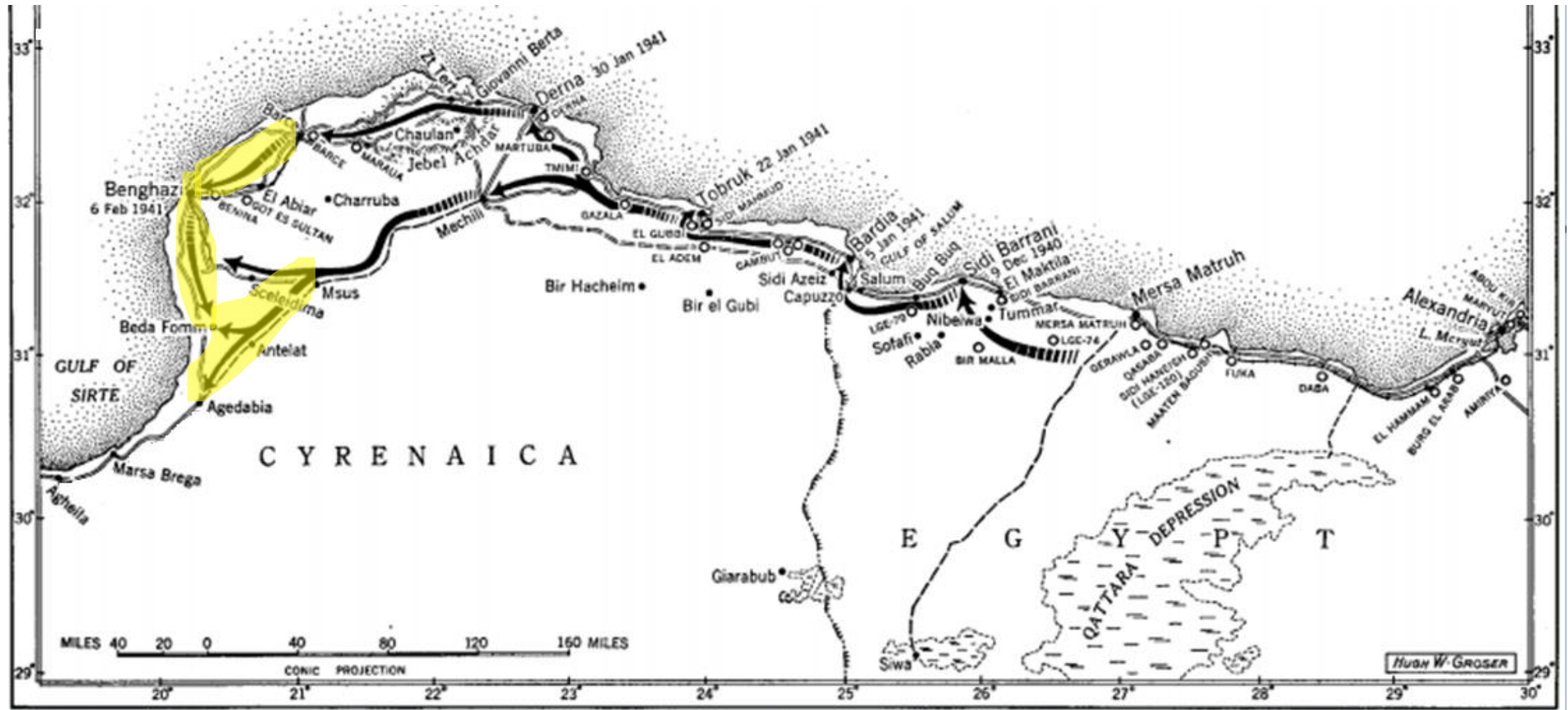


The Siege of Tobruk



7 February 1941



The 6th Australian Division advancing on the coast took Benghazi and the 7th Armoured Division cut off the Italians at Beda Fomm.

7 February – Beda Fomm

- The last Italian attack failed.
- General Berganzoli surrendered to Tom Pearson of the Rifle Brigade.
- The Italian army in Cyrenaica ceased entirely to exist.
- About 15,000 prisoners had somehow to be fed and disposed of. Well over 100 guns had been captured.



General Berganzoli, known to the British press as “Electric Whiskers”, Commander of the Italian X Army. Photographed after his capture.

7 February 1941

- That day the new Greek Government asked Britain what help she could give to Greece in the event of a German attack.
- The British War Cabinet told Wavell that no operations were to be undertaken beyond the frontier of Cyrenaica "which should be held with the minimum possible force necessary to secure the flank of our Egyptian base", and that
- the largest possible army and air forces must be sent from the Middle East to Greece.



18 February - Libya

- Savige had advanced the defensive line to Marsa Brega where the front was partly covered by a marsh which was an effective obstacle to tanks.



18 February - Libya

- On the 13th the first German aircraft seen in Africa bombed the Benghazi port.
- Anti-aircraft defences were hopelessly inadequate.
- On 18th enemy air attacks were extended to Tobruk and to British troops forward in the Agedabia area.



18 February 1941

- Wavell intended that the battle-trying 6th Australian Division, already in Cyrenaica, should be the western-frontier force's infantry division and that the Australian 7th and 9th Divisions should go to Greece.
- Blamey was determined that his best-trained troops should go to Greece and insisted that the 6th Division should go.
- The 9th Division, the most recently formed, would deploy to Cyrenaica.



21 February - Libya

- Scouting aircraft reported increasing but still small activity on the enemy's side of the Tripolitanian frontier.
- On 21st February a pilot reported seeing eight-wheeled, and therefore German, armoured cars whose crews wore a bluish uniform different from anything he had seen in Libya before.
- At this stage the staffs farther back would not believe that a substantial German-Italian force was assembling at the front.



German eight wheeled armoured car.

23 February - Libya

- By the third week in February the navy declined to send further supply ships to Benghazi until the air defences had improved.
- All supplies for forward army units now had to come overland from Tobruk, and lack of transport made it necessary progressively to reduce the strength of the force in western Cyrenaica.



24 February 1941 - Libya

- On the 24th scouting aircraft reported that 500 vehicles were moving south from Misurata.
- Two troops of armoured cars and a troop of Australian anti-tank guns were patrolling near Agheila when they were fired on by a force including tanks.
- Lieutenant Rowley, commanding the anti-tank troop, and the crew of an armoured car, which was disabled, were captured by the Germans, who had seven tanks, three armoured cars and fourteen motor-cycle combinations.
- The Germans withdrew with their prisoners, and towing the disabled car.



27 February 1941 - Libya

- On the 27th General Neame (photo) replaced General Wilson as commander in Cyrenaica. (General Neame is believed to be the only man ever to have won the VC and an Olympic Gold Medal).



27-28 February 1941 – North Africa



The 20th Brigade was the first Brigade of the 9th Division to move to Cyrenaica. On 27th February, the day after the brigade's transfer to the 9th Division had been announced, the first train left at 7 p.m. with the 2/13th Battalion on board. Within two days the whole brigade was moving westwards, mainly by train, across the Suez Canal and to Mersa Matruh where the desert railway terminated.

6-7 March 1941 - Libya

- On 6th March 20 Brigade moved on westwards.
- In the morning the convoy carrying the 2/13th Battalion was attacked for half an hour by five Heinkel aircraft: two were killed and one wounded, and some damage was done to vehicles.



7 March 1941 – North Africa

- On 7th March, Morshead, GOC 9 Division, (photo) and Lloyd flew from Cairo to Cyrenaica Command headquarters.
- Morshead was to take command forthwith of the fighting troops in western Cyrenaica.
- Morshead learned from Neame that about 19th March the 2nd Armoured Division would take over command in the frontier area and the 20th Brigade would stay in the forward zone under their command.
- Morshead's headquarters should move back to Gazala.
- Morshead told Neame that he was "not impressed with this arrangement".



General Morshead



A trench at Lone Pine after the battle, with Australian and Turkish dead on the parapet. In the foreground is Captain Leslie Morshead of the 2nd Battalion and on his right (standing facing camera), is 527 Private Jim Bryant.



General Morshead



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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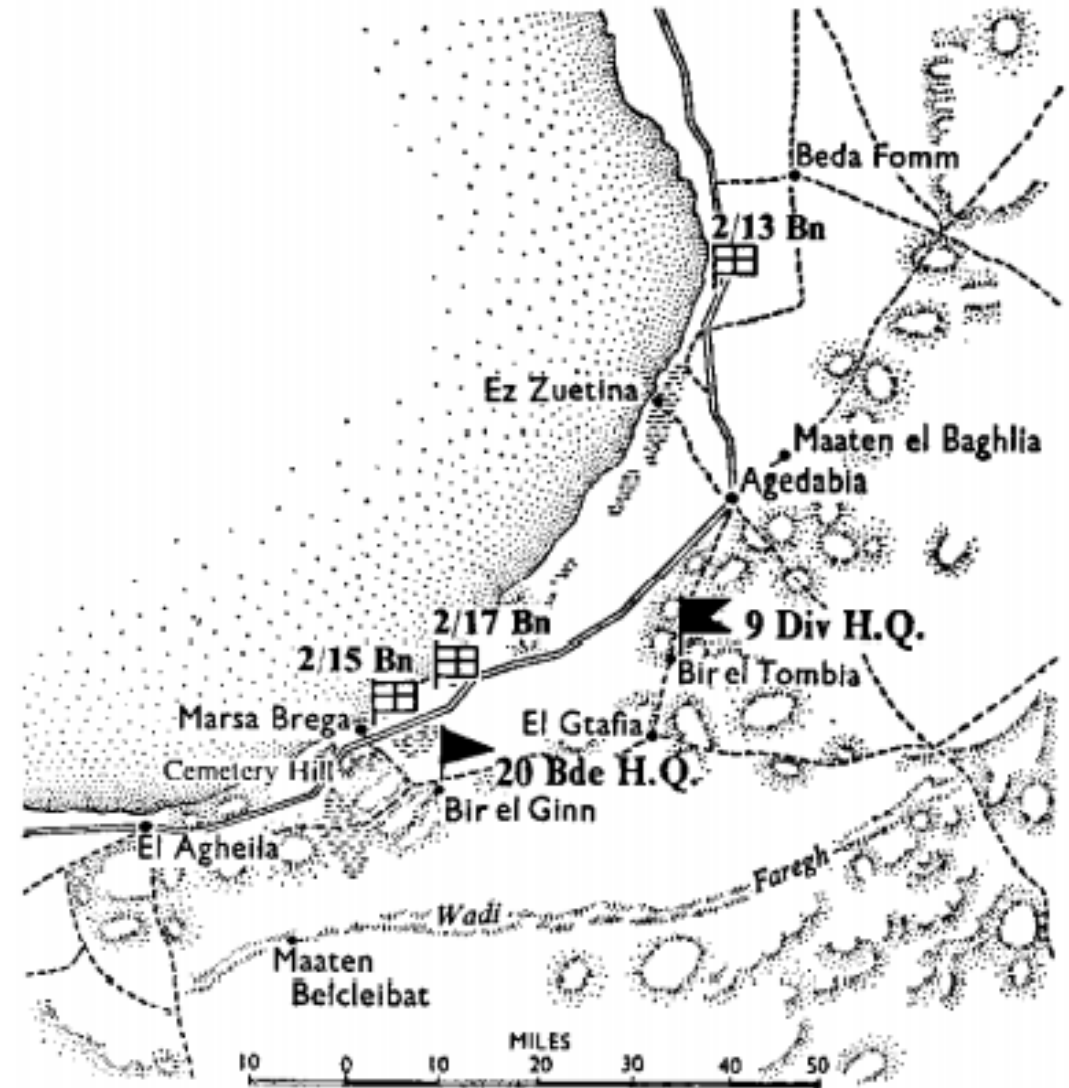
Billy Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia, addressing members of the 33rd Battalion at Peronne. Lieutenant Colonel Morshead is 2nd from right wearing football kit.



MR. WINSTON CHURCHILL, PRIME MINISTER OF GREAT BRITAIN, WITH MORSHEAD (CENTRE), GENERAL SIR CLAUDE AUCHINLECK, CINC, MIDDLE EAST, (RIGHT) AND GENERAL RAMSDEN, GOC XXX CORPS, (BEHIND), AT 9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION HQ

11 March 1941 - Libya

- On 11th March 9th Division headquarters arrived at Bir el Tombia and command passed to the 9th Division.
- But Morshead had in Cyrenaica only one of his infantry brigades; the other two were still in Palestine.



11th March 1941

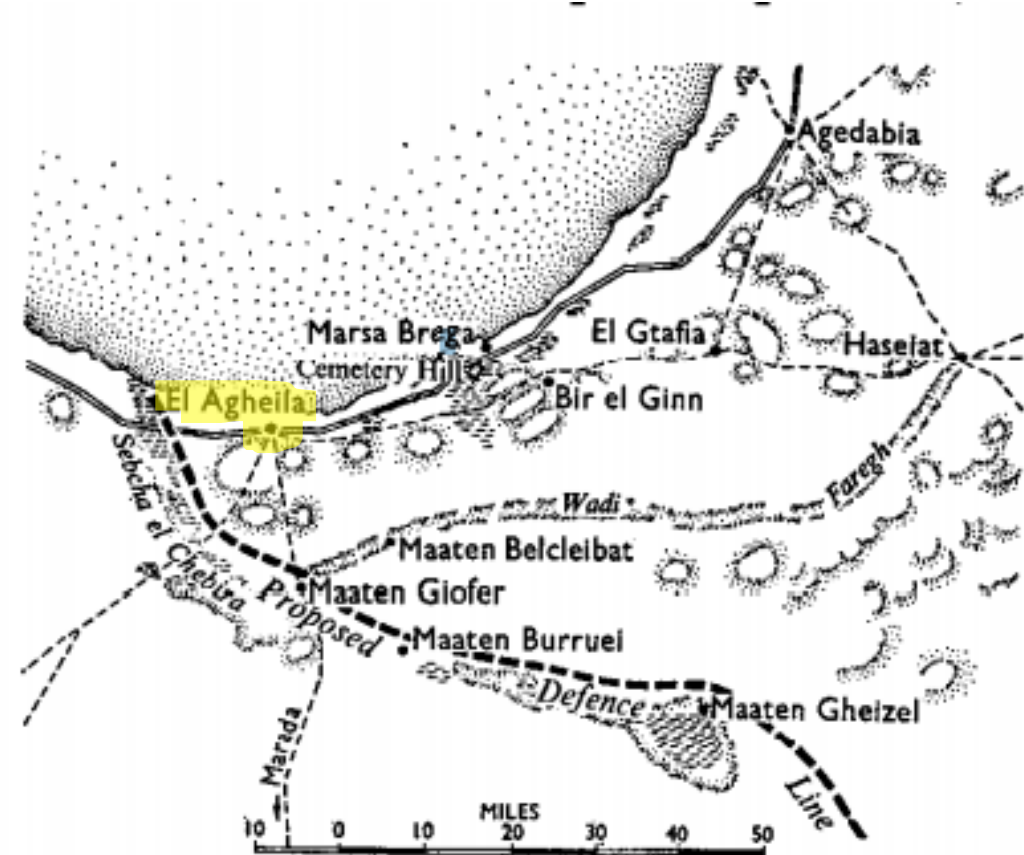
11 March 1941 - Libya

- Wavell told the Chiefs of Staff that the latest information indicated that two Italian infantry divisions, two Italian motorised artillery regiments and German armoured troops estimated at a maximum of one armoured brigade group had recently arrived in Tripolitania.
- Wavell's comment was: Tripoli to Agheila is 471 miles and to Benghazi 646 miles. There is only one road, and water is inadequate over 410 miles of the distance; these factors, together with lack of transport, limit the present enemy threat.



13 March 1941 - Libya

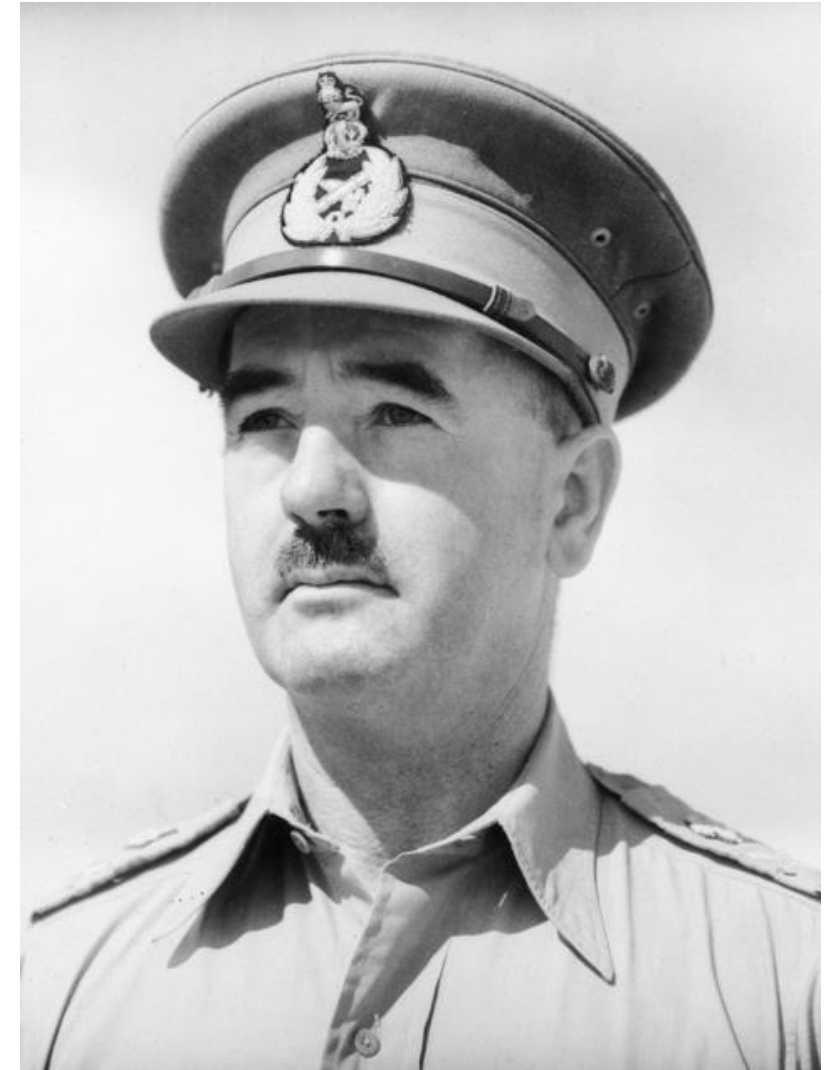
- Wavell forecast that the enemy was likely to initiate an early offensive reconnaissance against El Agheila and seize it, if he found the opposition weak.
- Morshead's own strength near the frontier was a light-tank regiment, an armoured car regiment, and an infantry brigade, with another tank battalion in process of equipping itself with captured Italian tanks of doubtful value. There were only 15 anti-tank guns in the whole frontier region.
- The vital defile west of El Agheila had not been secured nor were any ground troops holding El Agheila itself. An armoured car patrol went up to the fort at El Agheila each morning at first light but retired at dusk.



Morshead's proposed defence line

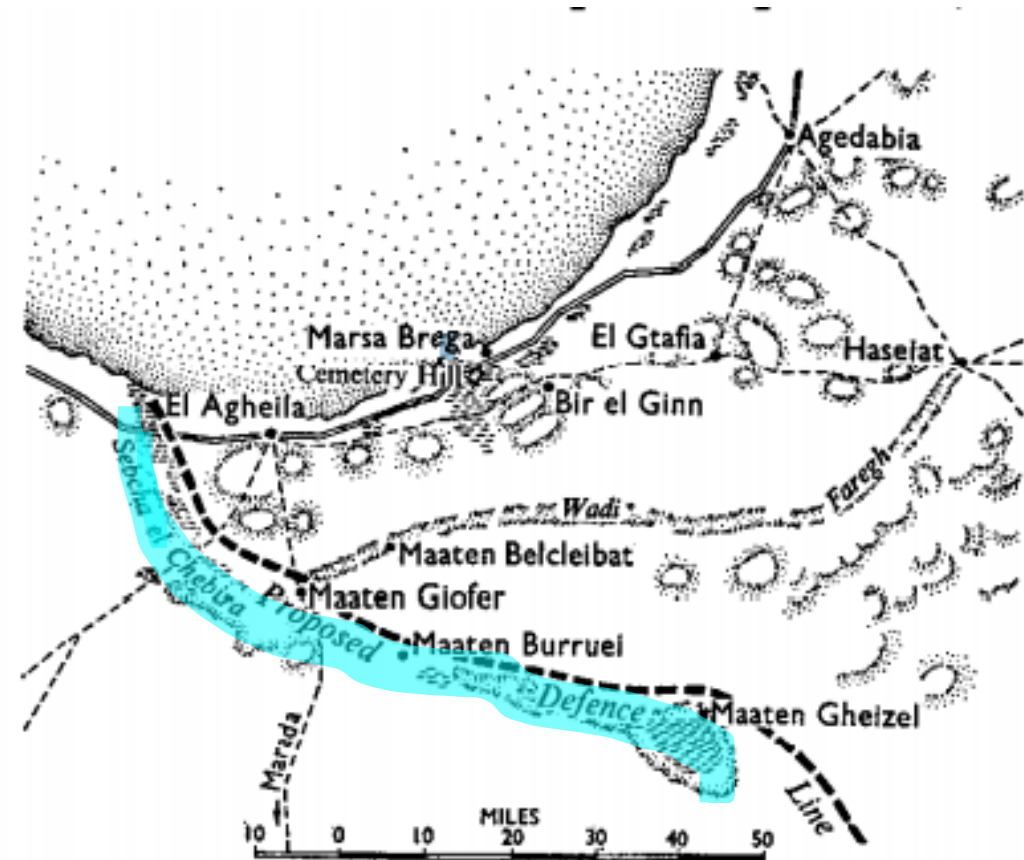
17 March 1941 - Libya

- Morshead was very worried that means were not available to prevent encirclement of his battalions, nor to move them if threatened with encirclement.
- In a memorandum to Neame on 17th March he requested that the 20th Brigade should be relieved.
- 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.



17 March 1941 - Libya

- On the day that Morshead wrote this memorandum he was unexpectedly summoned to meet General Dill the CIGS and General Wavell, CinC Middle East, who had flown to Neame's headquarters.
- Wavell asked Morshead for his appreciation. This he gave in the terms of his memorandum, 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."
- Dill telegraphed similar views to London. Between El Agheila and Benghazi the desert was so open and so suitable for armoured vehicles that the stronger fleet would win; there were no infantry holding positions.



