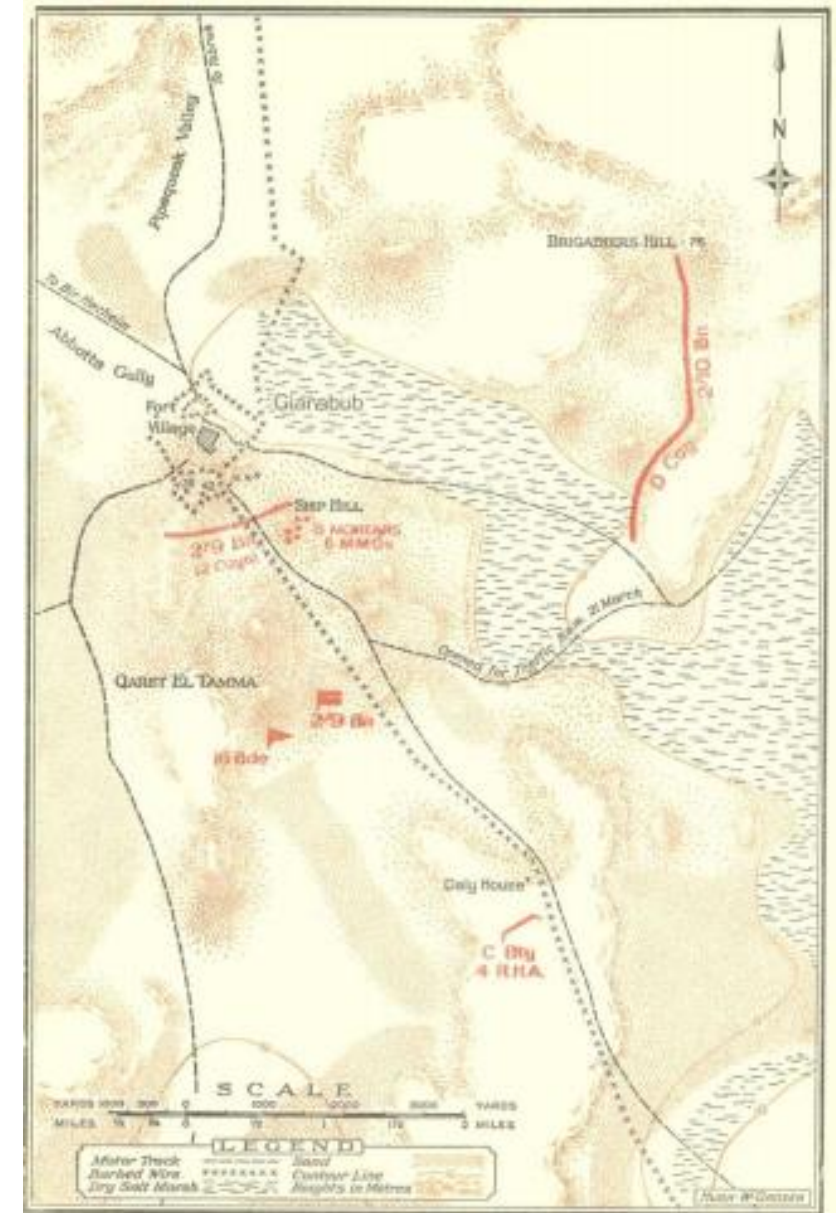
# 19 March 1941 - Libya

- In the afternoon of the 19th the leading companies of the 2/9th set out along the same treacherous route in 30-cwt and 3-ton trucks. The doubt whether it would be possible to pull the guns through the swamp was ended when Geoffrey Goschen, the energetic battery commander, and his men hauled two guns across the marsh in the wake of the infantry and put them in position about 1,000 yards south of Daly House. The remaining guns were dragged across with the aid of Italian tractors captured earlier by the cavalry.
- The first objective was found to be unoccupied by the enemy. Time was pressing. At Daly's suggestion Martin decided to send the leading company, Captain Berry's, still in its trucks, straight on past this first objective to Tamma , and there Berry arrived about 5 p.m.