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

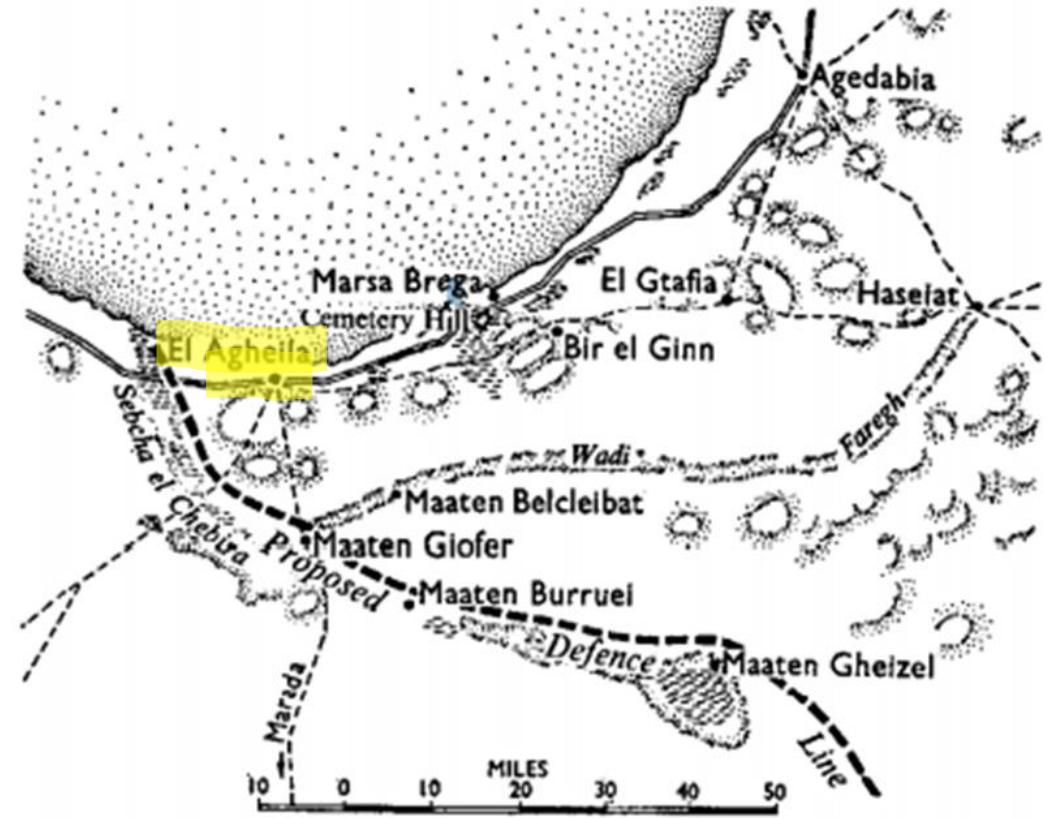
22 March 1941 - Libya

- On 20th March General Gambier-Parry, and the 2nd Armoured Division, took over responsibility for the frontier troops from Morshead, who then moved his headquarters to El Abiar.
- The relief Morshead had requested was then arranged.
- The Support Group of the 2nd Armoured Division relieved the 20th Brigade.
- 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 2nd Armoured Division was only at half strength. One of its armoured brigades and part of its support group had gone to Greece. It had no battle experience and Gambier Parry had only taken command a few weeks before.
- One of the armoured regiments was armed with captured Italian tanks.



24 March 1941 - Libya

- A British patrol on 24th March approached **El Agheila** fort at first light and found that it was occupied by the enemy.
- Soon afterwards the Italian flag was hoisted there and 10 enemy tanks and 20 motor vehicles were reported just east of the fort.



Morshead's proposed defence line

26 March 1941 - Libya



Two brigades of 9 Division were concentrating on the plateau. One was garrisoning Tobruk.

31 March 1941 - Libya

- At 7.45 a.m. the infantry near **Marsa Brega** first saw the enemy.
- Scouting aircraft had seen 200 tanks and armoured cars.
- The German advance in force, predicted by Neame's headquarters for the first week in April, had already begun.
- The 1/Tower Hamlets Rifles supported by the 104th Royal Horse Artillery and the anti-tank guns of "J" Battery (3rd R.H.A.) resisted an attack by a force of tanks and lorries, with tanks in the van supported by German dive bombers.



Morshead's proposed defence line

31 March 1941 - Libya

- The attackers were forced to withdraw twice during the day.
- As darkness fell the Support Group withdrew about eight miles.
- Fifty-five infantrymen (including two officers), an anti-aircraft gun and a considerable amount of transport and eight carriers were lost.
- Two platoons of 1/RNF, kept their machine guns firing until all their ammunition was gone and were overrun. Cpl Harrison, mortally wounded, spent the last minutes of his life burying the locks and spare parts of his guns.
- The Support Group drew farther back during the night to a position 20 miles in front of Agedabia, "in which area", Latham told his gunners, "we shall fight tomorrow".



A 25 Pounder in North Africa

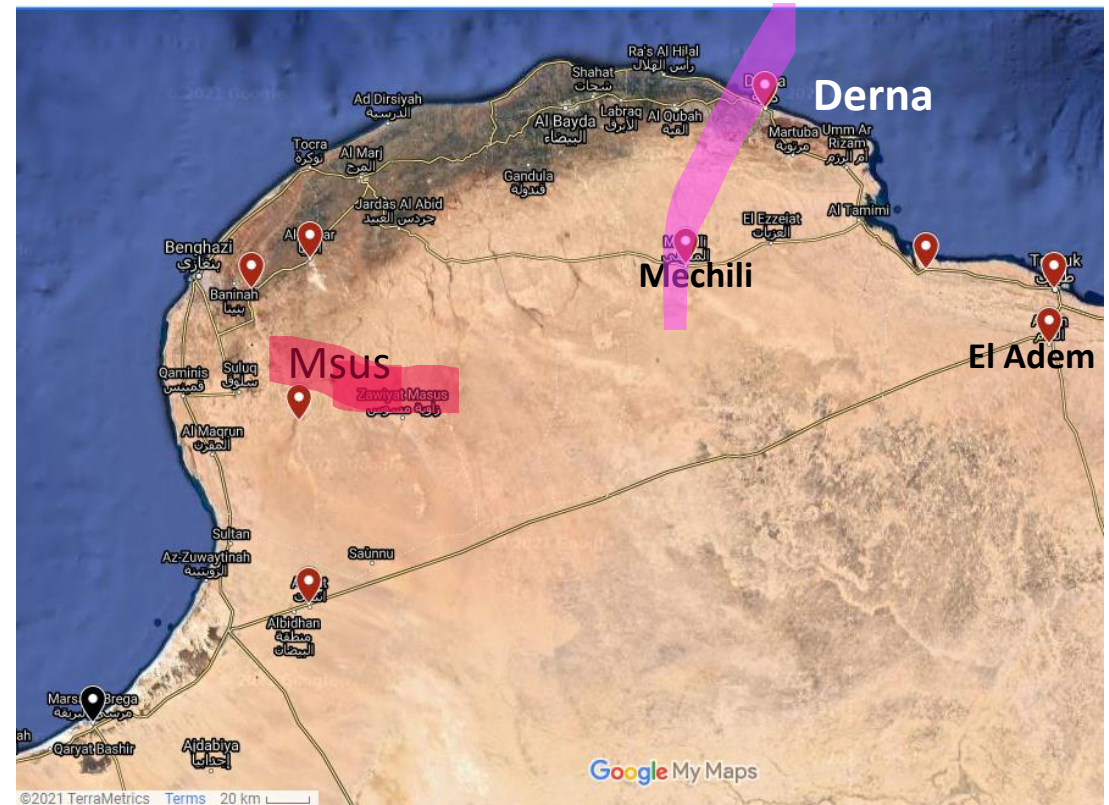
1 & 2 April 1941 - Libya

- The 2nd Armoured Division withdrew towards Benghazi through a number of delaying positions.
- They were very heavily dive bombed and machine gunned from the air and quickly followed and strongly attacked by tanks and infantry.
- A number of units were cut off and casualties from enemy action and mechanical break down were heavy.
- Gambier-Parry ordered the whole of the 2nd Armoured Division to withdraw to Antelat.
- The coast road to Benghazi was thus uncovered but Cyrenaica Command headquarters was not informed of this.
- Wavell now intervened, insisting that the coast road through Benghazi be blocked by the armoured division.



3 April 1941 - Libya

- Inactivity by the enemy on 3rd April gave the 2nd Armoured Division an opportunity to reorganise. But by the end of the day it had become much more disorganised as a result, not of enemy action, but of failures in communications and command.
- Repeated changes of plan, inadequate orders, delays in communications, mis-interpretation of reconnaissance reports and delays caused by mechanical reliability issues resulted in complete disorganisation.
- Confusion concerning the whereabouts of all units became so great that to sift truth from rumour became impossible.
- Communications with the 2nd Armoured Division had broken down. Nobody knew where it was; it was feared that it had been overwhelmed.
- Cyrenaica command decided to execute a general withdrawal to a line from **Derna to Mechili**.
- The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade (still at El Adem) was to occupy Mechili, into which the 2nd Armoured Division (or so much of it as remained) would withdraw "with all possible speed"



Captain Hore-Ruthven, ordered to ensure at all costs that the dump at **Msus** did not fall into enemy hands, receiving an erroneous report that an enemy column was approaching, ordered the destruction of the dump, so laboriously built up, and then withdrew the garrison.

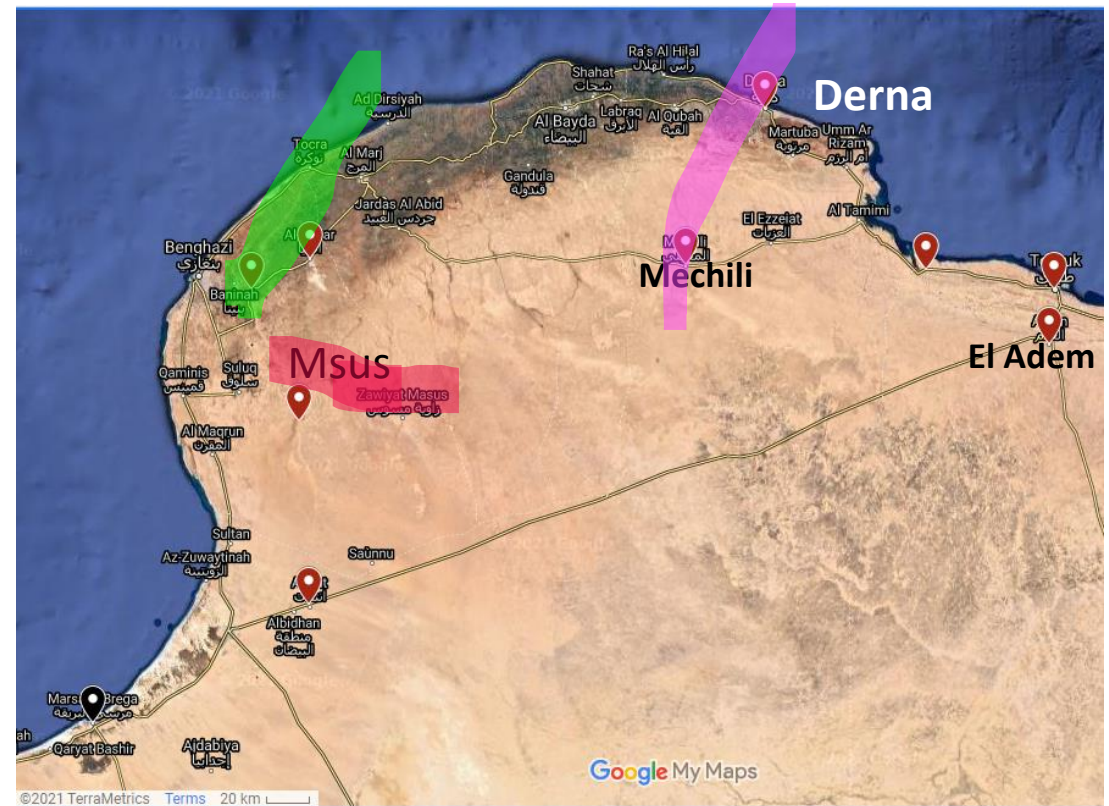
3 April 1941 - Libya

9th Division AIF was to establish 2 battalions forthwith on the 2nd escarpment east of Barce, using all available transport with 1/KRRC, to protect its left flank.



3 & 4 April 1941 - Libya

- Early in the morning of the 3rd Generals Wavell and Neame had visited the 9th Division and informed General Morshead that General O'Connor would soon arrive to take over command from General Neame.
- The 9th Division's orders, issued at 2 a.m. on the 4th, stated that its intention was to withdraw to the Derna area by stages. The moves could not be made immediately because the division had no troop-carrying transport.
- At midday 9th Division was ordered to halt its withdrawal. The division was to continue holding the Tocrá-Er Regima line on the first escarpment "until forced to withdraw by enemy action", but was not to become committed.



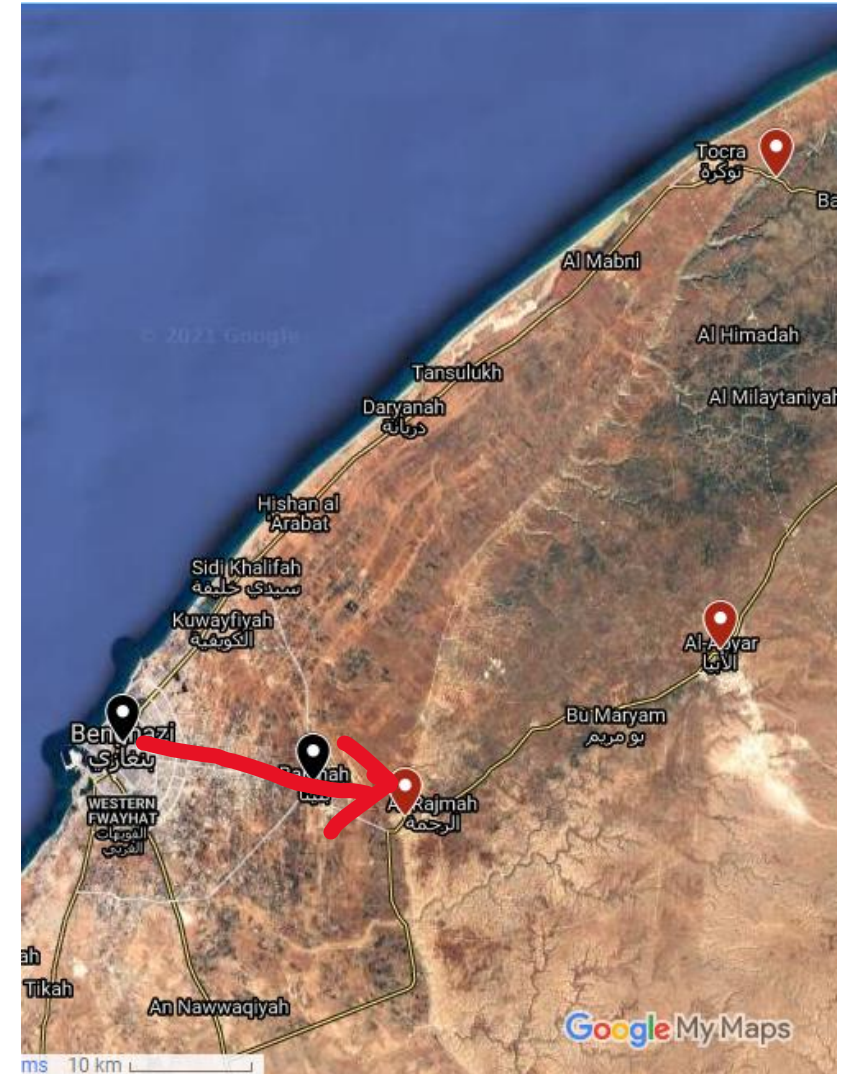
2 April 1941 - Libya

- The 26th Brigade AIF, which had been assigned the task of defending the lower escarpment from Tolmeta to **Tocra** had had only one battalion available, the 2/24th, when the German advance had begun.
- Lieut-Colonel Burrows with the 2/13th was still in **position on the first escarpment south east of Benghazi.**
- Although he had been under orders to withdraw as soon as transport could be made available he had kept the whole battalion in battle positions.
- Burrows had been informed at midday that the transport to move the battalion back would not arrive until at least 7 p.m.



4 April 1941 - Libya

- In the early afternoon, a column of tanks and armoured cars and behind them 30 to 40 troop - carrying lorries came out from Benghazi towards the pass.
- Sixteen tanks came to the fore in line abreast and moved up towards the pass, with trucks following. The 51st Field Regiment engaged them. Some direct hits were scored. The tanks and armoured cars withdrew, but the infantry dismounted, and deployed to attack.
- A fierce fight broke out along the top of the escarpment. The enemy began to work round the left flank and brought up more tanks.
- Morshead directed that the recently-cancelled plan of withdrawal should now be adhered to, since the intention had been to delay the withdrawal only so long as this did not involve becoming committed.
- Burrows sent his carrier platoon to a position on the right flank and used his small transport reserve to bring his reserve company into action behind D company.
- by 10 p.m. the rest of the troops had withdrawn behind it.
- At 10.45 p.m. an English transport company with Cypriot drivers met the 2/13th. The battalion was withdrawn without further engagement.
- The 2/13th suffered 98 casualties in this engagement including five killed. The 51st Field Regiment had one killed and 5 wounded and one missing.



4 April 1941 - Libya

- As soon as Neame learnt of the enemy assault in force against the 2/13th Battalion, he authorised a withdrawal from the lower escarpment.
- The 9th Division was to withdraw to the Barce escarpment, which it was to hold until forced to withdraw by the enemy.
- One of the last units to receive the withdrawal orders was the 2/24th Battalion, which had been holding the northern passes on the lower escarpment while the 2/13th held that at Er Regima.
- The additional transport needed to move it complete with stores failed to turn up so stores and surplus gear had to be destroyed before moving off crowded on to the few vehicles available.



4 April 1941 - Libya

- On 4th April the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade moved to Mechili.
- The brigade consisted of three lightly-armed but fully-mechanised Indian cavalry regiments and about a regiment of anti tank guns.
- Mechili's only building was the old Italian fort, a stone and mud structure useless for modern war but there was a very valuable well there.

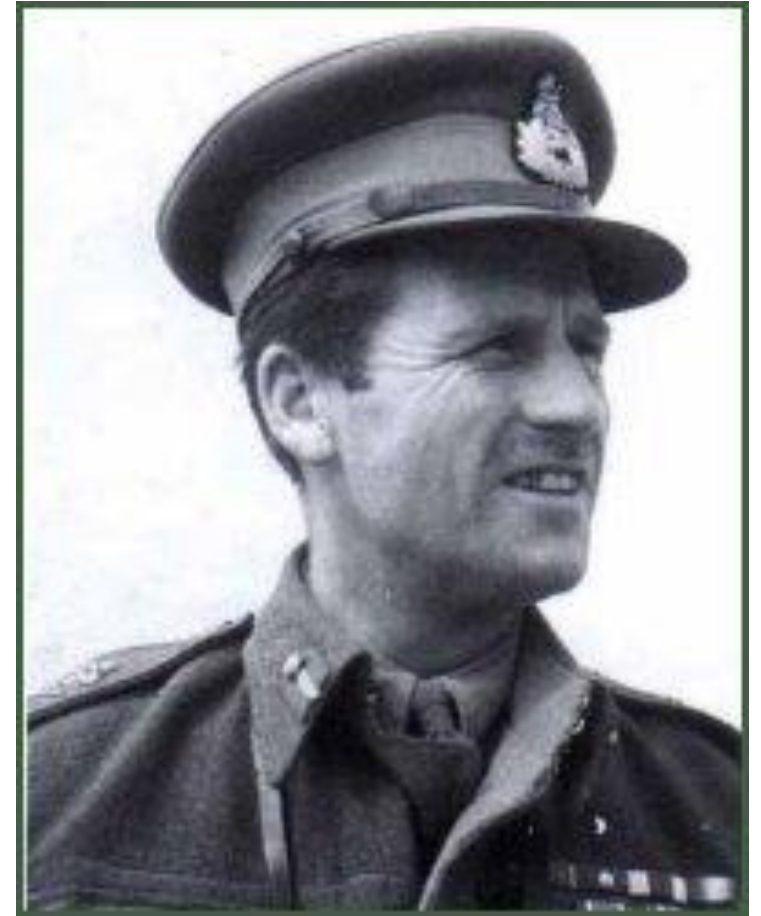


5 - 6 April 1941 - Libya

- German forces continued to filter east on the inland flank of Cyrenaica force.
- 2nd armoured division remained disorganised.
- Cyrenaica command continually changed its mind between fighting on the Barce escarpment and withdrawing to a Derna Mechili line and finally accepted Morshead's advice that they had to go back to Gazala.
- There was then a disorderly withdrawal in the process of which Generals Neame and O'Connor were captured.
- A diarist of the 2/48th commented:
- The troops started out tired and unshaven and unwashed. They seemed to be abandoning an ideal position for a stand and running away once more—contrary to everyone's wish to "have a go" at the enemy. They piled into overcrowded vehicles amid rifles, Bren guns and gear and equipment where no position offered comfort yet no move was possible. The sleep they needed was unattainable.

7 April 1941 - Libya

- About 4 a.m. Morshead arrived at Tmimi to find Brigadier Harding there, very worried because Neame and O'Connor had not arrived.
- Morshead and Harding concluded that the two generals must have been intercepted and were probably captured, and that they must themselves determine the immediate action to be taken.
- They decided to organise the next line of resistance at Gazala and to order the force at Mechili to withdraw immediately to El Adem;
- but the message conveying that order appears to have been addressed only to the 2nd Armoured Division and 3rd Armoured Brigade and does not appear to have been received by the Mechili garrison.
- Harding's and Morshead's headquarters were withdrawn to Gazala.



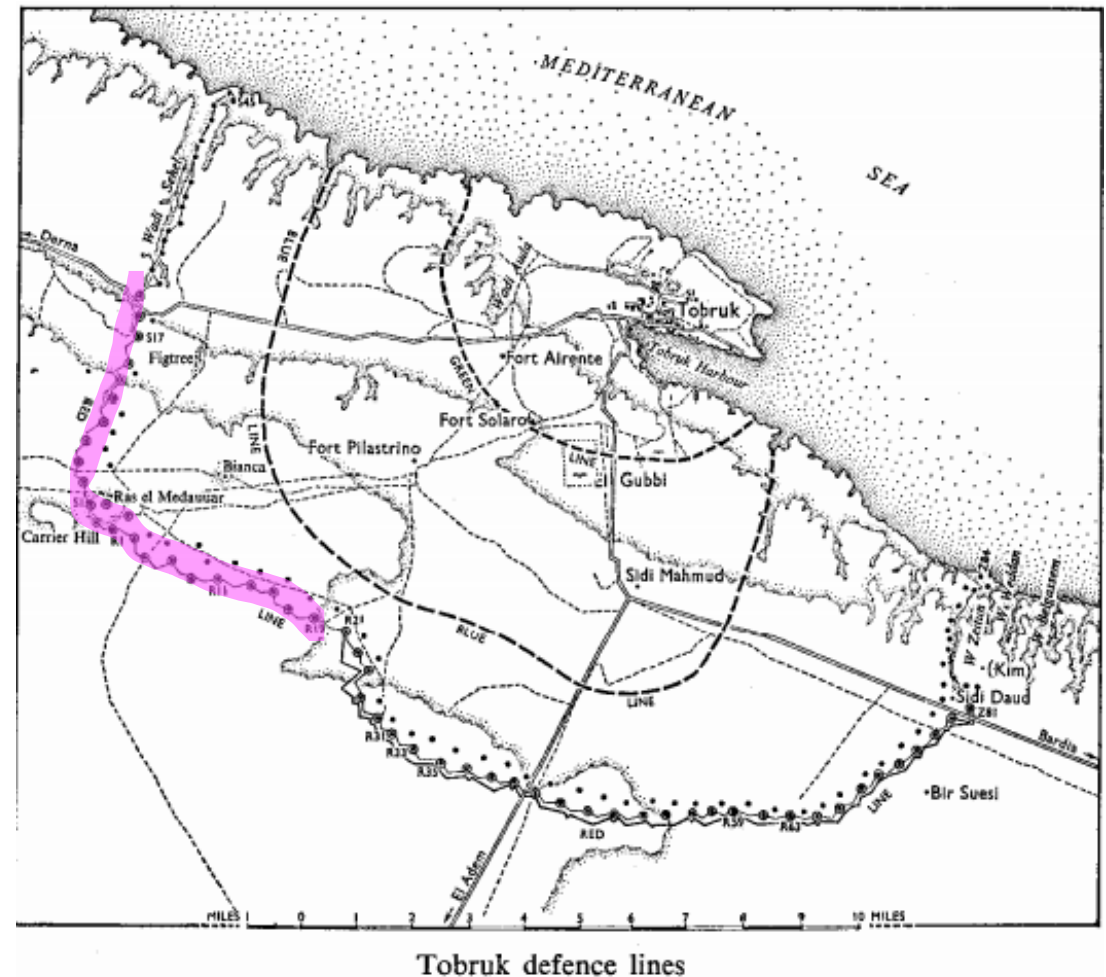
Brigadier Harding, Brigadier
General Staff XIII Corps

7 April 1941 - Libya

- German reconnaissance units hovered around the edges of the column sometimes picking off small parties sometimes being beaten off.
- A party of the 2/15th Bn including Lieut-Colonel Marlan, and 182 others and 23 of the 8th Lt AA Bty were captured after a fight in which 2 AA guns had been destroyed and the other 2 had exhausted their ammunition.
- At Derna airfield 2 troops of 1RHA, an Australian anti-tank gun and a bofors AA gun drove off a German party.
- The Luftwaffe struck in considerable strength at the Derna defiles, inflicting much damage and seriously delaying the withdrawal.
- Brigadier Rimington, commander of the 3rd armoured Brigade, tried to bypass the traffic stream by taking the desert route to Derna, drove into a German ambush and was captured.

7 April 1941 - Libya

- Lt Col Cook had been appointed to take charge of the base sub-area to be established at Tobruk, then became area commander.
- The speed with which the fortress was organised into a working base and provisioned during the next month was remarkable. In the first fortnight two excellent water-pumping stations were repaired, the electrical power system was put in working order and the bulk petrol storage system repaired: most of this work was done by the 2/4th Field Company.
- In the first fortnight of February, 8,000 of the 25,000 prisoners taken at Tobruk were removed.
- On 25th March, the 24th Brigade, which Brigadier Godfrey now commanded, with two battalions, the 2/28th and 2/43rd had taken over as the Tobruk garrison.
- By 6th April the perimeter defences in the west had been occupied in a wide arc from the Derna Road to Post R19.



7 April 1941 - Libya

- General Neame issued his "Policy for Defence of Cyrenaica" on 20th March. The paragraph on the Tobruk defences stated: "Italian field guns will be placed in position for anti-tank duties."
- On 7th April the 2/28th Battalion war diary says:
- Personnel of No. 6 Platoon did a good job on previous night ... pulling into position of five Italian 75-mm field pieces together with ammunition for the same. This brought total to 8 all manned by 4 Platoon.
- The bush artillery was not curtailed by ammunition shortage as the British field pieces were for long periods: the garrison's reserves of captured Italian ammunition were almost inexhaustible.
- Chester Wilmot in "Tobruk" tells a story, probably true, of a bush-gun crew who combined pleasure with profit by charging passers-by "2 piastres a pop" for the privilege of firing their gun at the enemy.
- The business was closed down on the protest of a neighbouring infantry commander whose headquarters became the delivery point for returns.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020648

MEN OF THE 2/28TH BATTALION AND 104TH ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY, MANHANDLE A CAPTURED 149MM ITALIAN FIELD GUN.

8 April 1941 - Libya

- The force at Mechili, 3rd Indian Motor Brigade and 2nd Armoured Division's headquarters, had been surrounded.
- Gambier-Parry ordered a break out at first light on the 8th and a move to El Adem.
- The operation miscarried badly.
- General Gambier Parry and the Headquarters of the 2nd Armoured Division and elements of the Indian 3rd Motorised Brigade were captured.
- Some 3,000 prisoners were taken by the Germans, including 102 Australians.
- The elements of the Mechili force who escaped immediate capture became scattered fugitives in the desert.



General Neame (centre), Brigadier Combe (left), and Major-General Gambier-Parry (right) following their capture in North Africa.

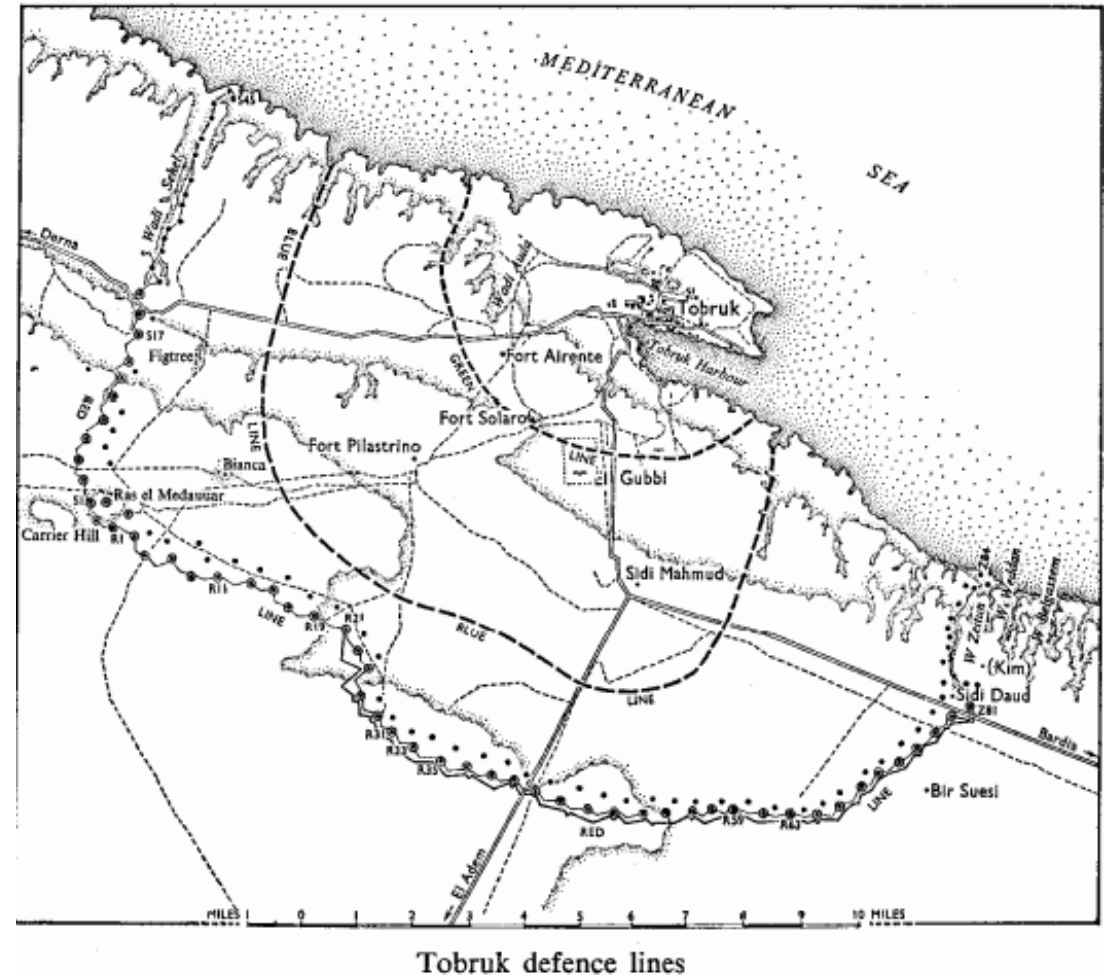
8 - 10 April 1941 - Libya

- The 9th Division withdrew by stages through Tmimi, Gazala and Acroma reaching Tobruk on the night of 9/10 April.
- The diarist of the 2/15th Battalion noted that difficulty and delay were caused by the weariness of the drivers, who fell asleep at every halt.
- At each stage German armoured cars hovered about the inland flank and had to be guarded against and occasionally driven off.
- Morshead found to his surprise that, as well as the 24th Brigade (Brigadier Godfrey), the 18th Brigade (Brigadier Wootten), part of 7th Division was in the fortress.
- Wavell ordered that Tobruk was to be held, if possible, for two months.



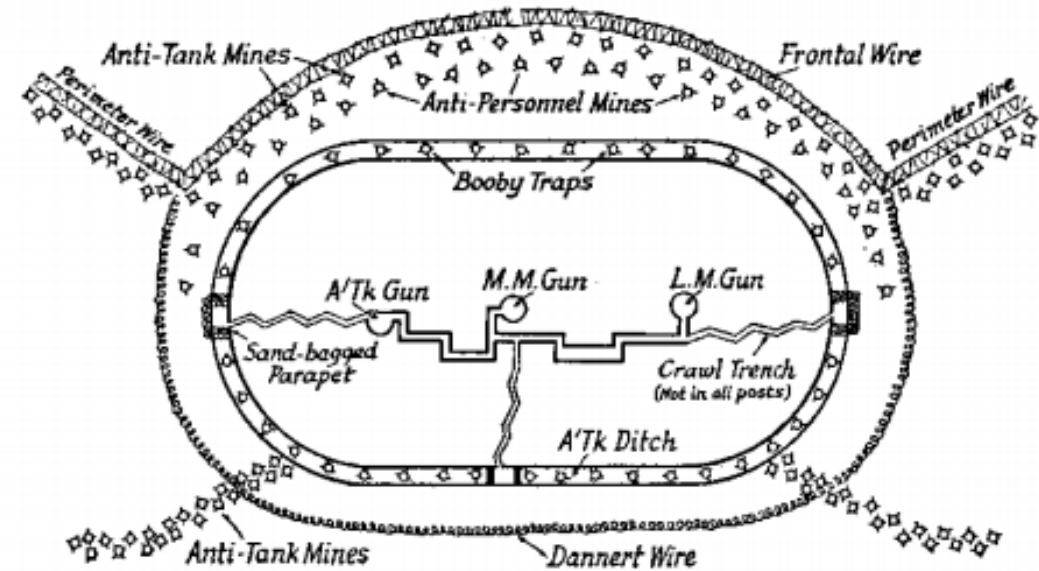
9 April 1941 - Libya

- On the 8th General Morshead was appointed to command the defence of Tobruk fortress.
- On 9th April Morshead made an extensive reconnaissance of the fortress area and quickly concluded that there was no alternative to holding the Italian perimeter defences, which were some 28 miles in length, protected as they were in great part by wire, anti-tank mines and ditches.
- The fortress had meanwhile received two important reinforcements by sea—the 107th R.H.A. (bringing the fortress's field artillery up to four regiments) and four infantry (heavy) tanks of the 4th Royal Tank Regiment.



14 April 1941 - Libya

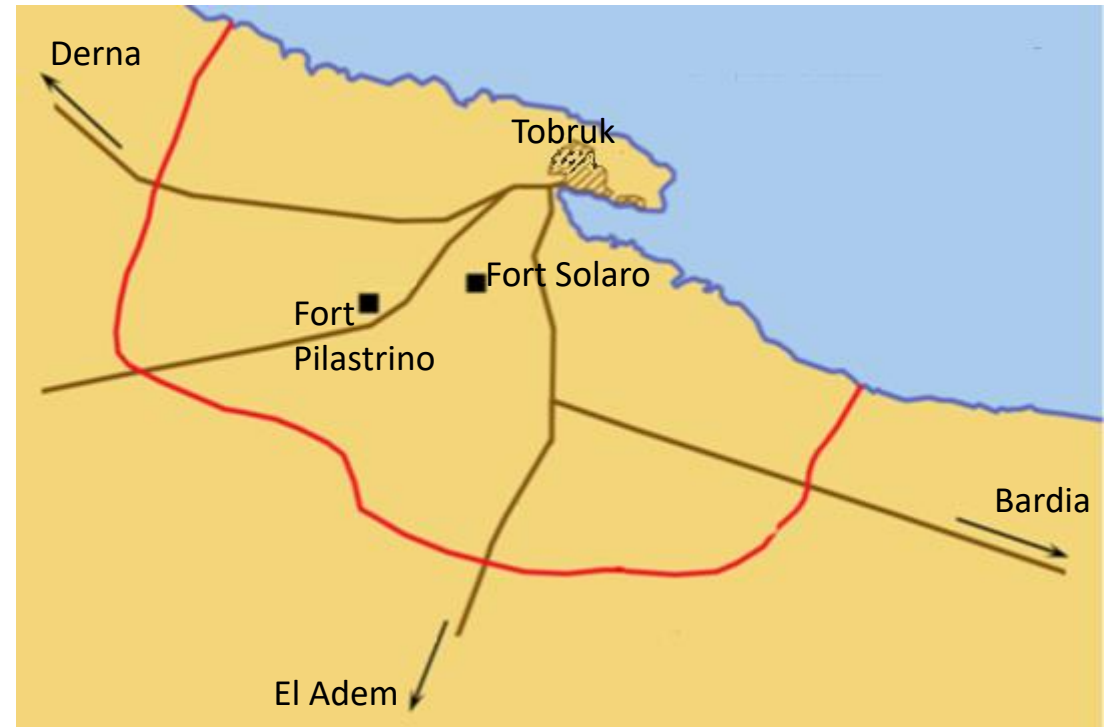
- The Italians had surrounded almost the entire perimeter with an excellent "box" wire obstacle.
- Outside the wire a deep anti-tank ditch had been partly excavated but not completed.
- In the apex of each "dog-leg" in the perimeter wire, was sited a perimeter post. These frontal posts were spaced at intervals of about 750 yards; about 500 yards behind them, covering the gaps between each two, was a second row of posts.
- A thin line of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines had been laid in front of the wire, but many of these had been removed since the Italian occupation.
- Distrusting the Italian strongpoints because they provided so few fire-bays and enabled men to shelter without fighting, Morshead ordered the immediate construction of additional weapon-pits, with intercommunication trenches.



A typical perimeter post contained three concrete circular weapon-pits sited at ground level and interconnected by concreted subterranean passages, which led also to bomb-proof subterranean living and storage quarters

10 April 1941 - Libya

- The 28 miles of perimeter were to be taken over on this day by the three brigades of the 9th Division—from right to left, the 26th, 20th and 24th Brigades—using six battalions to man the perimeter.
- One regiment of field guns was allotted to each brigade sector.
- As the sun rose, a searing wind-storm blew up, which reduced visibility to a few feet: "the filthiest day ever," one unit diarist called it.
- Units moved out to take up positions along the perimeter but the men could not see the terrain; as they shovelled sand from trenches, the wind relentlessly filled them up again.



10 April 1941 - Libya

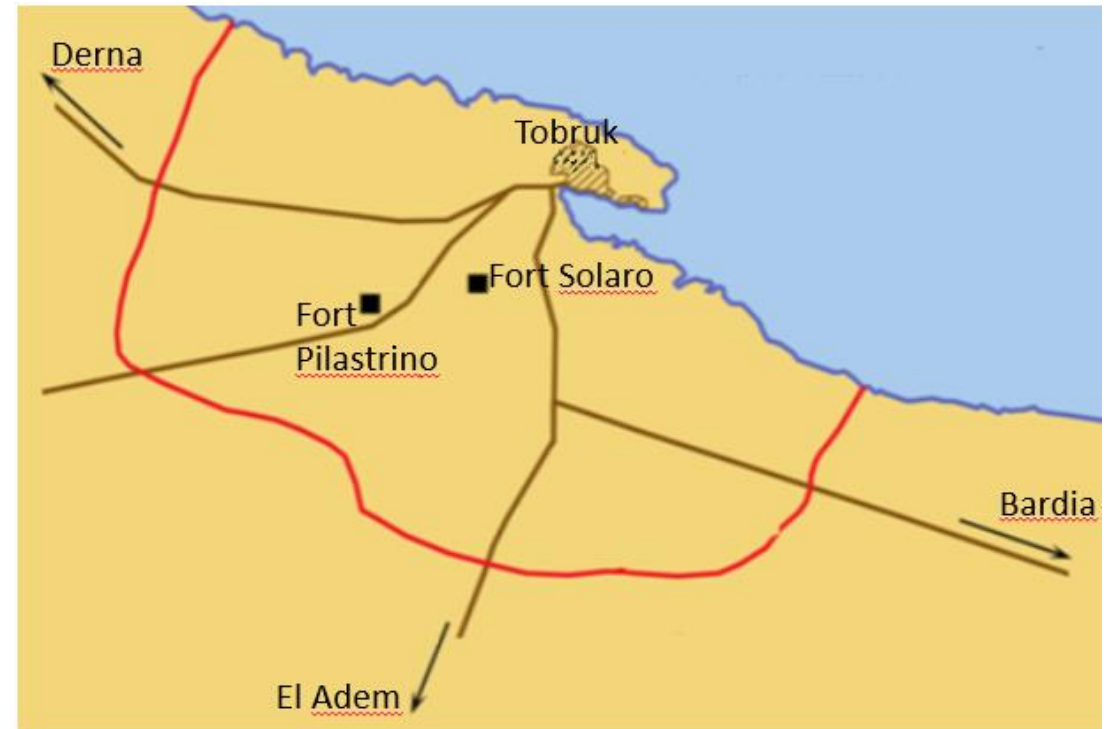
- Soon after 9 a.m. Lieutenant Bamgarten of the 2/3rd Field Company demolished the bridge over the wadi at the western gateway of the perimeter just as the first troops of a German column came down the road towards it.
- The Germans did not try to assault across the wadi near the Derna Road but took up positions on the far side and brought machine-guns, mortars and light artillery into action.
- Desultory firing continued throughout the day.
- As the day went on German forces moved round the fortress occasionally turning in towards the defences until being fired on.



Looking across to the Derna Road from Post S17 near the head of the Wadi Sehel.

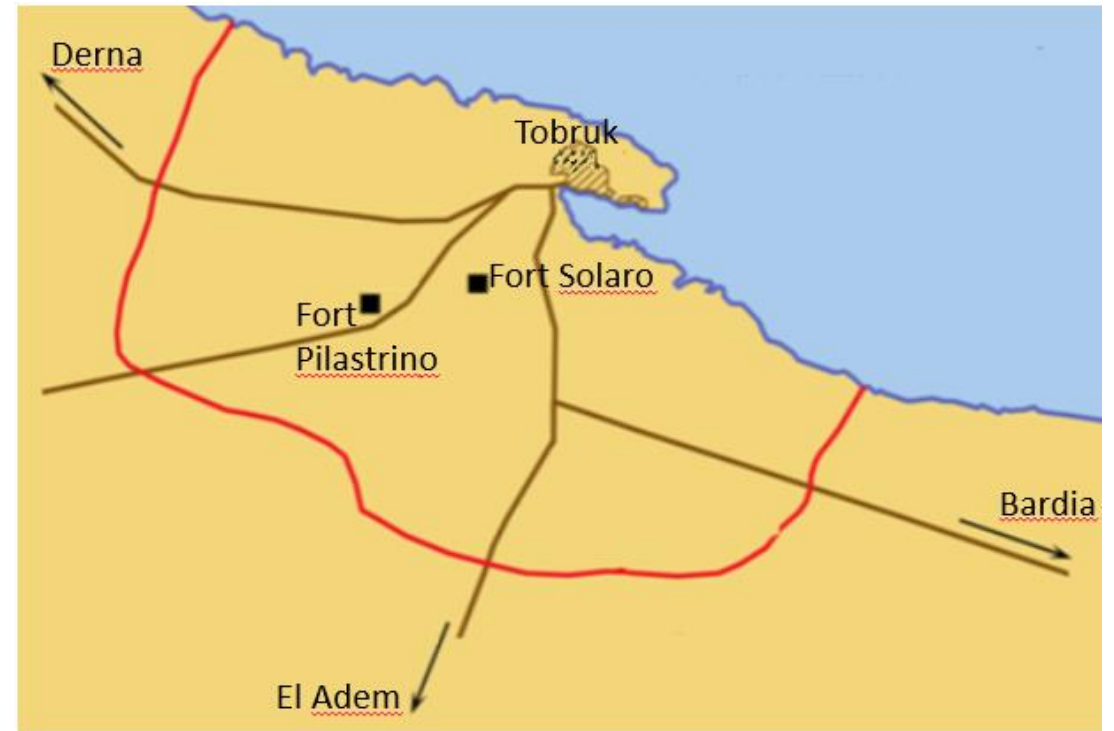
11 April 1941 - Libya

- The German move around the fortress continued.
- By noon it was apparent that the enemy was astride the El Adem Road opposite the southern sector in considerable force.
- Forces continued to approach the perimeter until dispersed by artillery.
- Meanwhile the enemy had cut the Bardia Road. The siege had begun.
- At 1.30 p.m. Brigadier Gott ordered his mobile forces to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. The group's supply vehicles, which happened to be within the Tobruk perimeter when the road was cut, were compelled to remain there.