# 19 March 1941 - Libya

- Immediately ahead they could see the cluster of knolls into which were dug the main southern defences of the Italian fortress, and beyond them the white buildings of the little town.
- Berry sent one of his platoons —Lieutenant Lovett's — towards Ship Hill whence it could give covering fire while the remainder of the company moved forward on the left among sandhills which offered some protection from the Italian fire.
- As the infantrymen advanced the Italians began firing at them with 20-mm guns, whose tracer shells "bounded all over the desert". Just at dark the leading platoon reached the barbed wire at the south-eastern corner of the Italian defence area.
- Berry, whose company was now 600 yards ahead of the nearest support, decided to investigate the Italian positions still further and left Forster's platoon in the post with orders to exploit and explore but not to become involved in "anything serious".
- Forster captured another post and a 44mm gun then, at 2 a.m., after the moon had risen, a strong Italian patrol attacked the men on the knoll and Forster withdrew his platoon.





20 March 1941 - Brisbane

## **CHINA PLANS NEW "BACK-DOOR" ROAD**

NEW YORK, March 19. — The Chungking correspondent of the New York Times says that Chinese engineers are on their way to the southern Sikang province to begin a survey of a highway from Ningyuan across some of the world's highest mountains to Sadiya (India). It is proposed to build a new 1000-mile highway which will open a new back-door for China, connecting the upper Yangtze River with the railway running north from Chittagong (India).

Meanwhile plans are being introduced to increase the capacity of the Burma Road by as much as three times its present volume.

## **MR. MATSUOKA TO HOLD MOSCOW CONFERENCE**

TOKIO, March 19.—The Japanese Foreign Minister (Mr. Matsuoka) will spend two days in Moscow on his way to Berlin and Rome and it is believed that his talks there will affect Japan's role in the Axis plans vitally. Observers believe that Japan is seeking guarantees from Russia that her interests bordering Siberia will be safeguarded before she commits herself to any irretrievable action.

It is understood also that Mr. Matsuoka will visit Moscow on his return trip. Observers conclude that discussions in Berlin and Rome will be made conditional on his Moscow talks.—  
**A.A.P.**