11 April 1941 - Libya

- During the 11th Morshead issued an operation order, which decreed that active infantry patrolling should be carried out in all sectors with the utmost vigour.
- Meanwhile the engineers with the three forward brigades were busy on all fronts, strengthening the perimeter defences. The 2/3rd Field Company laid more than 5,000 mines that night on the 24th Brigade front; by morning the front of the entire sector was protected by antitank obstacles.



13 April 1941 - Libya

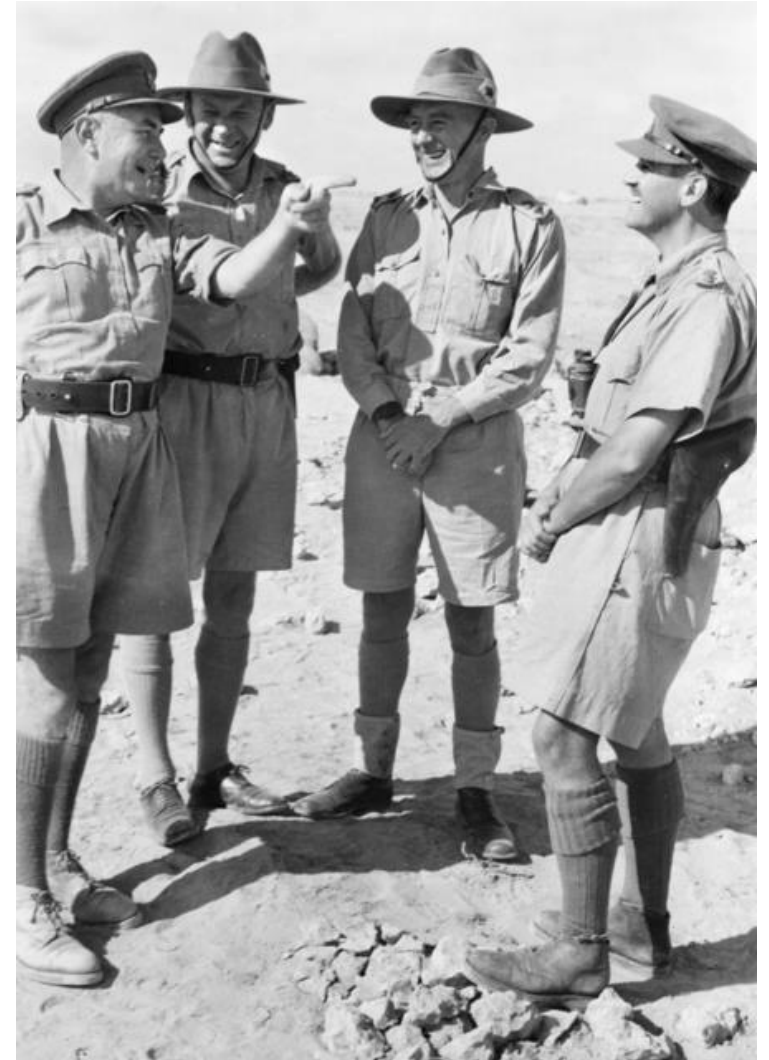
- Enemy aircraft scattered leaflets over the fortress. These read:
- “The General Officer Commanding the German forces in Libya hereby requests that the British troops occupying Tobruk surrender their arms. Single soldiers waving white handkerchiefs are not fired on. Strong German forces have already 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.”
- Morshead commented that because of the prevailing dust and of the need to ration water for essential purposes, no white handkerchiefs were available.
- Until mid-afternoon the enemy appeared to be less active than usual.



(Capt J. S. Cumpston)
Headquarters 2/24th Battalion at Tobruk, 13th April 1941. Major C. G. Weir (extreme left) and Lieutenant J. T. Brock (at telephone).

13 April 1941 - Libya

- Armoured cars probed the southern perimeter and lorries brought up troops to an assembly area some 4,000 yards out from the perimeter wire, where they dismounted and remained bunched, making no attempt at concealment until the British artillery caused them to scatter.
- Then very small detachments were brought forward to about 1,500 yards from the perimeter wire and there set up machine-guns, which brought fire to bear on the perimeter posts, opening up whenever movement occurred.
- The enemy was paying special attention to the sector held by the 2/17th Battalion. At 4 p.m. Colonel Crawford moved his reserve company up behind Captain Balfe 's company (holding Posts R30 to R35) through which he expected the thrust to be made.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020772

BRIGADIER MURRAY (POINTING) AND HIS BATTALION COMMANDERS. FROM LEFT:- LT COL CRAWFORD (2/17TH), AND LT COL BURROWS (2/13TH).

13 April 1941 - Libya

- At 5pm heavy artillery concentrations were brought down on Balfe's company. Half an hour later, heavy small-arms fire was directed across the same area, and enemy infantry with a few tanks were seen to be advancing about 500 yards from the wire.
- The guns of the 1st and 107th R.H.A. fired into their ranks with such good effect that they did not press on. After darkness fell, two or three enemy tanks cruised singly along the anti-tank ditch, possibly looking for the gap that should have been made.
- The air force's evening reconnaissance reported that there was a concentration of 300 vehicles astride the El Adem Road.



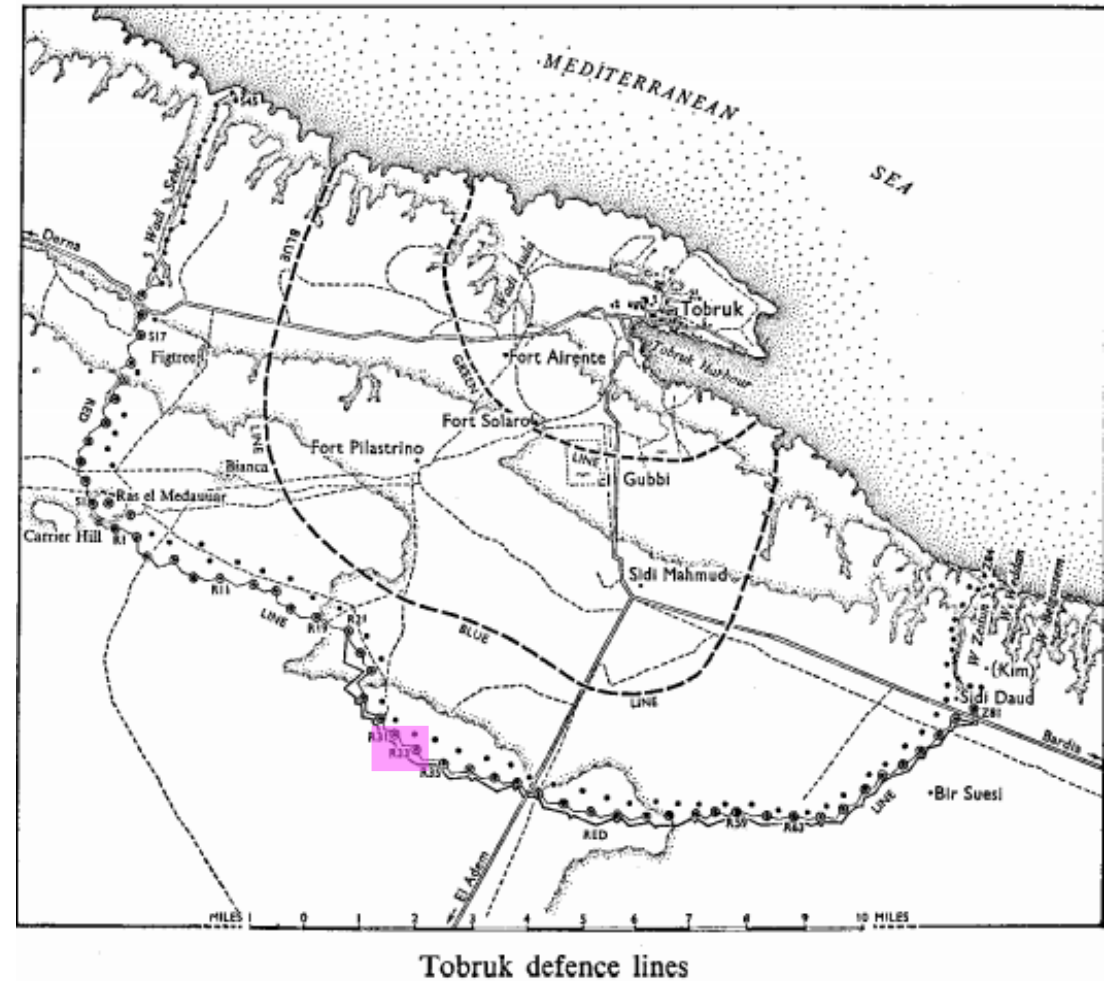
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020377

TOBRUK, LIBYA. HEAVY CLOUDS OF DUST AND SMOKE ALMOST HIDE THIS 25-POUNDER OF THE 107TH REGIMENT, ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY, WHEN FIRED FROM UNDER HEAVY CAMOUFLAGE.

13 April 1941 - Libya

- At 11 p.m. about 30 infantrymen with two small field guns, a mortar and eight machine-guns broke through the wire, dug themselves in about 100 yards to the east of Post R33 and brought all their weapons into action against it. Lieutenant Mackell, commander of the post set about dislodging them.
- At first he returned their fire, but when that failed he took Corporal Edmondson and five other men to attack the enemy party at the point of the bayonet.
- First they headed north, away from the post, intending to take the Germans in flank, while the men in the post kept the Germans under fire. Soon the enemy turned their weapons upon them, but by sprinting in bounds Mackell managed to get his men without harm into position for an assault. Mackell later said:
- "We'd arranged with them that, as we got up for the final charge, we'd shout and they would stop firing and start shouting, too. The plan worked. We charged and yelled, but for a moment or two the Germans turned everything onto us. It's amazing that we weren't all hit."



13 April 1941 - Libya

- As we ran we threw our grenades and when they burst the German fire stopped. But already Jack Edmondson had been seriously wounded by a burst from a machine-gun that had got him in the stomach, and he'd also been hit in the neck. Still he ran on, and before the Germans could open up again we were into them.
- They left their guns and scattered. In their panic some actually ran slap into the barbed wire behind them and another party that was coming through the gap turned and fled. We went for them with the bayonet. In spite of his wounds Edmondson was magnificent. As the Germans scattered, he chased them and killed at least two.
- By this time I was in difficulties wrestling with one German on the ground while another was coming straight for me with a pistol. I called out—"Jack"—and from about fifteen yards away Edmondson ran to help me and bayoneted both Germans. He then went on and bayoneted at least one more."
- Edmondson continued fighting till he could no longer stand. The seven Australians accounted for at least twelve Germans and took one prisoner; the rest fled, leaving their weapons. The men helped Edmondson back to the post. He died there in the early morning.
- Photo: Corporal John Hurst 'Jack' Edmondson

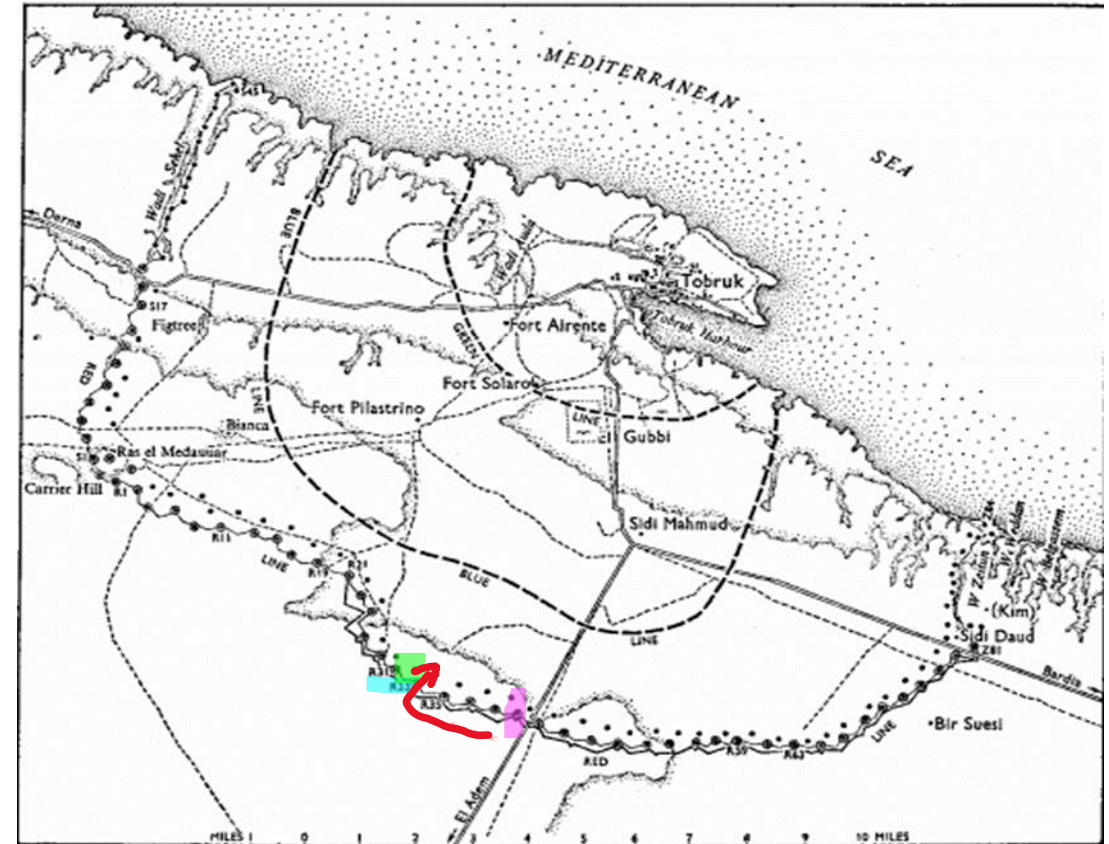


AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P09003.001

14 April 1941 - Libya

- At 4.50 a.m. some 40 tanks were reported moving west from R41 along the perimeter just outside the wire. Enemy guns began to bombard the garrison defences largely with air-burst shells.
- The tanks continued to skirt the perimeter. At 5.20 a.m. the first tanks turned and entered the perimeter through the gap near Mackell's post and made straight for Balfe's headquarters.
- There were 15 in the first wave, some of them towing anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns.
- Morshead's instructions for the defence in a tank attack were to avoid attracting the tanks' attention but to engage the following infantry when the tanks had passed.
- The tanks passed by the front perimeter posts and assembled almost on top of Balfe's headquarters in R32; 15 to 20 men followed each tank or rode on it, but dropped behind once they were within the perimeter.
- The British artillery defensive fire had been falling in front of the wire; the range was now shortened and fire was brought down right on Balfe's headquarters, with excellent effect.

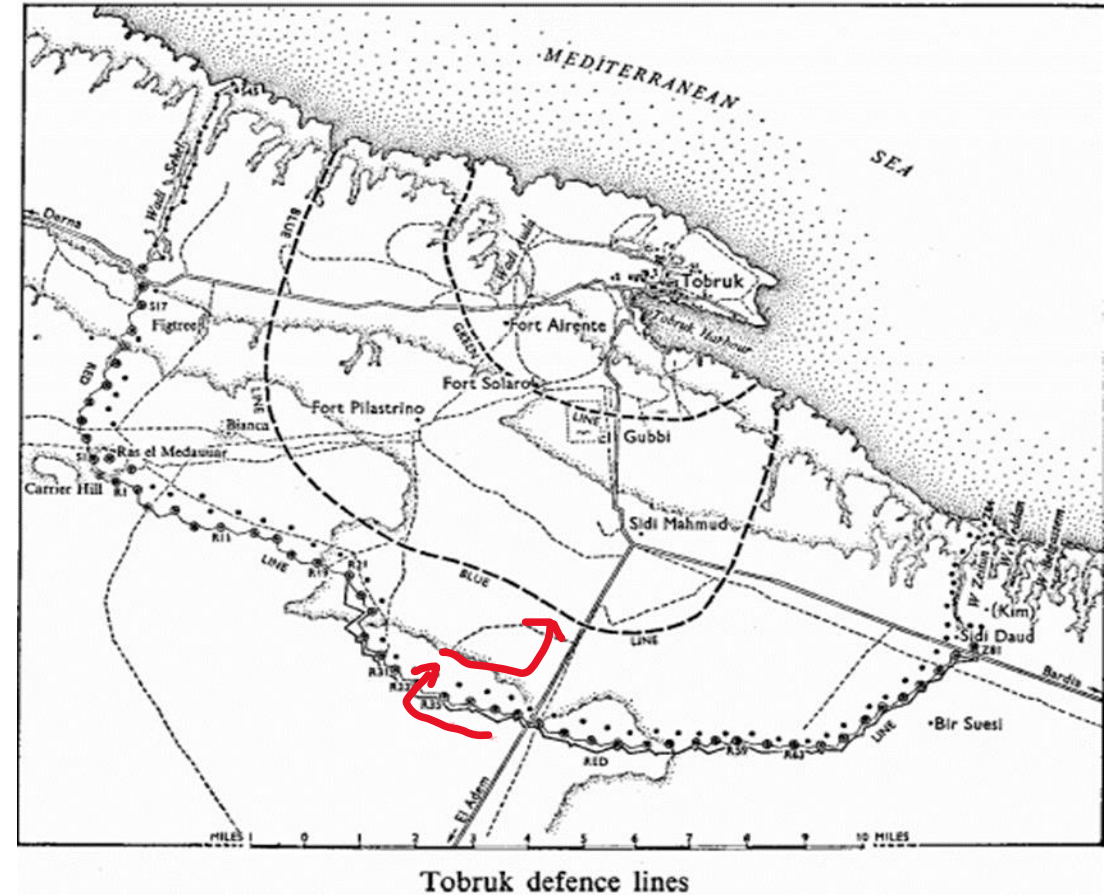


Tobruk defence lines

The machine-gun crews who had been riding on the tanks were mostly killed or wounded; the tanks moved on without them, while the accompanying infantry scattered and moved back towards the wire and, for the most part disorganised, were engaged from the posts.

14 April 1941 - Libya

- The tanks moved back eastwards on the Tobruk side of the wire until they were within a mile of the El Adem Road. Then they turned northeast, moved for a short time parallel to the road, and, facing northwards, halted to await the dawn about a mile and a half from "A/E" Battery of the 1st R.H.A. Tracers from their machine-guns told the R.H.A. where the tanks were. The gunners allowed them no peace.
- On the perimeter the forward posts kept the perimeter gaps under steady fire, blocking the follow-up of unarmoured reinforcements, while the weapons in the second-line posts, covering the ground between, prevented the enemy from recovering the cohesion lost when the first artillery concentrations had fallen among them.
- As dawn came, the fire fight increased in intensity. Near Balfe's headquarters, three German anti-tank guns and a small field-piece were brought into action, firing behind the post.



Balfe's men engaged the crews with rifle fire; the enemy turned their guns onto the post; but the Australians continued to snipe the gun crews until all were killed.

14 April 1941 - Libya

- As visibility improved the British cruisers crossed the El Adem Road and the enemy tanks could be seen in a huddle one and a half miles to the south of the guns of "A/E" Battery, which brought down concentrated fire upon them.
- The German tanks spread out and began to work forward in groups towards the gap between the battery's two troops.
- One troop of "M" Battery 3rd R.H.A. was fighting a spirited action with its five guns on portee in the open. The troop worked round to the rear of the tanks, came up on the right flank and engaged them in a running fight, accounting for several, but leaving two of their own guns and their portees destroyed.



Australian Army 2-pounder portée

14 April 1941 - Libya

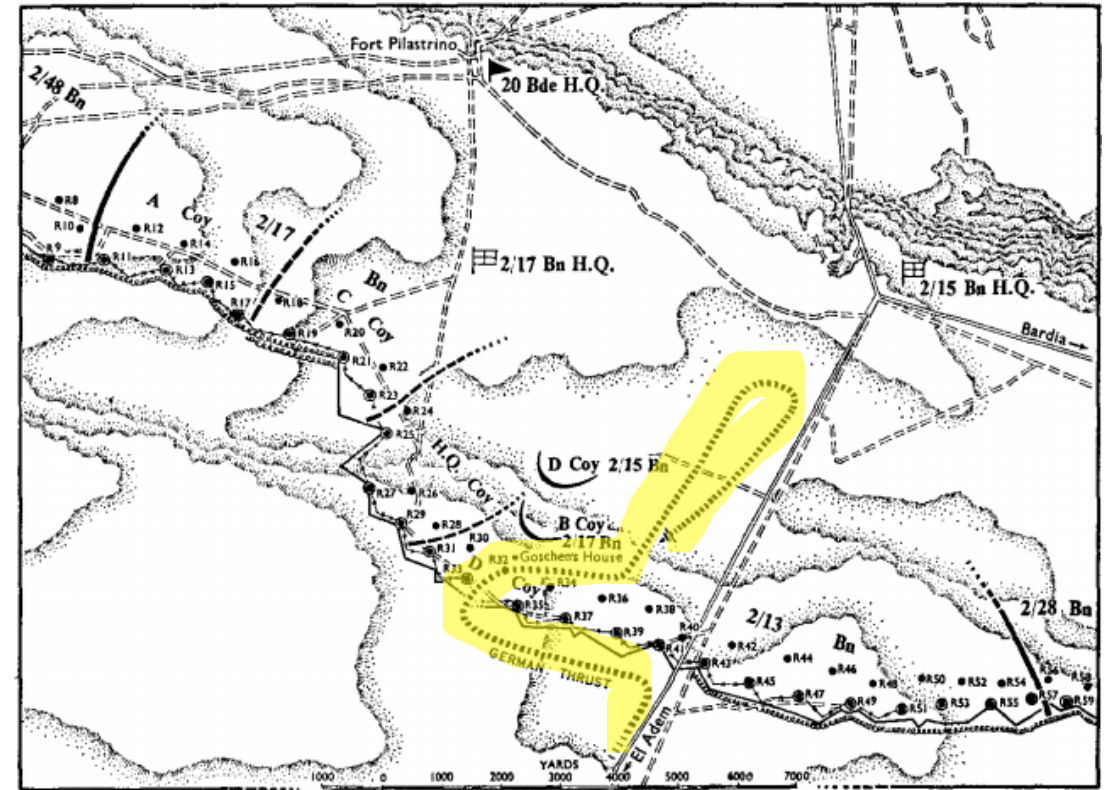
- Fired at on all sides, the tanks, which had at first advanced well dispersed, tended to bunch, but continued to fight their way forward by bounds. One group would stop to fire their guns, while another moved on through them. The whole body of tanks thus advanced relentlessly on the guns of the Chestnut Troop of the 1st R.H.A.
- The British gunners had no armour-piercing shell but their fire was effective. The foremost tanks came within 600 yards of the gun positions. At that range the 25-pounders were deadly and the gunners firing over open sights, did not relent when casualties mounted fast. In no time, five tanks were burning and one Mark IV tank had its turret blown clean off. Two veered to the right to work their way round the flank only to be engaged and checked by some anti-tank guns of the 2/3rd.
- The German tanks turned round and retreated but ran straight into the follow up battalion. There was confusion and several collisions.