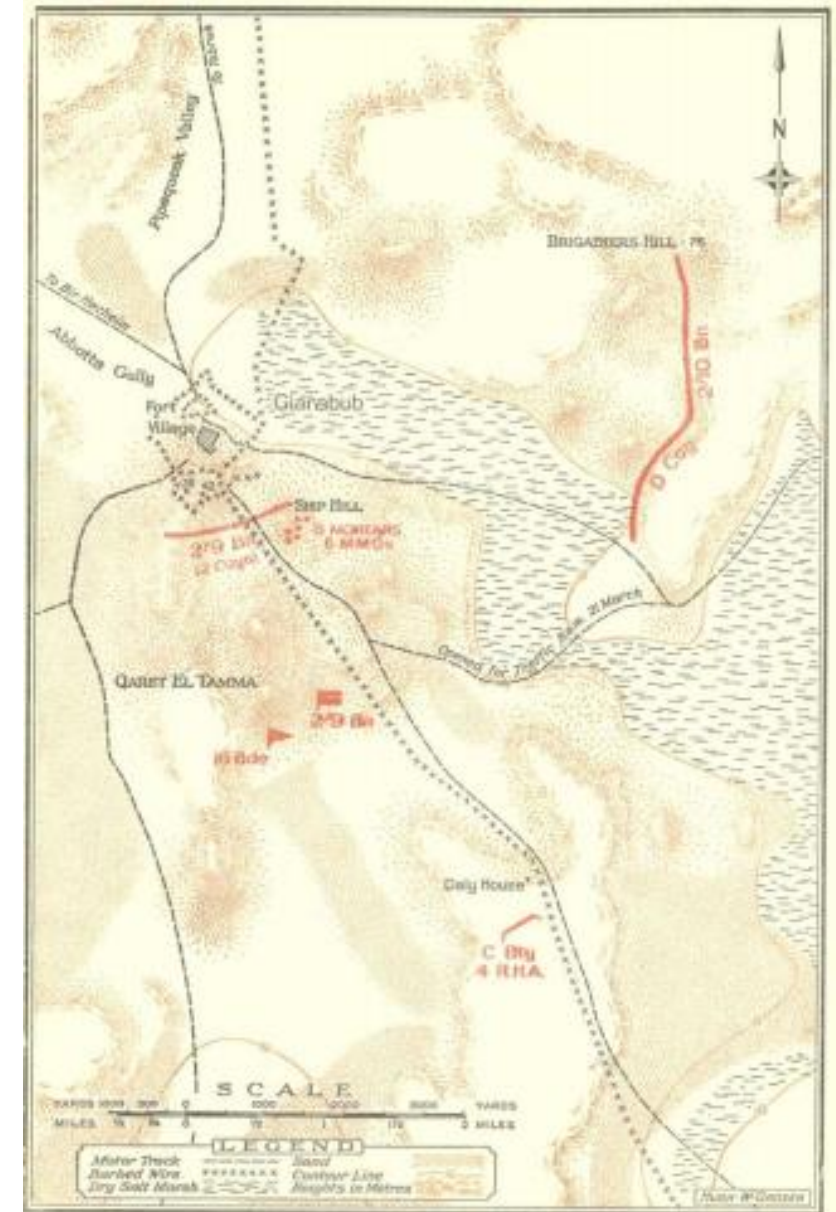
# 20 March 1941 - Libya

- Wavell reported to the Chiefs of Staff (on 20th March) that an attack on a limited scale on the frontier seemed to be in preparation.
- He said that, if the advanced troops were driven from their present positions, it would be of no use to hold positions south of Benghazi.
- For administrative reasons only a limited enemy advance was likely.



# 21 March 1941 - Libya

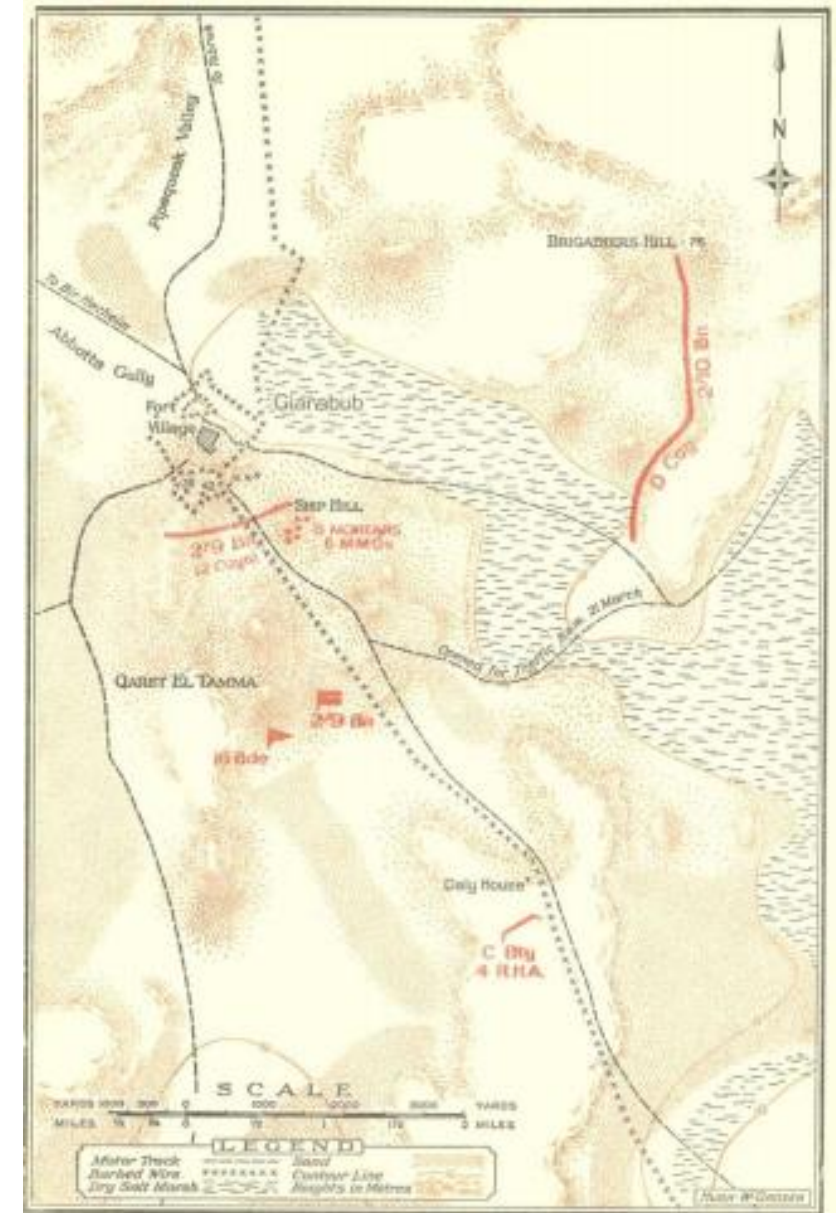
- Wootten's orders to Martin for the capture of Giarabub were simple. The 2/9th, strengthened by machine-gunners of the 2/12th and mortarmen of the 2/10th, would attack at dawn on the 21st from a start-line 400 yards south of the wire round the fortified knolls and would capture these.
- Thence they would advance to the second objective—the town itself. The engineers would blow gaps in the Italian wire to let the infantry through. The artillery would fire on the fortified knolls for ten minutes after zero and then lift to the second objective.
- Reidy's company on the right would attack the eastern half of the fortified area, and Berry's in the centre would attack the western half frontally, while a third company attacked the western flank of the position. In the second phase this company (Captain Loxton's) and a fourth one would take the lead and advance into the town itself.
- Martin placed on and round Ship Hill six 3-inch mortars and six Vickers guns—Wootten having brought to Giarabub all the 3-inch mortars and belt-fed machine-guns the brigade possessed.