25 pounder field gun in the desert.

14 April 1941 - Libya

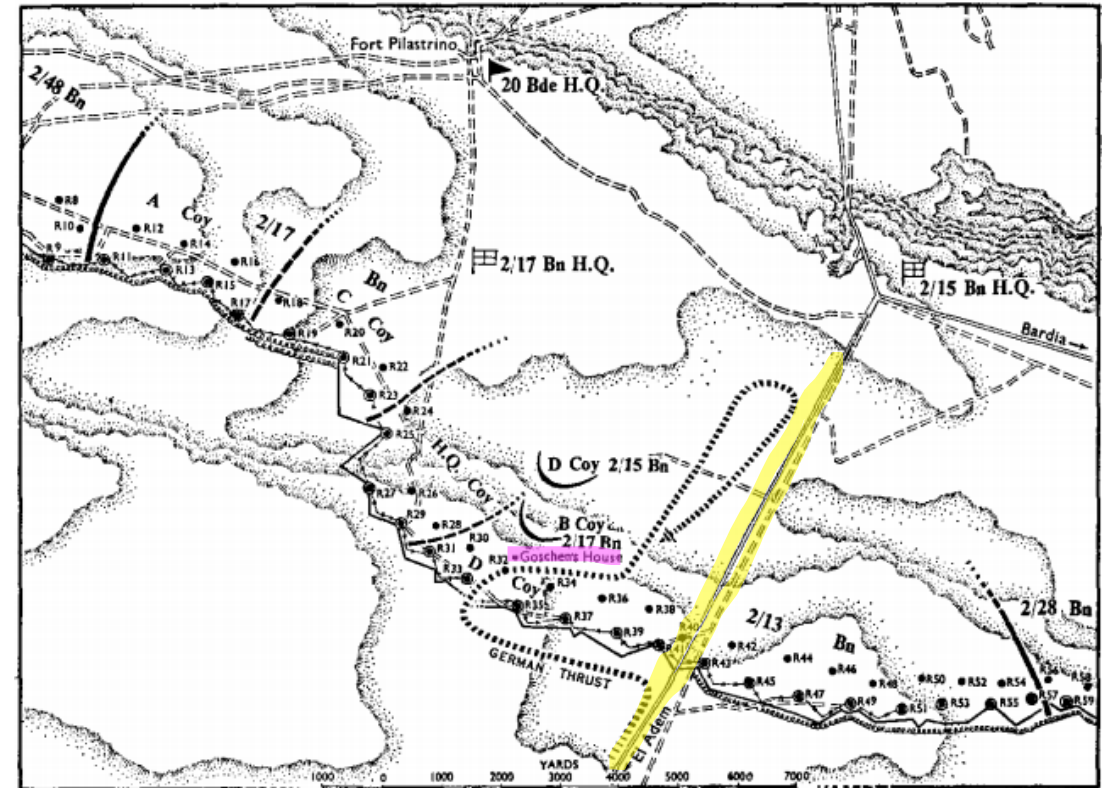
- The assault had been turned. "A/E" Battery must get the main credit. For 45 minutes they had stood to their guns and contested the seemingly relentless enemy advance; the German tank crews were first to quail.
- The battery had one gun knocked out. In the Chestnut Troop 5 men were killed, and 3 wounded, including both the officers at the guns. "E" Troop's casualties were 6 killed or badly wounded, of whom only one survived.
- The German tanks next turned eastwards, but ran into the fire from a section of guns of the 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment while "B/O" Battery also engaged them with 25-pounders.
- Two guns of the 2/3rd under Sergeant Hinds caught them in enfilade while the R.H.A. engaged them frontally. Both anti-tank guns opened fire simultaneously. A medium German tank was stopped. One of the antitank guns was put out of action and the gunner, Scholfield, was killed.
- Hinds continued firing the other. When the tanks had passed on and the smoke and dust had cleared, there were four enemy tanks knocked out in front of Hinds' gun. The Rocket Troop, in a close duel, had three guns knocked out, two tractors destroyed and many men killed.



The German attack of 13th-14th April

14 April 1941 - Libya

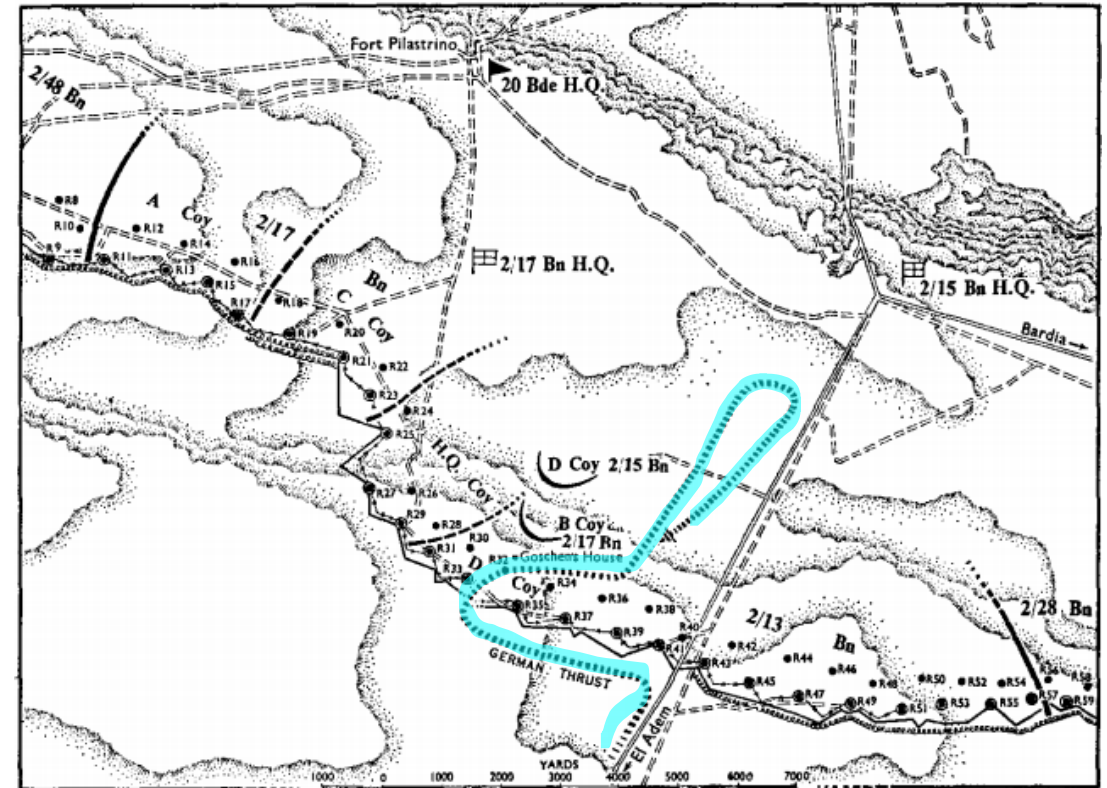
- The cruisers of the 1st Royal Tanks had taken up position to the east of the **El Adem Road** and opened fire at a range of about one mile and began to close in.
- Over the whole area of the break-in the battle was now being fought with great intensity, with weapons of every calibre from rapid light automatics to field guns. Drifting smoke and dust, billowing up, showed where the ground fighting was severest.
- Beside the El Adem Road German tanks were being engaged simultaneously by "B/O" Battery, the 2/3rd's anti-tank guns and the cruiser tanks.



The German attack of 13th-14th April

14 April 1941 - Libya

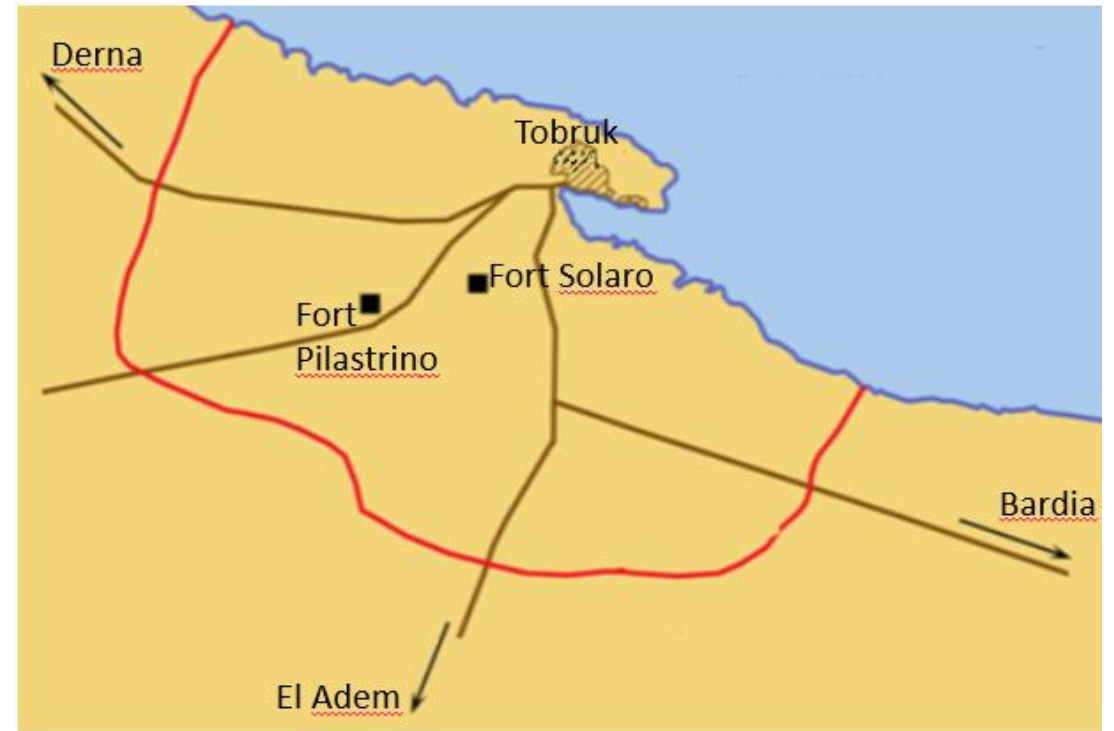
- Engaged on all sides the German tanks turned and made for the gap by which they had come, harassed still by "B/O" Battery and the 425th Battery.
- Now they encountered the mobile anti-tank guns of Lieutenant Hatch's troop of "J" Battery, 3rd R.H.A..
- Next the tanks came within range of some guns of the 9th Battery, 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment. The British cruisers were following behind the German tanks, and two infantry tanks, which had closed in on the gap, joined in the fray.
- There was much confusion as the tanks made their exit—tanks and infantry pushing through the gap together.



The German attack of 13th-14th April

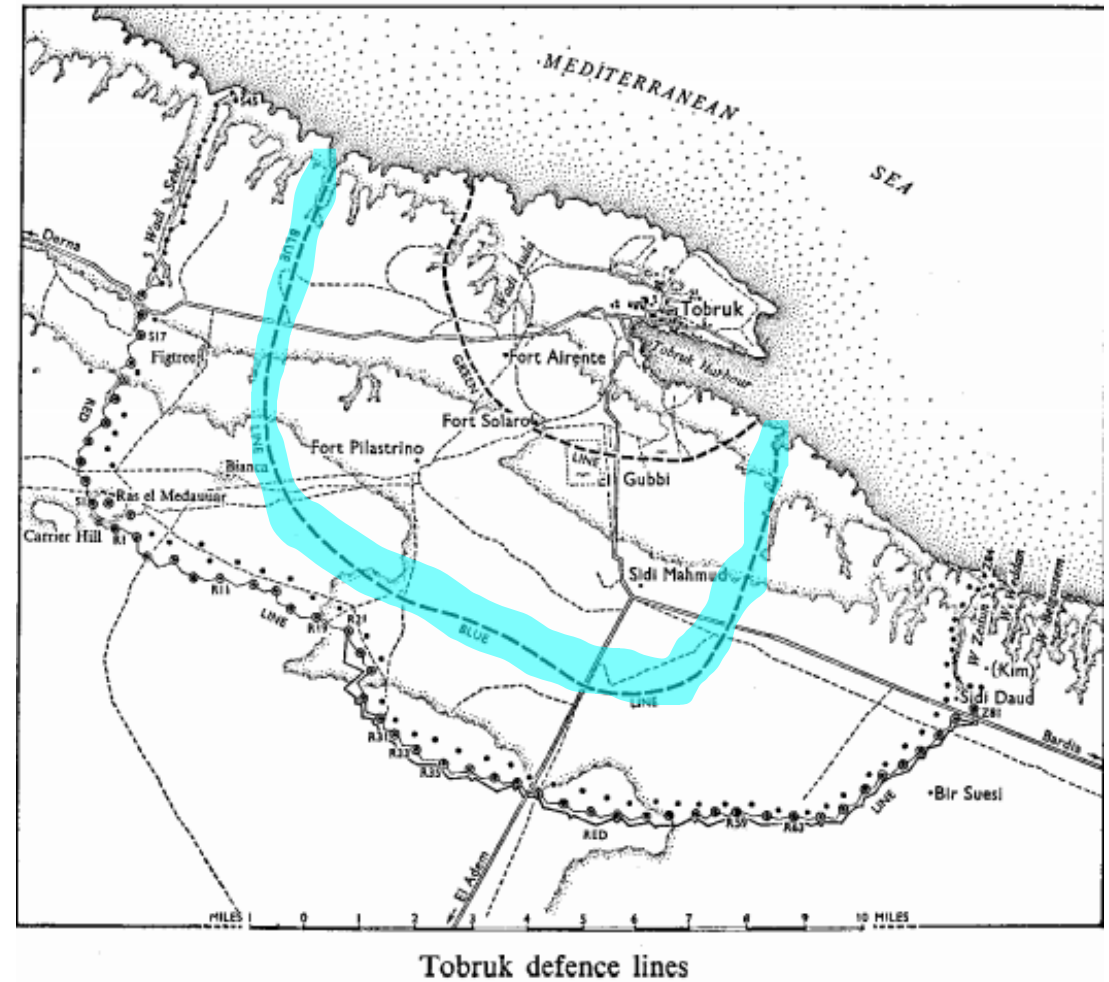
14 April 1941 - Libya

- The Germans' first major attack on the fortress had ended in complete defeat.
- 150 enemy dead were counted on the battlefield and 250 prisoners were taken. The garrison's casualties were 26 killed and 64 wounded.
- Seventeen enemy tanks were destroyed, two British cruisers knocked out.



19 April 1941 - Libya

- A squadron of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment with 12 infantry tanks arrived by sea on the 16th.
- The reduction in the scale and strength of enemy ground operations enabled specialist and other reserve troops to be released from emergency defensive roles for other tasks.
- Work on the **Blue Line**, the second line of defence, was again pushed forward. The mining of the line was completed on the 19th though many positions had yet to be dug.



22 April 1941 - Libya

- In a raid on the harbour on the 21st by a force of 24 bombers escorted by 21 fighters, the quay was hit, two ships were sunk and two were put out of action.
- It was little consolation for such severe losses that the few Hurricanes of Nos. 73 and 274 Squadrons intervened with great success and shot down four enemy aircraft.
- Morshead called a conference next day to devise counter-measures, attended by his commander of antiaircraft artillery, Brigadier Slater, and by the two senior R.A.F. commanders. Slater proposed to change the method of fighting the heavy anti-aircraft guns from predictor laying on individual machines to an umbrella barrage. This was agreed to. It was also decided to form the nucleus of an observation corps, with three observation posts in a wireless network, to combat dive-bombing attacks on the forward troops.



(Australian War Memorial)

Major-General L. J. Morshead and his senior commanders at Tobruk. *Left to right:* standing, Brigadier J. N. Slater, Colonel R. C. Keller, Brigadiers G. F. Wootten and A. H. L. Godfrey; seated, Brigadiers L. F. Thompson and R. W. Tovell, General Morshead and Brigadier J. J. Murray.

23 April 1941 - Libya

- On the next day, the 23rd, air activity was almost continuous and more ships were hit.
- Three of the garrison's dwindling force of aircraft were shot down, and two were damaged.
- But of 13 aircraft that raided the harbour and landing ground, 6 were brought down.



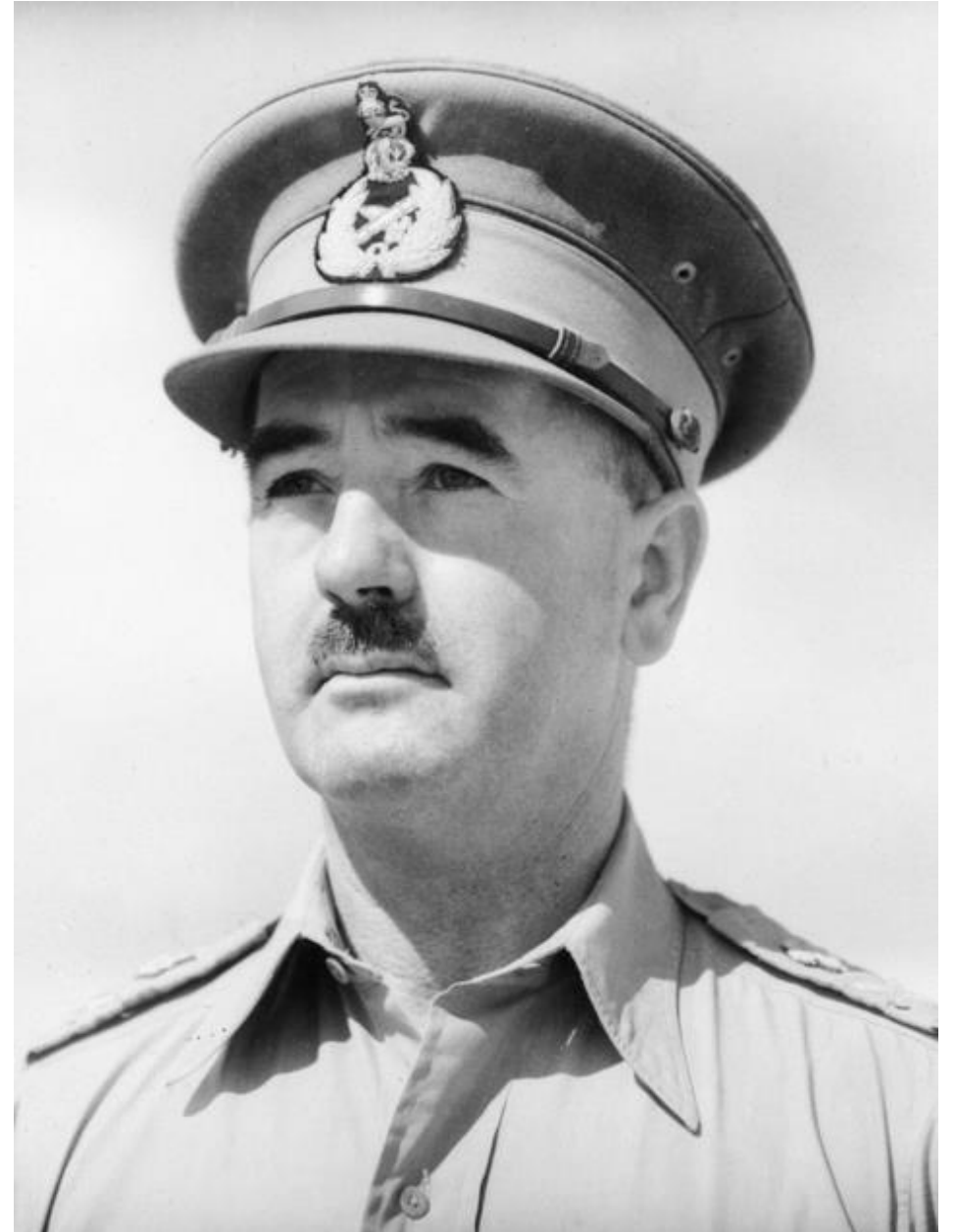
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

020737

TOBRUK, LIBYA. ONE OF THE BOFORS 40MM ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS IN ACTION ON THE HARBOUR FRONT.

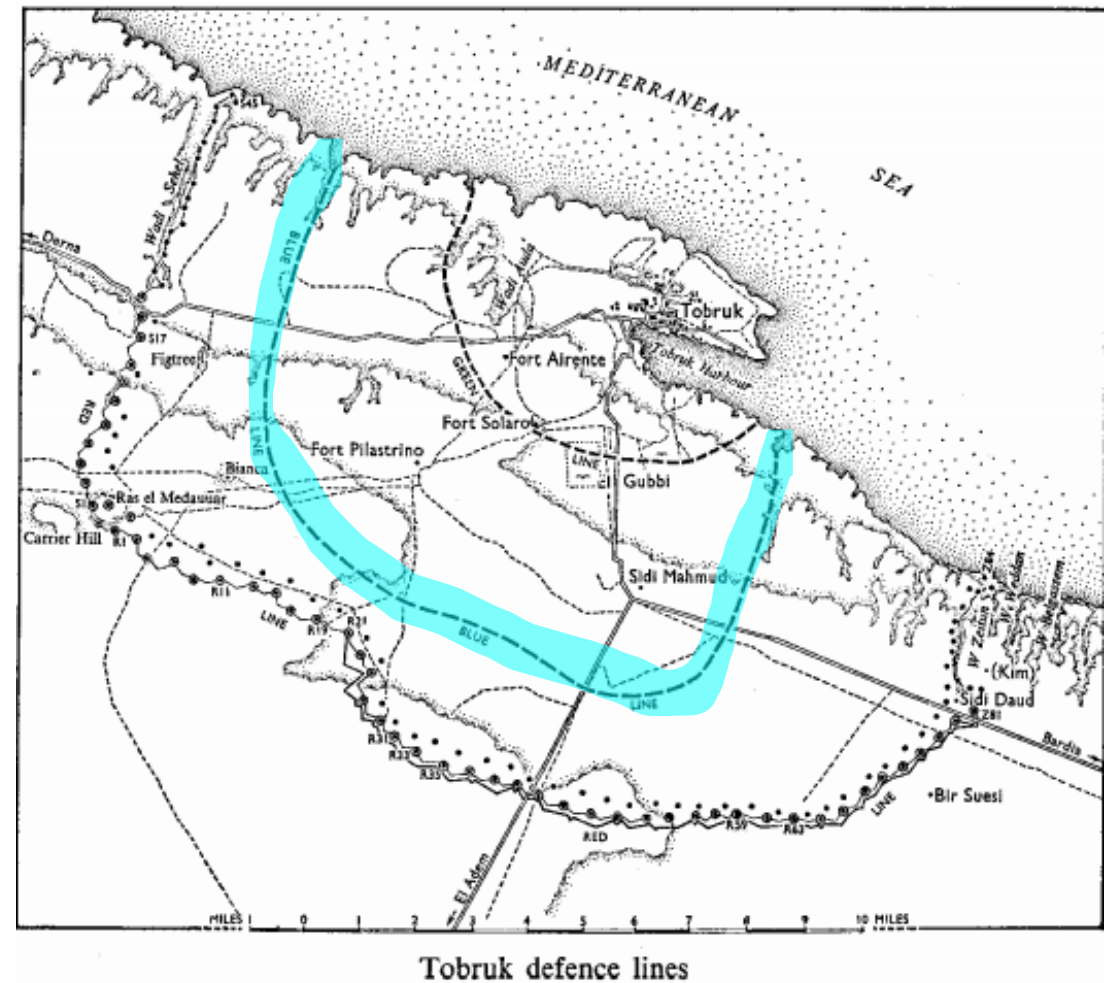
25 April 1941 - Libya

- Morshead (photo) was warned by HQ Middle East that another German armoured division might be expected to appear before Tobruk about 1st May.
- Two measures were immediately put in hand. Minefields outside the perimeter were lifted and re-laid in the wire in front of the posts and a system of inner minefields was designed, which would confine the forward and lateral movement of an armoured penetration in any sector, boxing the tanks in between the perimeter and the second line of defence (the Blue Line).
- Morshead directed that the work on the minefield and the Blue Line defences was to be completed to meet an enemy attack by the 27th.
- A long instruction on defensive arrangements and defects was issued from Morshead's headquarters on the 25th. "It must be impressed on all," it stated, "that future attacks are certain to be carried out with extensive artillery preparation and air attack." On no account must there be any pause in the task of improving the defences.



29 April 1941 - Libya

- The morning tactical air reconnaissance on the 29th revealed continued movement of transport across the front of the 20th and 26th Brigades.
- The tempo of enemy air activity was stepped up still further as the day progressed. Field gun positions, forward infantry posts and infantry in reserve areas were bombed and strafed. In one attack three men were killed and eight wounded in the 2/10th Battalion. The 20th Brigade's sector was shelled all morning.
- In the past week great progress had been made in strengthening the defences in depth and developing the **Blue Line**, particularly in the western sector. The engineers had continued working round the clock laying the tactical minefields.



29 April 1941 - Libya

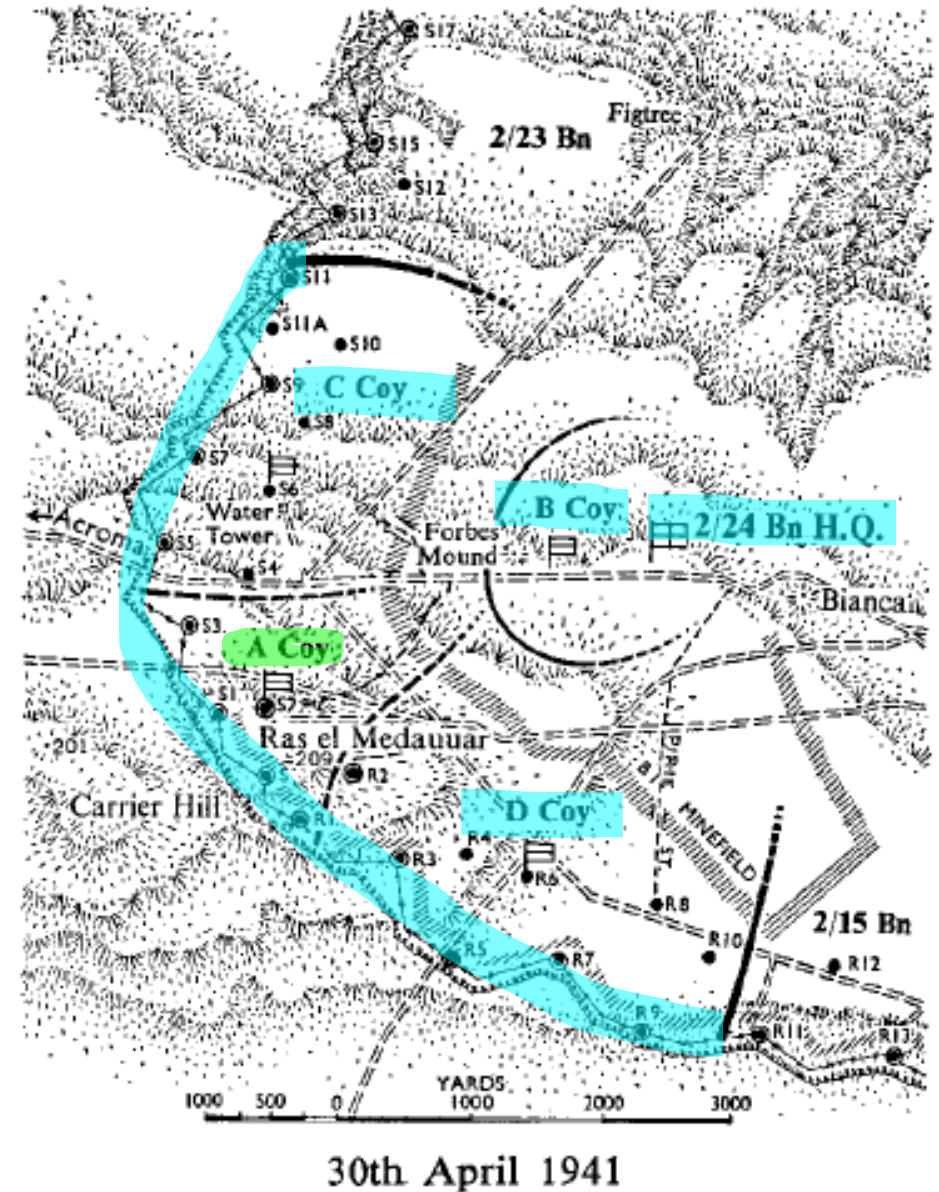
- In the late evening about 30 aircraft (one reports put the number as high as 63) using the last of the daylight dive-bombed the rear areas of the 20th Brigade; more than 30 men were wounded.
- The day ended with an artillery bombardment of the reserve positions of the 26th Brigade. But the night was quiet.
- In the port three lighters arrived, unloaded six infantry tanks and took back with them some of the German tanks captured in the Easter battle for examination by the equipment experts in England.



A Matilda 2 Infantry Tank. 25 tons, crew of four, 2 pounder gun, max speed 16mph on road, 9 mph off road.

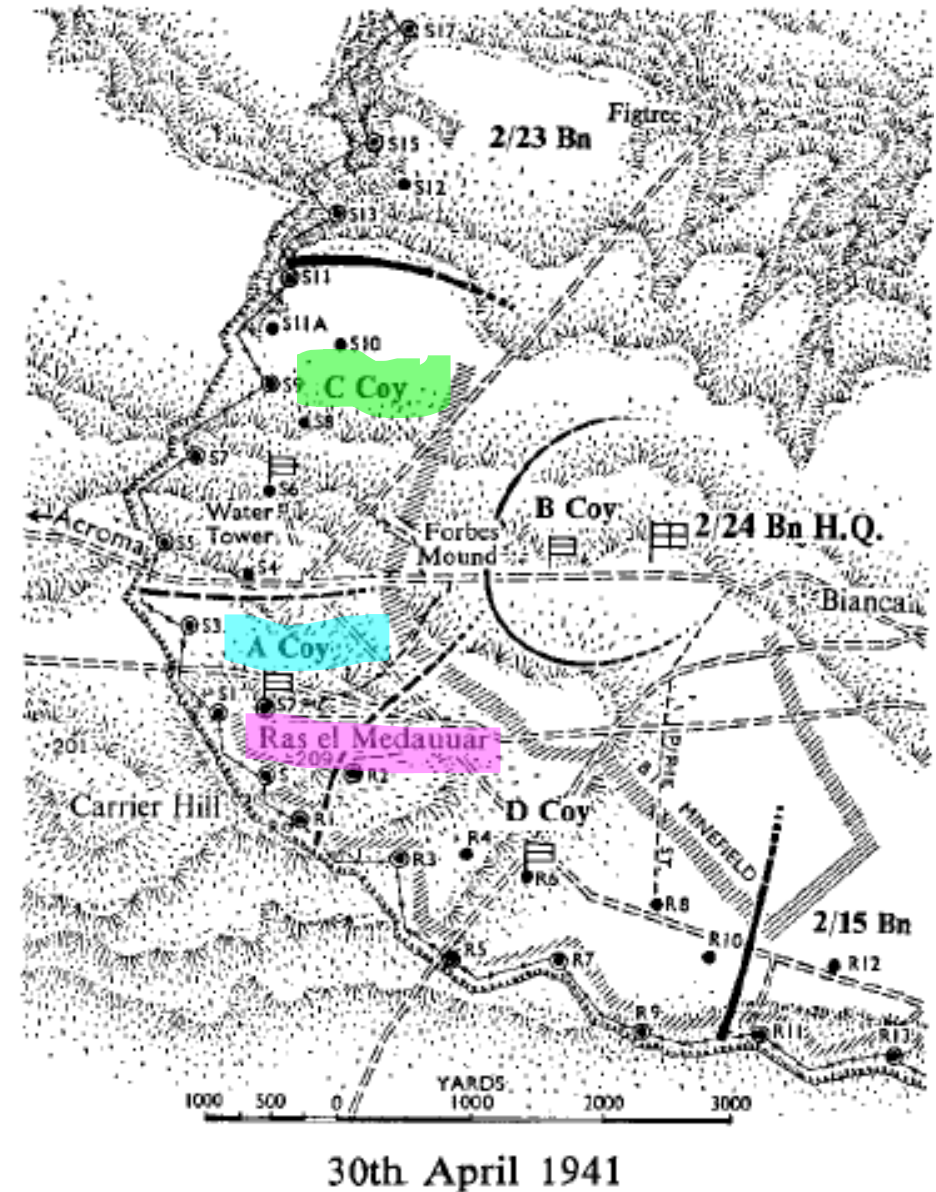
30 April 1941 - Libya

- In the Ras el Medauuar sector curtains of dust closed and parted, giving momentary, hazy views of enemy territory where continuous movement of men and tanks could be indistinctly perceived all day.
- The 2/24th was ready to meet an attack.
- Yet the morning and afternoon passed with only some light shelling and some dive-bombing of the forward troops in the western sector.
- At 7.45 p.m. as the dust began to clear, more infantry were seen in the dying light gathering about 3,000 yards in front of Fell's company. The telephone line to Fell had gone dead, but there was still communication to the companies on either flank.



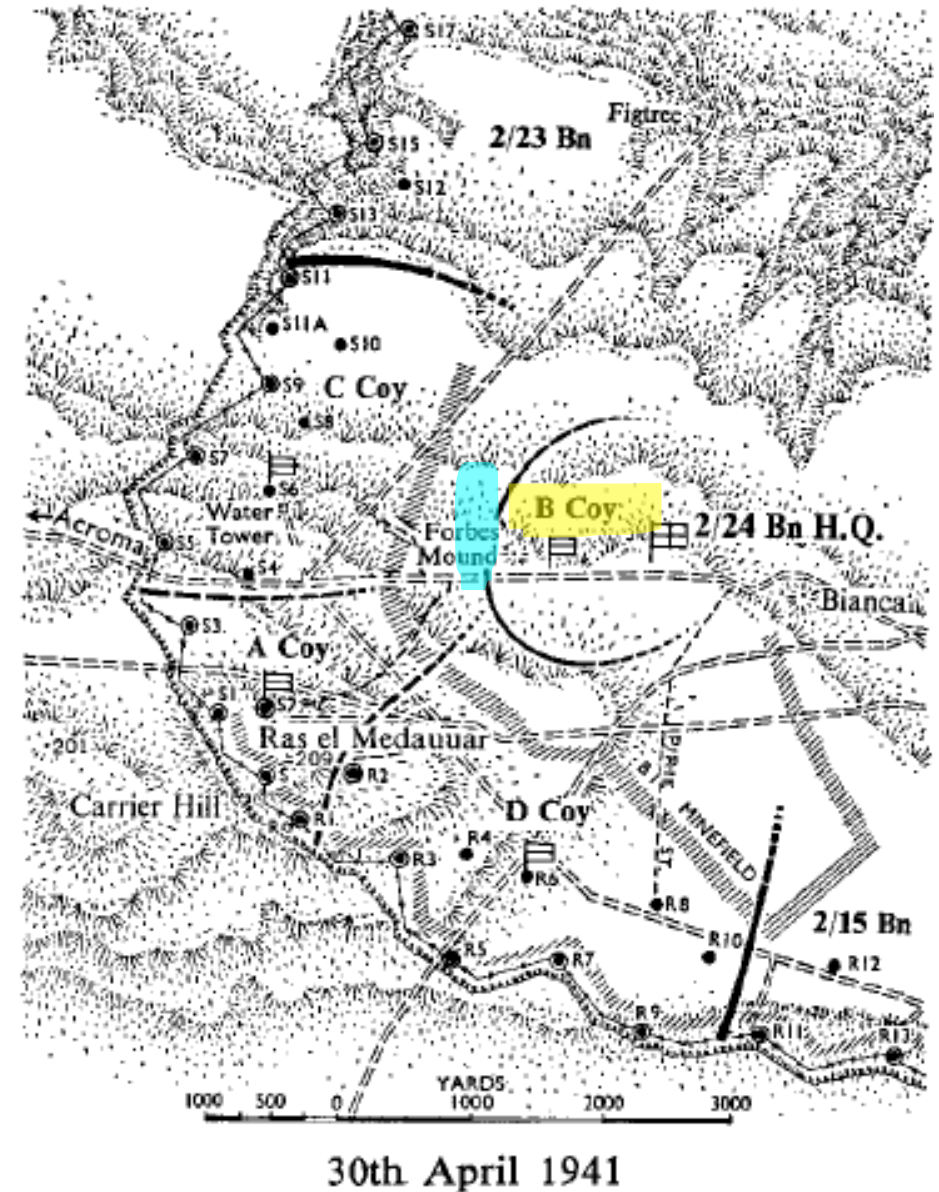
30 April 1941 - Libya

- At 8 p.m. a heavy artillery barrage was brought down on 4,500 yards of the perimeter on either side of Ras el Medauuar, enveloping the front in a pall of dust as the light faded.
- At 8.15 the barrage lifted and concentrations were brought down with great accuracy on the perimeter posts themselves.
- About 8.30 p.m. there was a pause in the artillery fire and the perimeter wire was blown with bangalore torpedoes between Canty's and Fell's companies, where the Acroma road crossed the perimeter.
- Spowers of the 2/24th had already lost contact with his centre and right wing companies. Soon after 9.30 p.m. his lines to brigade headquarters and the brigade reserve battalion both went dead. The slow process of enciphering radio messages began.



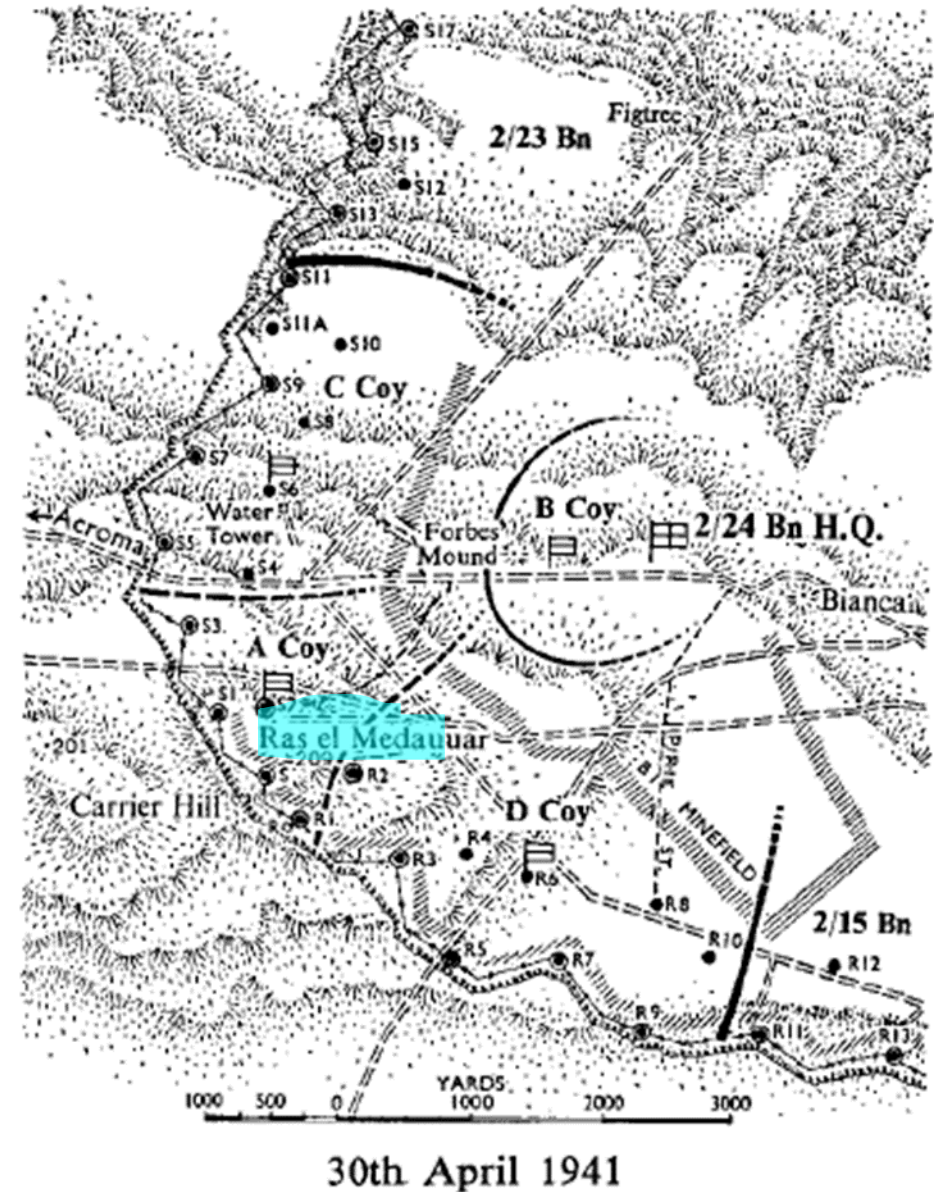
30 April 1941 - Libya

- At 9.30 p.m. 26 Brigade reported that a considerable number of flares had been seen along the perimeter; there was no further information available because Major Fell's and Captain Canty's companies, on whose front the flares had been seen, were out of communication.
- At 10.14 p.m. Spowers received a report from the commander of his reserve company, Captain Gebhardt that his right platoon had been fired on from the north-west at a range of 500 yards.
- Spowers ordered Gebhardt to send out a patrol to ascertain what troops were firing on them.



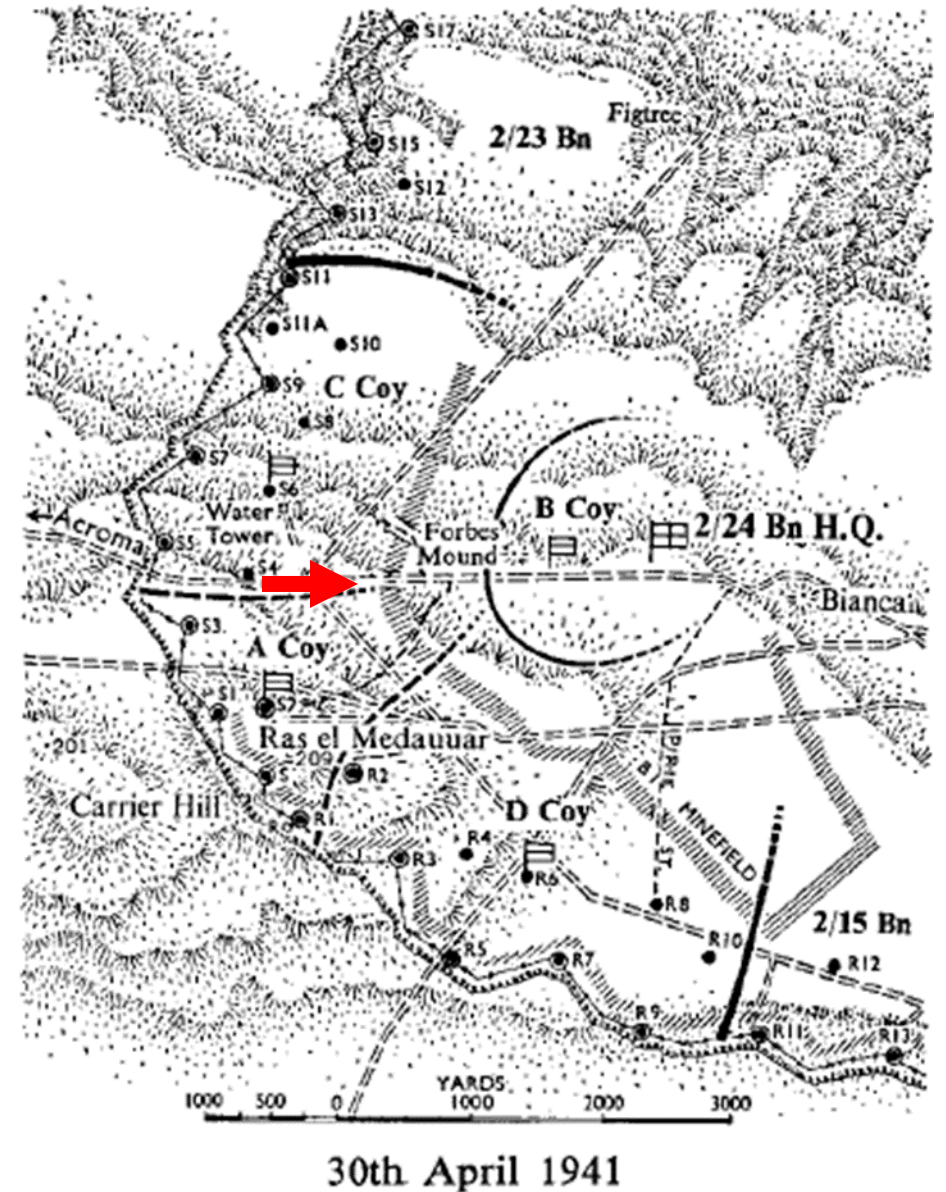
1 May 1941 - Libya

- Spowers attempts to find out what had happened to his frontline companies achieved nothing. His patrols were unable to penetrate into the area.
- Just afterwards the sun broke through and the mist cleared.
- As the fog dispersed, heavy firing broke out along the perimeter in the **Medauuar** sector; dive bombers swept down with blaring sirens and other aircraft strafed the front.
- There were six enemy tanks on the east side of Ras el Medauuar.