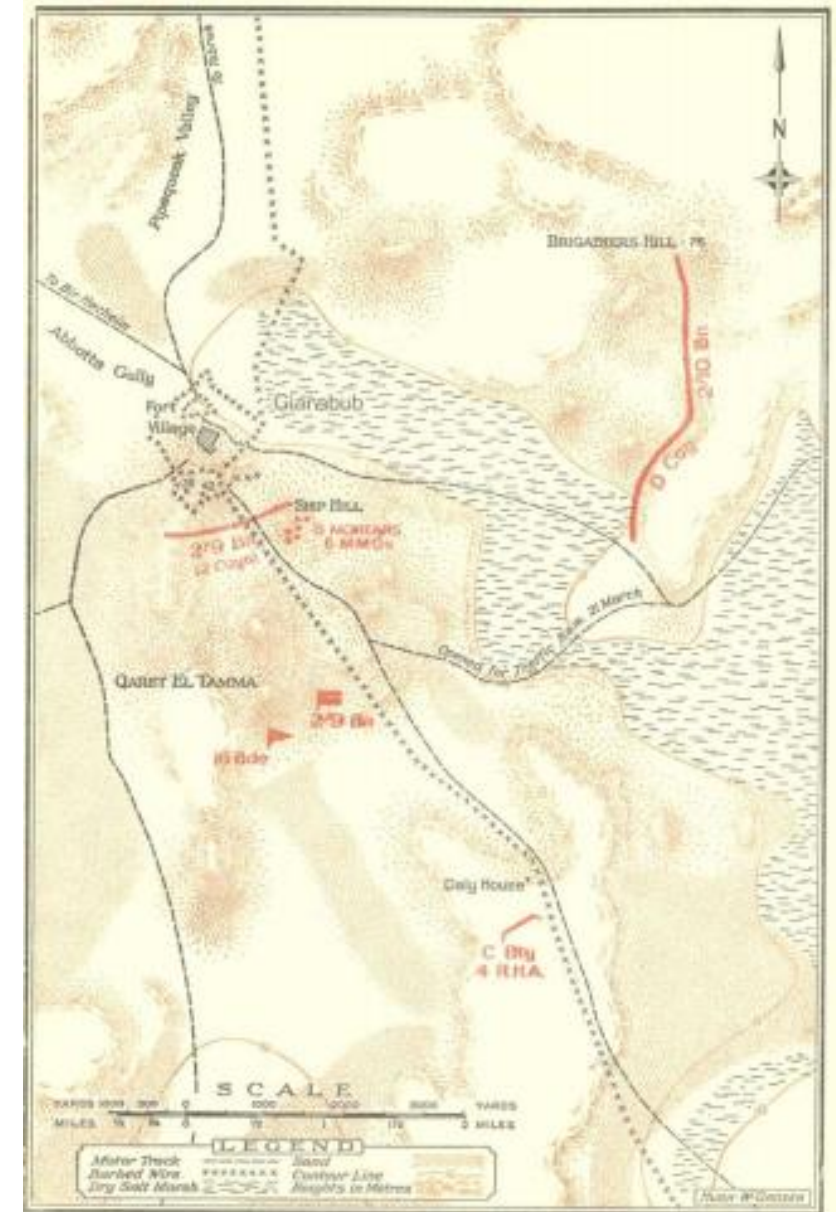
# 21 March 1941 - Libya

- Martin ordered the company commanders to advance in three bounds, the first to be finished twenty-five minutes after zero, which was fixed at 5.15 a.m. Thus the attack would open in faint moonlight and daylight would come at the end of the first phase and after the most dangerous part of the advance.
- As dawn approached the sandstorm was still so thick that in the front line visibility was no more than fifty yards. Reidy, anxious to be as close as possible to the Italian positions when the barrage ceased, moved his men forward in the sandstorm until they were within fifty yards of the Italian wire, and they lay there for ten minutes or more waiting for guns.
- Then the guns opened fire.



# 21 March 1941 - Libya

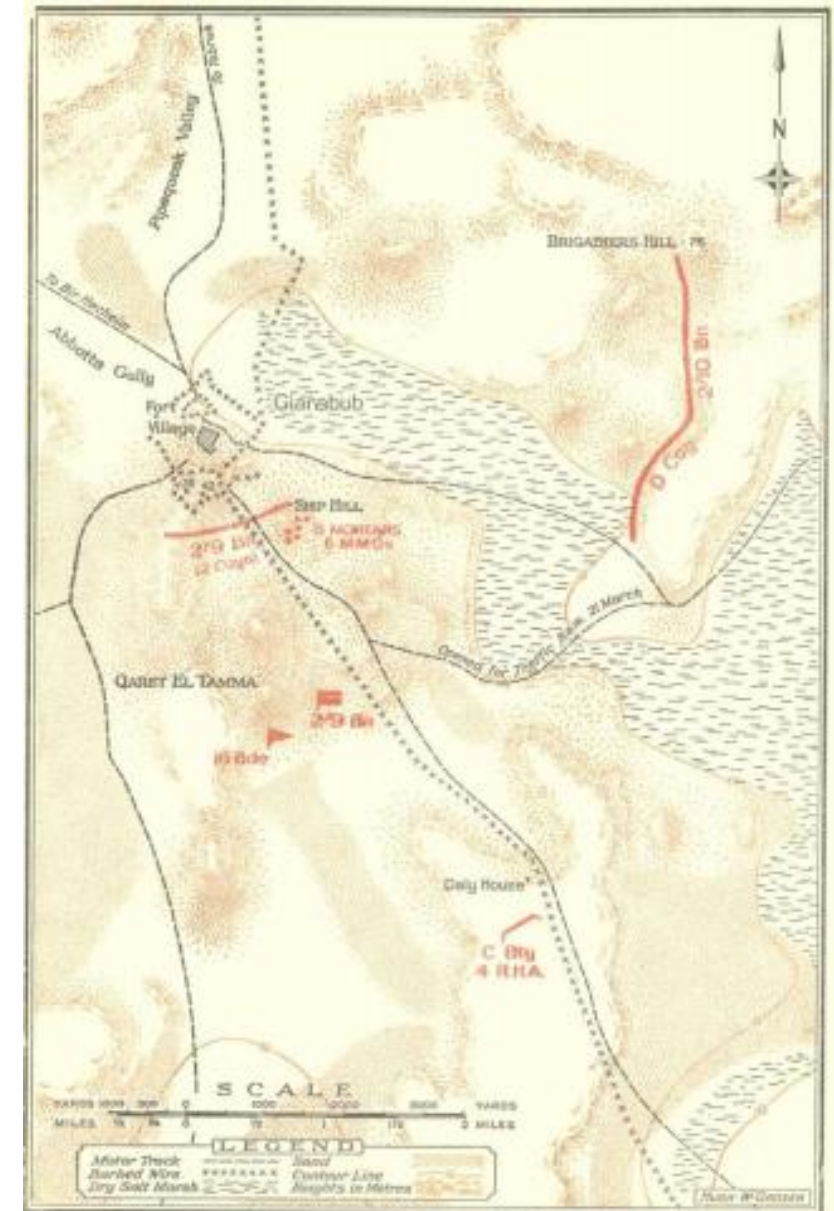
- In blowing sand the two companies advanced.
- Very little fire was coming from the Italian positions. The Italians were in caves dug into the side of the hill, protected by parapets of stones and sandbags, and generally with blankets curtaining the entrance so that the attackers had to pull them aside before throwing in grenades.
- Before the first of the two knolls had been passed there were no grenades left— each man had set out with only two—and all weapons were clogged with sand except the anti-tank rifle.
- The artillery fire was now falling on the farther knoll. Without waiting for the barrage to lift, Noyes' platoon advanced. At the foot of the knoll they met the right platoon of Berry's company. This company had had three men wounded in the attack, but had found the Italians apparently too stunned by the bombardment to fight effectively.
- The second knoll caused more trouble than the first because the Italians were deeply dug in on the northern side and the attackers came under accurate fire from the fort and the plantation beyond. The Italians in these caves, though they were being subjected to a galling fire from the mortars and machine-guns on Ship Hill, were more determined than those farther forward, and several Australians were killed here by Italian grenades. However, soon after 9, all real resistance had ceased