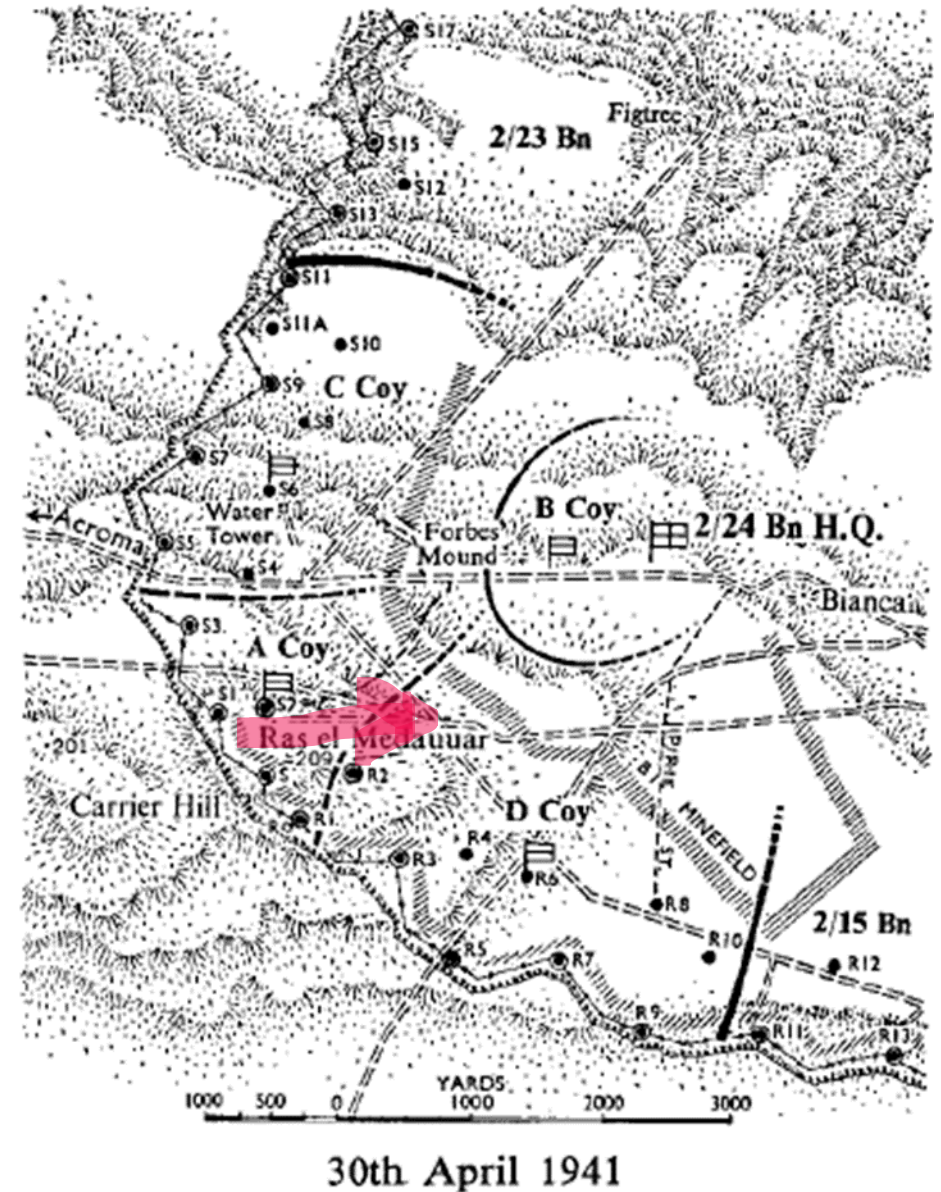
1 May 1941 - Libya

- Some 15 minutes after the mist lifted about a battalion of enemy infantry were perceived by artillery observers advancing eastwards from the area near the hut north of Ras el Medauuar, which was approximately on the boundary of Canty's and Fell's companies.
- Gunfire from the 51st Field Regiment effectively broke up the advance.



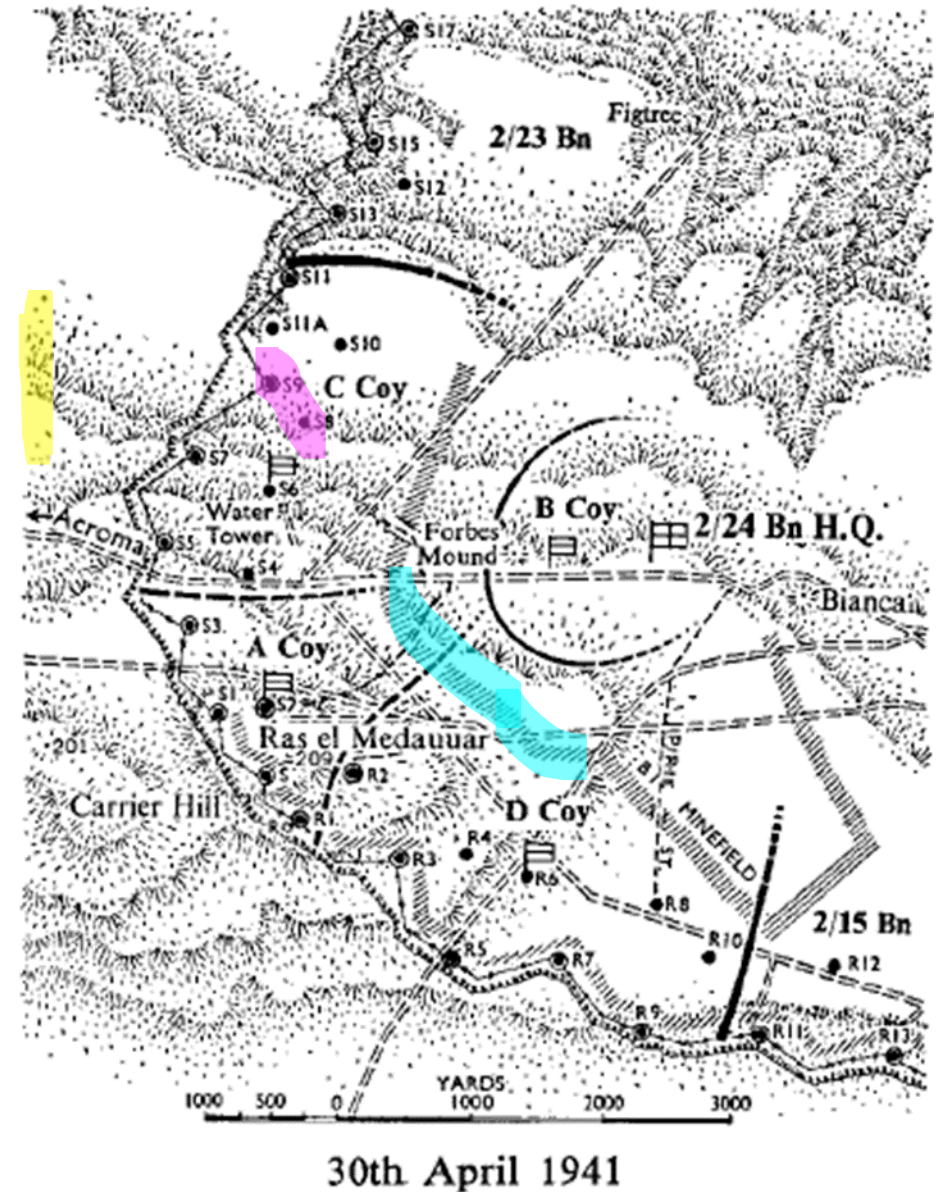
1 May 1941 - Libya

- Five minutes later 30 enemy tanks were seen on the slope of Ras el Medauar. At 8 a.m. they began to come over the sky-line south of that high point, **moving eastwards**. In all, about 40 took part in this thrust—there were about 80 inside the wire.
- The British gunners were at first reluctant to engage them, fearing that their fire might harm Australian infantry in the same area. But the tanks came on, and soon encountered the fire of every artillery piece the defenders could bring to bear.
- Captain Norman's 24th Anti-Tank Company engaged them in flank. Corporal Aston's gun knocked out one German Mark III and two other tanks, but was then beset by 11 or 12. Two of the crew (Lance-Corporal Luck and Private Bridges) were seriously wounded but the others kept the gun firing until it was smashed by a direct hit. Norman's company lost three guns in the action.



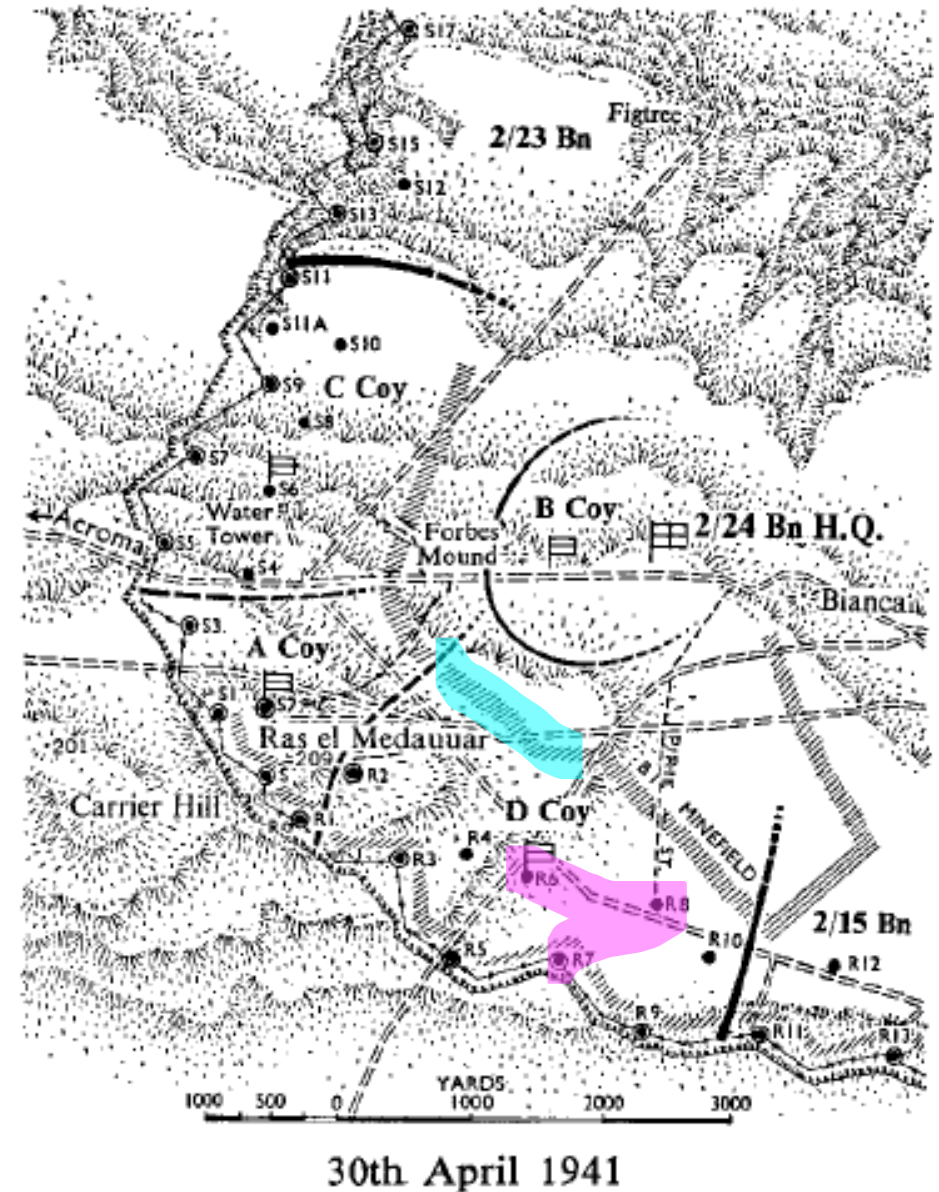
1 May 1941 - Libya

- The German tank column, shedding one or two tanks damaged by gunfire, moved forward irresistibly until it ran straight onto the B1 minefield in front of Gebhardt's company.
- Within a few minutes 17 tanks had struck mines and come to a halt.
- About a battalion of German infantry followed the tanks but, as they reached the perimeter defences, came under intense fire from the 51st Field Regiment firing at extreme range; the infantry advance was broken up.
- About 15 minutes later more infantry were driven up in lorries about 2,000 yards out from the perimeter opposite Canty's company. There they left their vehicles and advanced between Posts S8 and S9. They too were subjected to gunfire by the 51st Field Regiment.



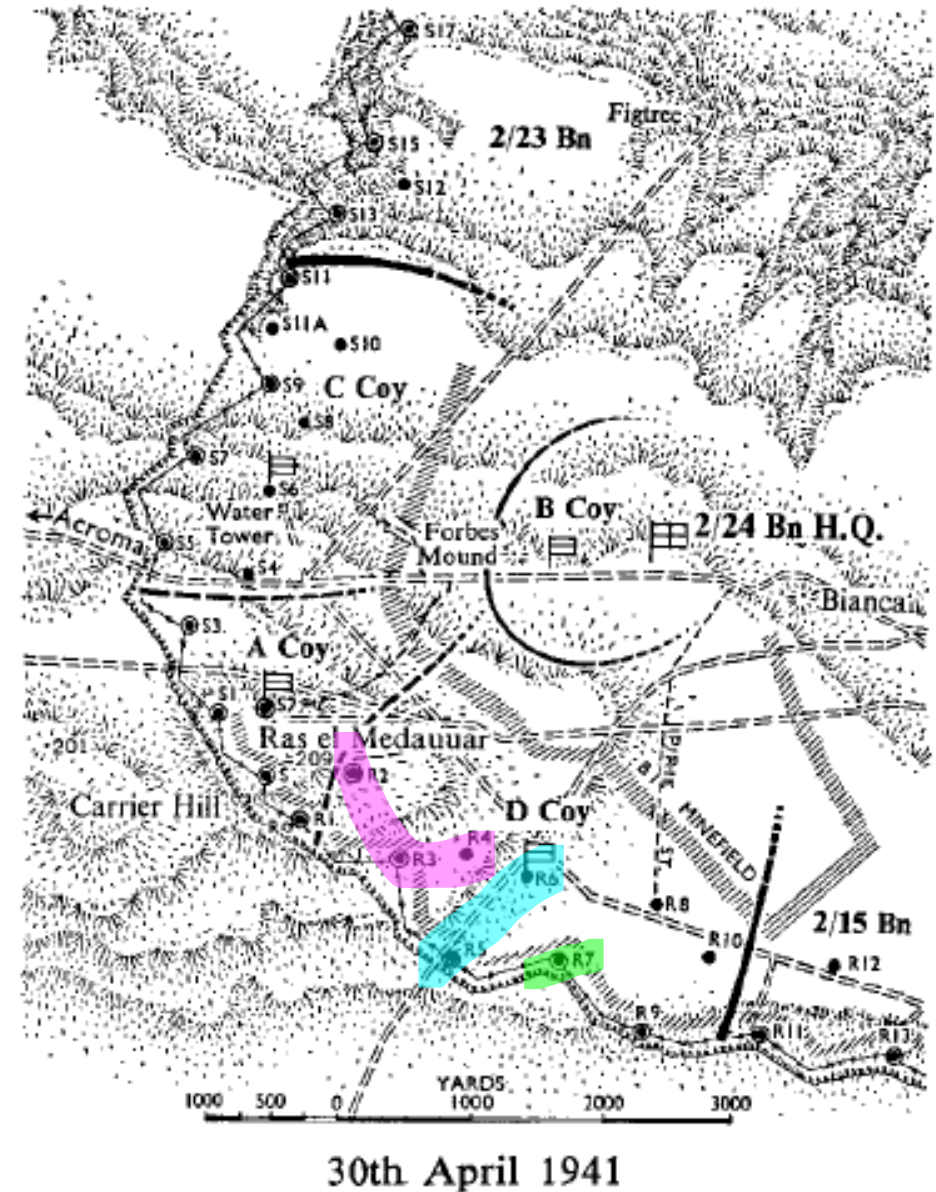
1 May 1941 - Libya

- Behind the first column of 40, which had become bogged down in the B1 minefield, a second containing 30 more was now moving among the perimeter posts east of Ras el Medauuar.
- Each post was attacked in turn. As the head of the column reached a post, two or three tanks remained to stand over it while the rest moved on. Smoke was laid down continuously to cover the column's operations.
- The column was engaged by the four anti-tank guns of "B" Troop of the 3rd R.H.A. Bombardier Lane's gun was overrun by seven tanks but four of these were later knocked out by another gun and their crews, as they emerged, were shot up by Gunner Deane with his Bren.
- Three British cruiser tanks of "B" Squadron advanced towards the German tanks in the area R6-R8, fired a few rounds and then withdrew behind a ridge. The enemy put down smoke. The German tanks soon afterwards withdrew.



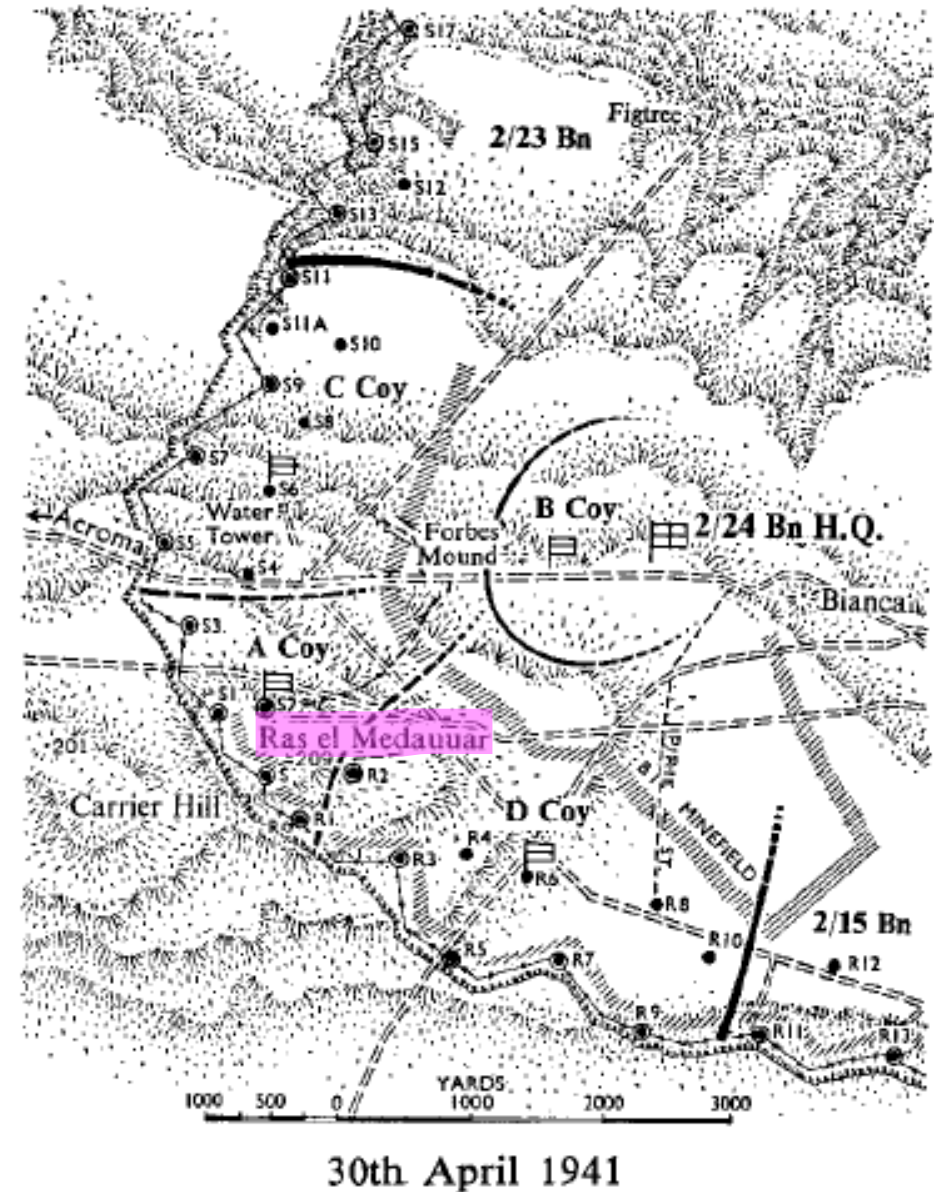
1 May 1941 - Libya

- The German tanks assembled behind Ras el Medauuar, re-formed and thrust south-eastwards, followed by troop transporters, to continue the process of rolling up the perimeter posts.
- Two or three tanks peeled off at each post to shoot in the weapon pits. Then grenades were thrown right into the posts.
- Numbers of troop-carrying vehicles were sighted, but the enemy infantry in the main failed to follow up their tanks.
- The head of the column of tanks pushed on past Posts R2, 3 and 4, past Posts R5 and 6 to the east of Post R7, and there formed a semi-circle facing eastwards.
- Other tanks began breaking down the perimeter wire by dragging cable stretched between two tanks across it.
- Some infantry advanced on Post R5 under cover of a small ditch. Corporal Gazzard stood up above his weapon-pit to engage them and was swiftly killed.
- Posts R5 (Sergeant Poidevin), R6 (Captain Bird) and R7 (Corporal Jones) held out.