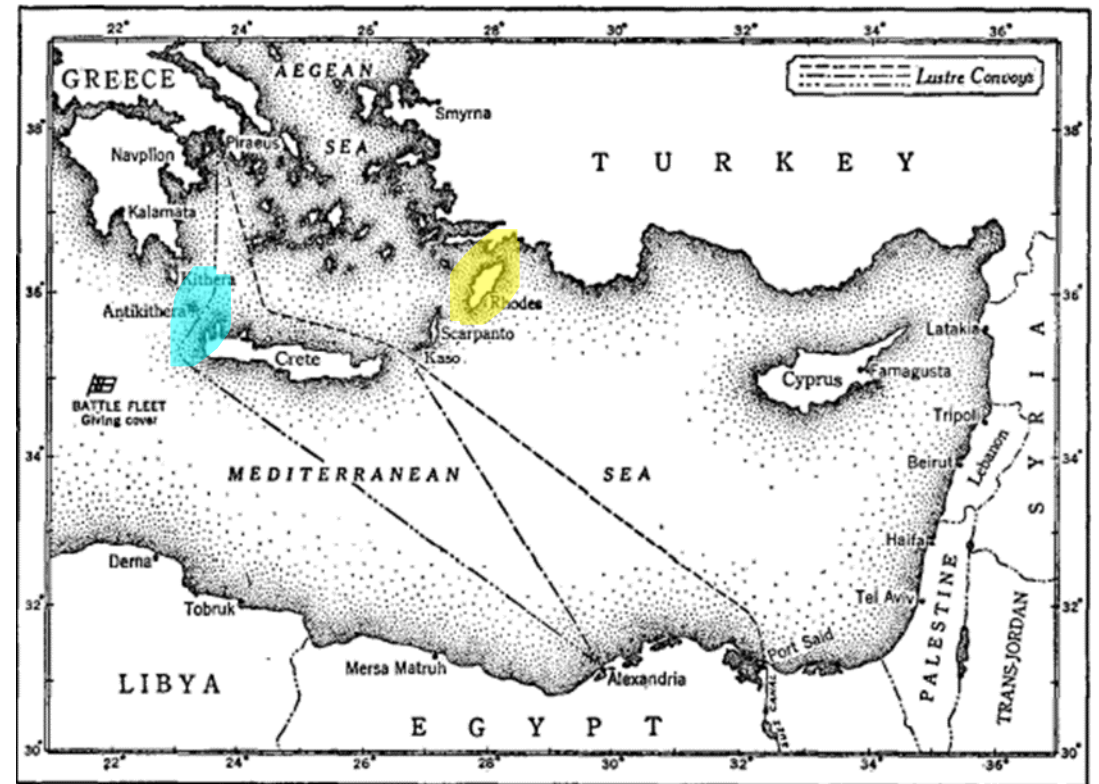
# 21 March 1941 - Libya

- As soon as the Italians perceived that prisoners were being taken, dozens appeared from within the honeycombed knoll. About 200 prisoners were taken here; about the same number had been killed.
- Not until the advancing troops reached this second fortified knoll did they establish touch with the remainder of Reidy's company and learn that, when the barrage fell among the men on the start-line, Reidy himself and eleven others had been killed and about twenty wounded.
- Berry, who was carrying on in spite of a wound, led two of his platoons on to the fort and reached it about the same time as Loxton's company, which had made a wide flanking movement on the left, meeting considerable fire and suffering some fifteen casualties.
- At 10 a.m., however, Loxton's company began to advance towards the plantations on the north-eastern edge of the town, slowly because a minefield lay across its path and the mines had to be disarmed.
- There was no opposition now. The Italian flag was pulled down and the black and blue banner of the 2/9th was hauled up in its place. By 2 p.m. some 600 prisoners had been collected and sent marching south.



# 21 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- One of the more obvious dangers of the expedition to Greece lay in the presence of a considerable Italian air force in the **Dodecanese Islands** on the eastern flank of the sea route to Athens.
- On the 21st of March, as the convoy was passing through **Kithera Channel** in squally, rainy weather, it was attacked at 4 p.m. by four aircraft which appeared from low cloud.
- The Australians fired back with the Brens and with captured Italian Bredas which they had mounted on the decks.
- Only a tanker was hit.



# 21-22 March 1941 - Mediterranean

- A "Lustre" ship, the Danish tanker Marie Maersk (8,271 tons), was hit on the bridge, suffered heavy casualties, and was set on fire, and abandoned.
- Waterhen closed her, picked up thirty-two survivors, and sent a volunteer salvage party of nine ratings and the tanker's second engineer, Mr Rasmussen, over to the damaged ship under Lieutenant Hill.
- Shortly afterwards the armed trawler Amber arrived, and Waterhen was ordered to rejoin the convoy, which she did, leaving the salvage party in the tanker after Hill had reported that there were good prospects of getting the vessel into harbour "providing I had someone to lead me, there being no compass left".
- On boarding Marie Maersk at 5.30 p.m., Hill found the whole of the bridge section on fire, the deck plating blown up abaft the bridge, and the oil in the tank below burning fiercely.
- Hoses were rigged and the fire tackled; Rasmussen got the engines working; and at 8.45 p.m. they were put to full ahead.
- The electric steering gear then failed, and steering was done throughout the night by the engines, the ship making good four knots.
- By midnight the fires were under control, and by daylight on the 22nd Able Seaman Haydock had managed to rig the hand steering gear, after which Marie Maersk was able to steam at full speed with Amber as guide. "We all greatly appreciated seeing one of our own fighters overhead," reported Hill, "with everything so satisfactory on board."
- Marie Maersk entered Suda Bay at noon on the 22nd, and Hill anchored her in the inner harbour. The fires were finally extinguished at 6 p.m., and only 500 tons of the oil cargo was lost.

# 20/22 March 1941 - Plymouth

- No. 10 squadron then became temporarily inoperative after two heavy enemy air raids on the nights of 20th and 22nd March when the station breakwater was cut in two, squadron offices, operations room and No. 2 hangar damaged, and the electric power house put out of action for forty-eight hours.
- Three Sunderlands received damage from bomb and anti-aircraft shell fragments and were unserviceable for some days.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

SUK10479







# 22 March 1941 - Libya

- General Gambier-Parry, who had been recalled from command of the British troops in Crete to take charge of the 2nd Armoured Division, had already arrived in the forward area.
- At midday on 20th March he took over responsibility for the frontier troops from Morshead, who then moved his headquarters to the vicinity of El Abiar, an inland village on the plateau above Benghazi at the southern end of the Barce plain.
- The relief Morshead had requested was then arranged. The Support Group of the 2nd Armoured Division was to relieve the 20th Brigade.
- The 1st and 104th Regiments, Royal Horse Artillery, were allocated to the forward area while the 51st Field Regiment was allotted to the 9th Division.
- To conceal the change of dispositions from the enemy and safeguard the troops from air attack, the relief was to take place at night. Wireless silence, already imposed, would be continued.
- The 1/Tower Hamlets Rifles was brought forward from Benghazi and on the harshly-cold moonless night of 22nd March the three Australian infantry battalions were taken back in draughty trucks to the plateau east of Benghazi.
- The convoy to lift the 2/13th Battalion overshot the meeting point, attracted enemy attention, was heavily attacked from the air, and got back to the battalion only just before dawn, which necessitated a dangerous but uneventful journey back by day.



Meeting of the Anglo-Greek War Council ca. January 1941. Major General Gambier-Parry is on the left.

# 22 March 1941 - Atlantic

- On 15 March Scharnhorst and Gneisenau encountered a dispersed convoy in the mid-Atlantic and sank eight ships.
- The next day the main body of the convoy was located, and the pair sank another seven ships totalling 27,277 tons.
- One of the surviving ships radioed the location of the German battleships, which summoned the British battleships Rodney and King George V.
- Scharnhorst and Gneisenau used their high speed to escape in a squall and then headed for Brest in occupied France, which they reached on 22 March.



The battleship Scharnhorst. She and her sister ship Gneisenau had 9 eleven inch guns a max speed of 31 knots and a 14 inch thick armor belt.

# 22 March 1941 - Libya

- On 22nd March all R.A.F. squadrons were warned to be ready to move at short notice and to prepare demolition plans.
- They would be required to operate throughout a withdrawal under the following general plan:
  - (1) Army cooperation squadron (No. 6 R.A.F.) to maintain tactical reconnaissance.
  - (2) Bomber squadron (No. 55) to maintain strategical reconnaissance and carry out bombing attacks in direct and close support of the army.
  - (3) Fighter squadrons (No. 73 and No. 3 R.A.A.F.) to protect Tobruk port and the forward troops, especially armoured units.



## 22 – 30 March 1941 - Egypt

- The day after the battle, while the cavalrymen and a platoon of Senussi which had been organised at Siwa remained to salvage captured equipment, the troops of the 18th Brigade set off on their return journey.
- Wootten and his staff arrived at Ikingi on 24th March, and the troops arrived by road and rail on the following four days.
- On the 30th the cavalry regiment also reached Amiriya, and joined its third squadron which had recently returned from Benghazi.
- For the loss of 15 killed and 71 wounded, the Australians had captured the fortress along with 36 artillery pieces.

# 23 March 1941 – Indian Ocean

- On 23 March 1941, HMS Leander intercepted and captured the Vichy French merchant Charles L.D. in the Indian Ocean between Mauritius and Madagascar.
- The Leander's boarding party was relieved by an armed guard under the command of Lieutenant Stevens, RNZNR, with Lieutenant Lee-Richards and two engine-room artificers for the general charge of the engine-room.
- With the exception of the master and his first and second officers, the ship's company were prepared to work her on condition that they would receive the agreed rates of pay accruing to them.
- There were two passengers on the ship, the senior naval officer at Diego Suarez, going on leave to France and a Mauritian making his way home from France. The latter, who was most co-operative as an interpreter, said the ship was bound from Diego Suarez to Reunion to load coffee, cocoa, and sugar for France, of which the greatest part would have gone to Germany.
- The Charles L.D. then proceeded for Mauritius, where she arrived in the afternoon of 24 March.



The light cruiser HMNZS Leander (75) underway at sea, in 1945.



- Thanks for your attention