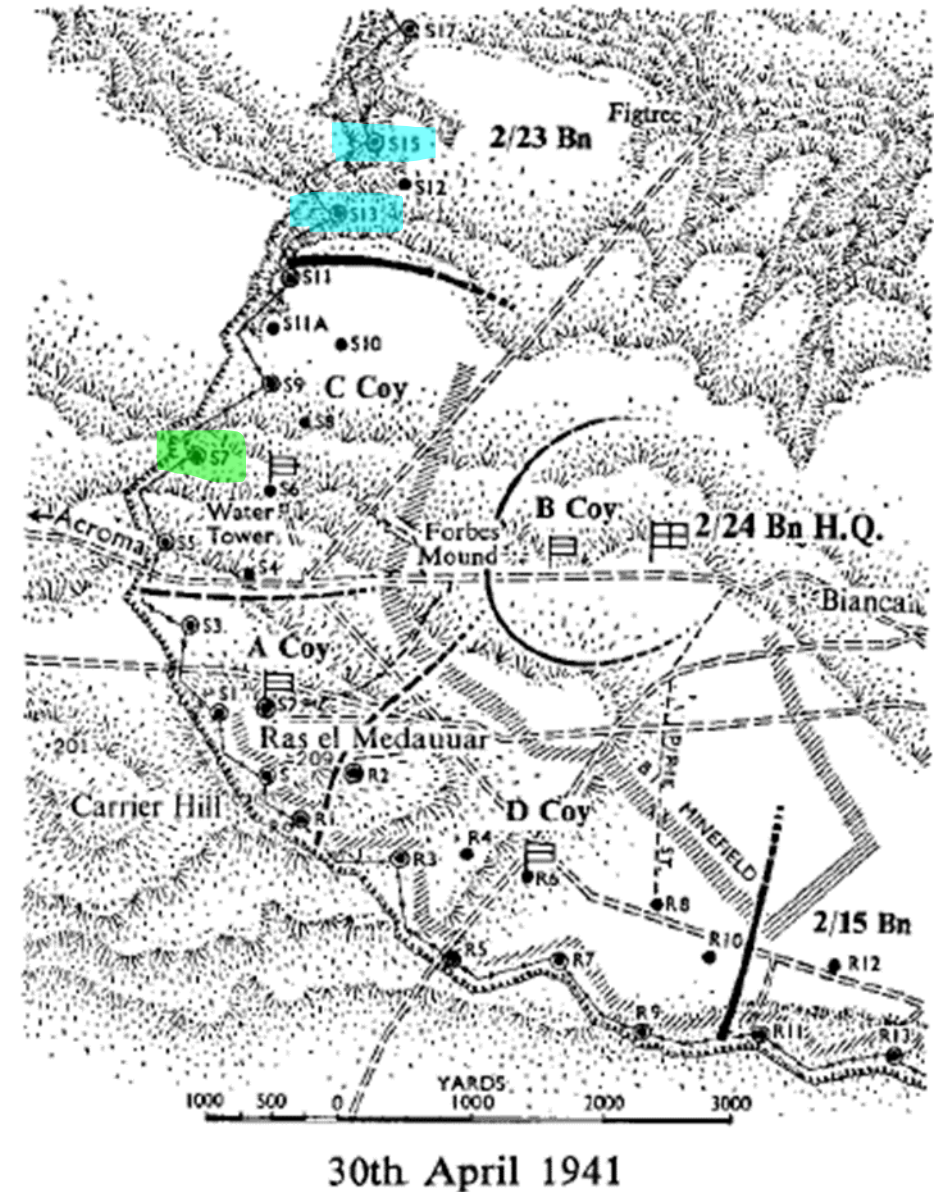
1 May 1941 - Libya

- About 11.30 a.m. the now stationary spearhead of the enemy tank force, comprising about 25 tanks, was attacked by the ten cruiser tanks of 1st R.T.R.. Several hits were scored on the intruding tanks at a range of from 700 to 800 yards and one medium and two light German tanks were seen to catch fire. The enemy then put down smoke, which halted the engagement; but one of the British tanks had been destroyed and two of the cruisers were hit as they turned to withdraw.
- The guns of the 1st and 107th R.H.A. then concentrated on the German armour, which withdrew again behind Ras el Medauuar.



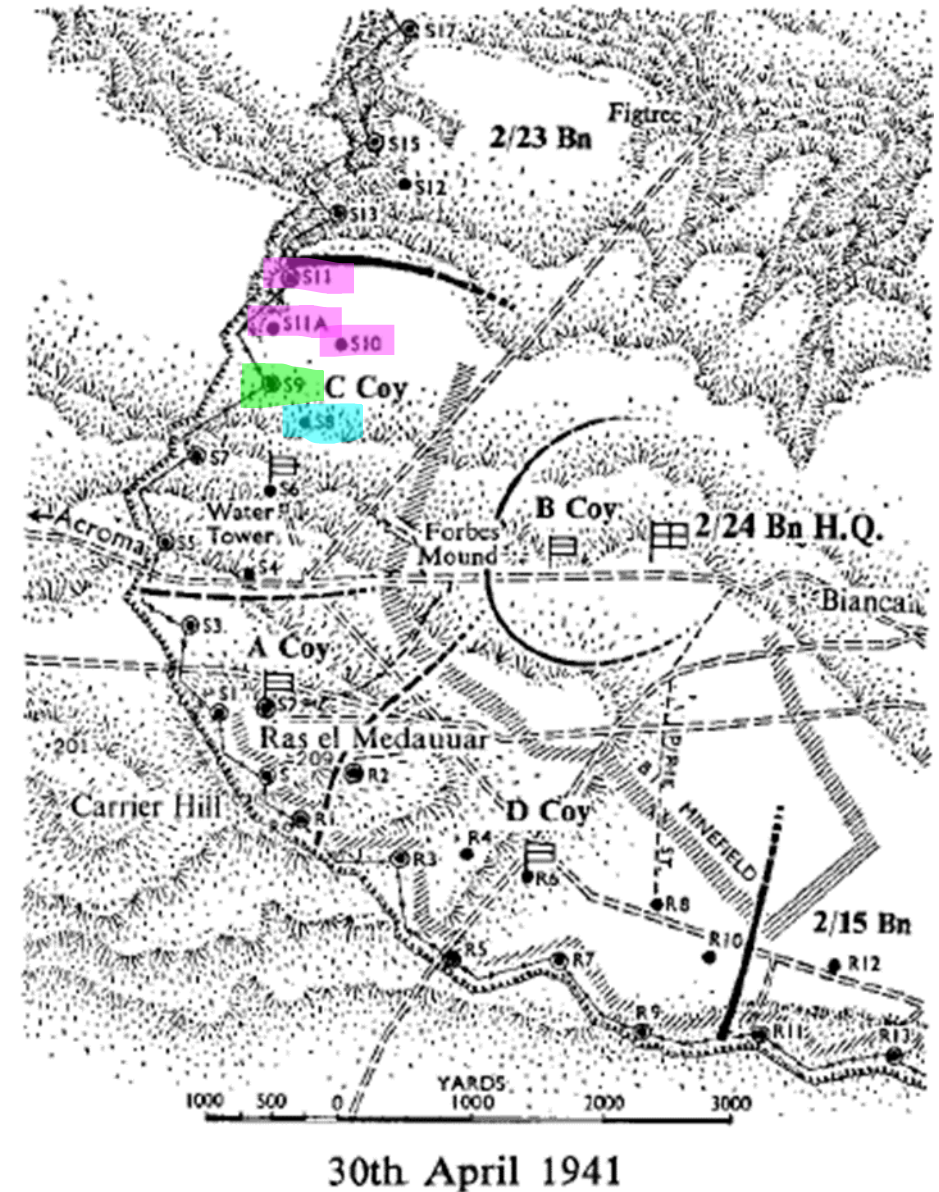
1 May 1941 - Libya

- It was a confused fight, of which no coherent picture could be obtained at the time. Tanks and gunfire had cut all telephone lines in the penetration area. Smoke from shells and bombs and burning vehicles, smoke screens deliberately laid and dust churned up by tanks and trucks were daubed across a blurred landscape shimmering under a mirage through which the black forms of moving tanks could only vaguely be apprehended. As the day advanced a hot wind got up and lifted more dust.
- Soon after midday the attackers exerted pressure on both flanks to extend the width of their breach.
- On the northern flank a small group of tanks outside the perimeter thrust past Post S7 until, near S13 and S15, they were bombarded by the 51st Field Regiment just before 1 p.m. and forced to withdraw. Infantry in trucks followed the tanks, dismounted and attacked the posts from S7 northwards, but with little success against staunch defence.



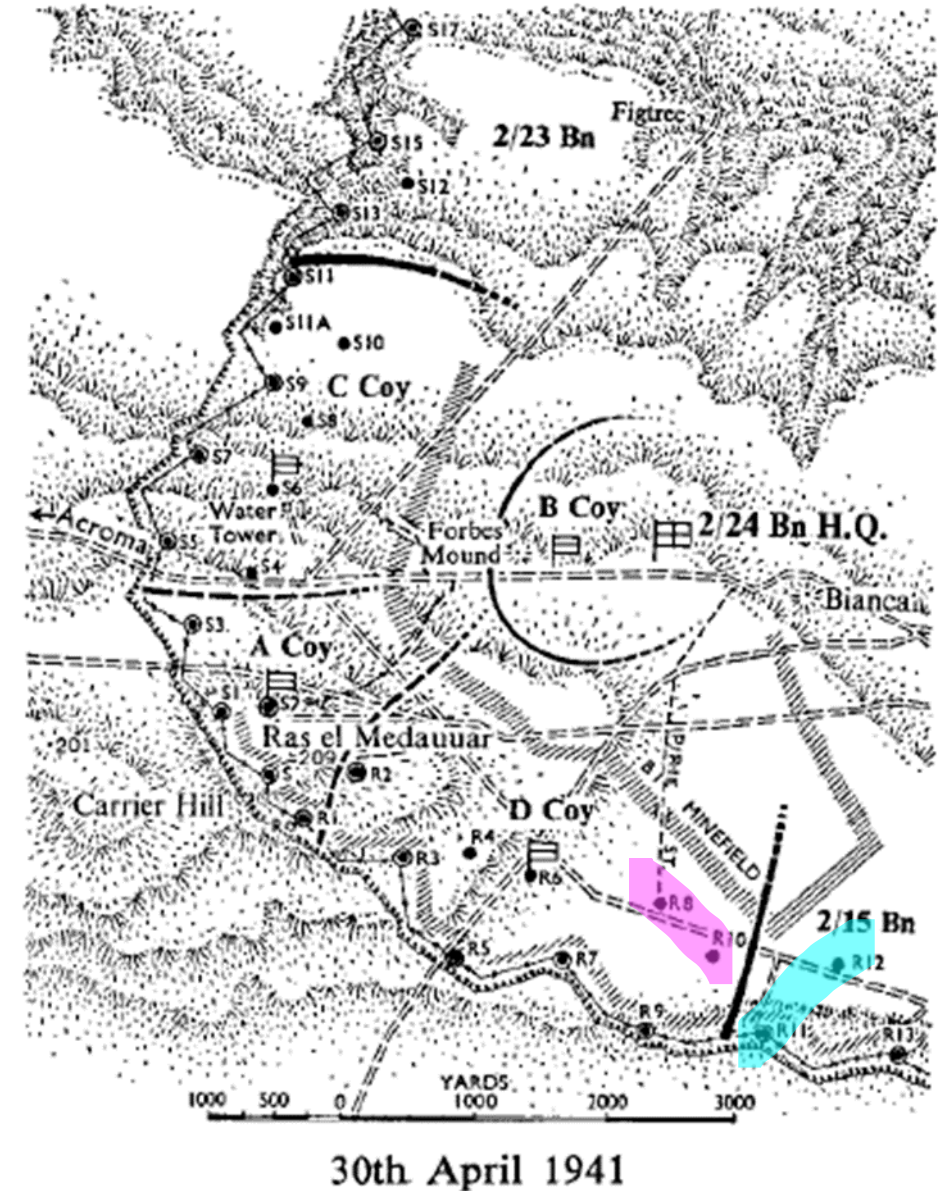
1 May 1941 - Libya

- Lieutenant Christie, with headquarters in Post S8 and a forward section in S9, though surrounded, hung on.
- So did Lieutenant Rosel whose platoon, on the extreme right of the battalion front, held Posts S10, S11 and S11A. Rosel had taken charge of the company after Captain Canty's surrender had been enforced earlier in the morning.
- When Rosel found his ammunition stocks dwindling he sent to the neighbouring 2/23rd Battalion for replenishment. About 2.30 p.m. a party led by Corporal Jackson was sent out and delivered several thousand rounds of small-arms ammunition to Rosel in S10.



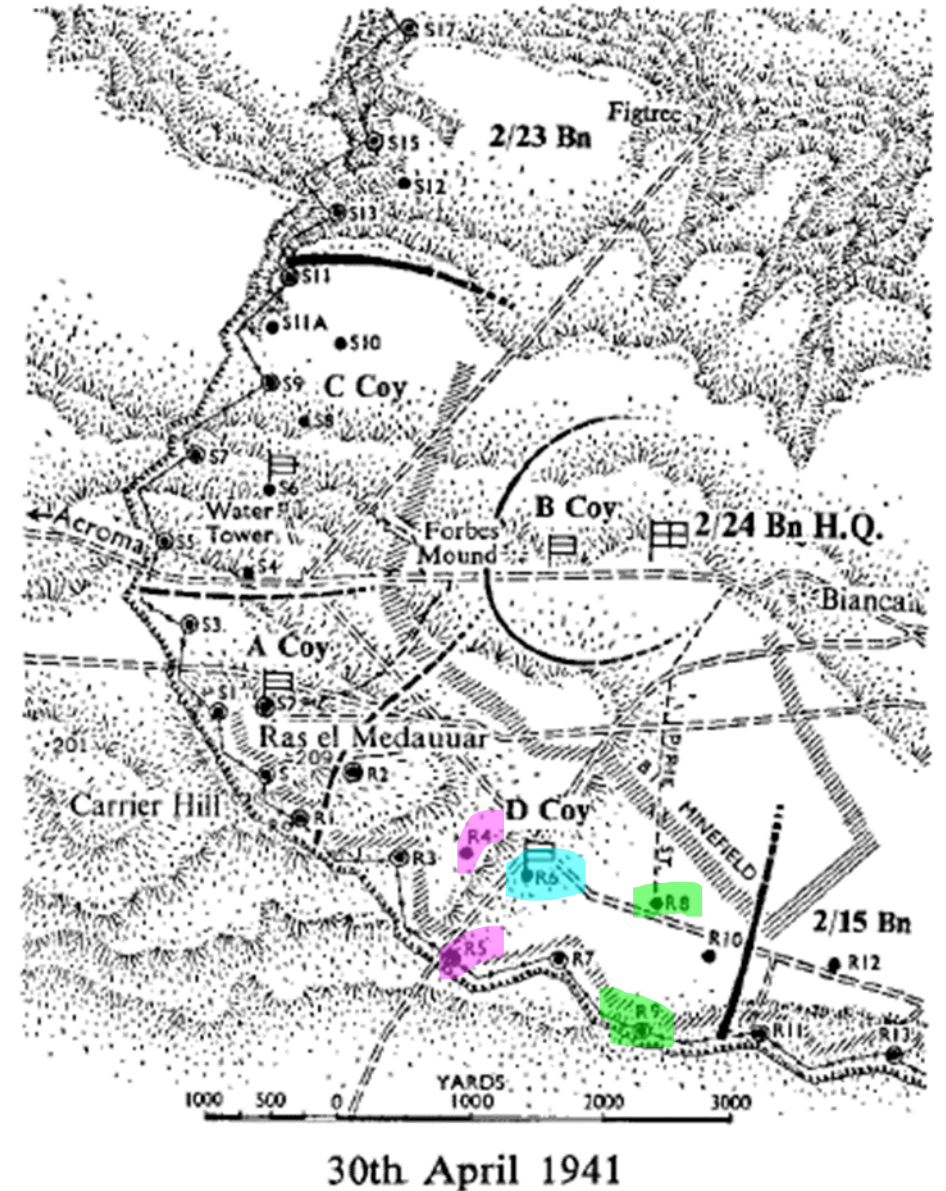
1 May 1941 - Libya

- About 3.15 p.m., a number of enemy tanks made another eastward attack along the perimeter and were soon reported to be massing between R8 and R10. The British tank force was ordered to engage them. A composite force of 7 cruisers and 5 infantry tanks was organised.
- The plan was simple. The striking force, now reduced to five Matildas and the three cruisers, was to advance along the perimeter between the front and inner row of perimeter posts straight towards the enemy.
- Posts R11 and 12 were reached about 4 p.m. and it was found that the Australians were still in occupation: they had not been closely engaged.



1 May 1941 - Libya

- The Matildas then led the advance to Posts R8 and 9. Here again the Australian garrisons were still hanging on, though many were badly wounded.
- The tanks commander then advanced to R6. Again it was found that the Australian garrison was holding out. Four German light tanks could then be seen inside the perimeter wire at Post R5 while one German medium tank was visible at R4.
- The British tanks advanced towards the German medium at R4. Fourteen German medium tanks then came up from the rear and opened fire at 1,000 yards range.
- The Matildas moved round to the west of R6 and advanced to meet them. Two cruisers were hit at R6 and the forward tanks now returned. Another force of German tanks engaged from the flank.
- The five British infantry tanks then fought a rearguard action, greatly outnumbered but effectively supported by the British gunners. Only one cruiser and two Matildas got back to R14. Two Matildas and two cruisers had been lost.



1 May 1941 - Libya

- At 4 p.m. Morshead (photo) had set off for Tovell's headquarters to issue orders for a counter-attack.
- The 2/48th Battalion was to counter-attack to restore the perimeter defence line but was first to be relieved in its defensive positions on the Blue Line by the 2/10th Battalion.
- The attack was to be mounted before night fell.
- When Windeyer arrived back at the 2/48th Battalion headquarters after visiting Spowers, he was informed that his battalion was to mount a counter-attack at dusk that evening and that written orders were on their way.
- The orders were received soon afterwards, at 4.45 p.m. Windeyer was dismayed.



1 May 1941 - Libya

- Windeyer (photo) requested Tovell by phone to postpone the operation until the next morning. Tovell told him that Morshead would speak to him.
- Windeyer described the conversation.
- "The G.O.C. said "Listen Windeyer, it is important that this be done and done today." I said it was impossible. He asked why. I said the troops were spread over miles and could never be assembled and got to the start-line in time. He said he would send vehicles to move them. So I said, that being so, we would do our best. I asked for tank support."
- Morshead informed Windeyer that the tanks were to engage enemy on the southern flank at 5 p.m. but would thereafter be available to protect the battalion's left flank.

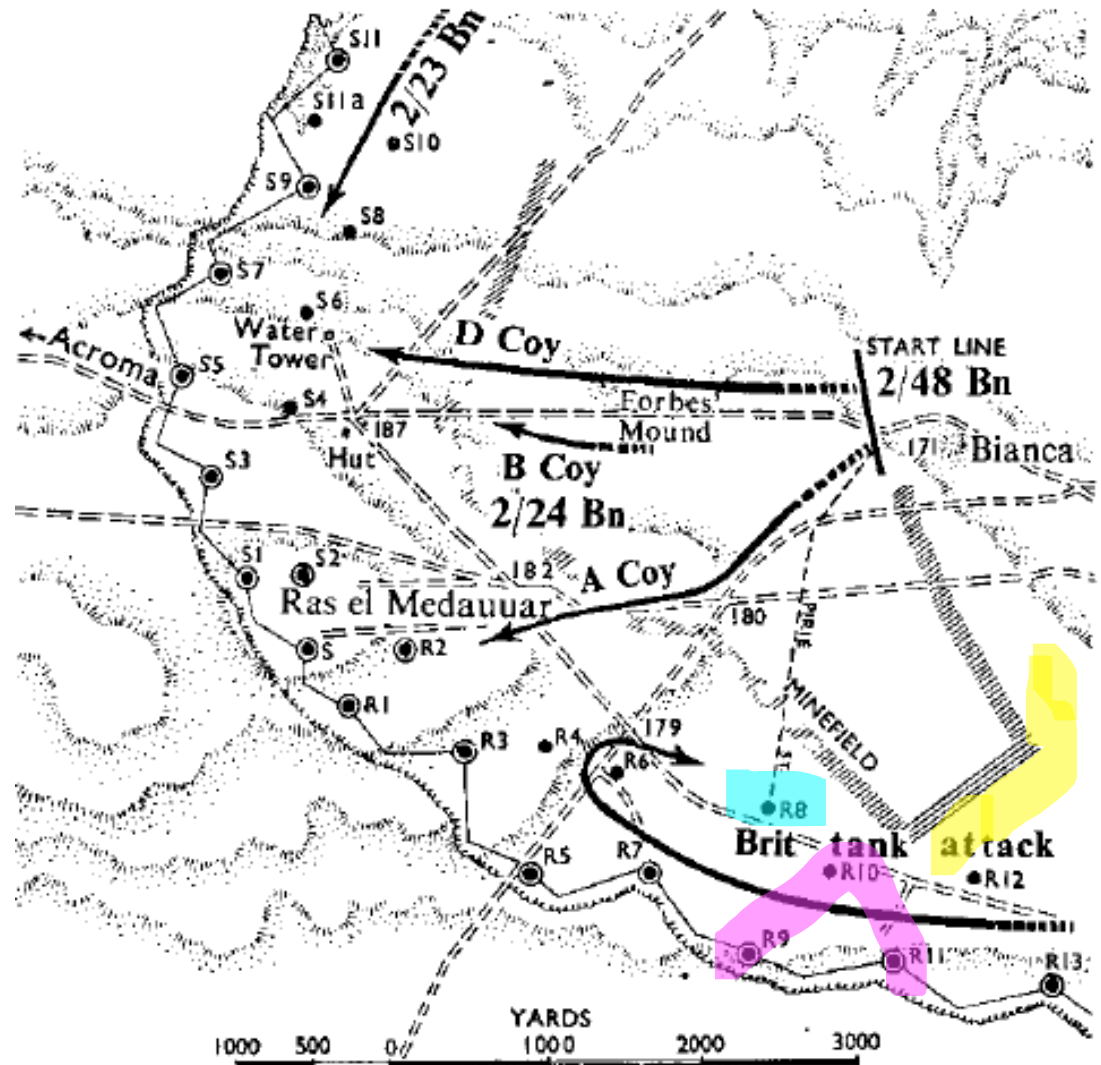


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1 May 1941 - Libya

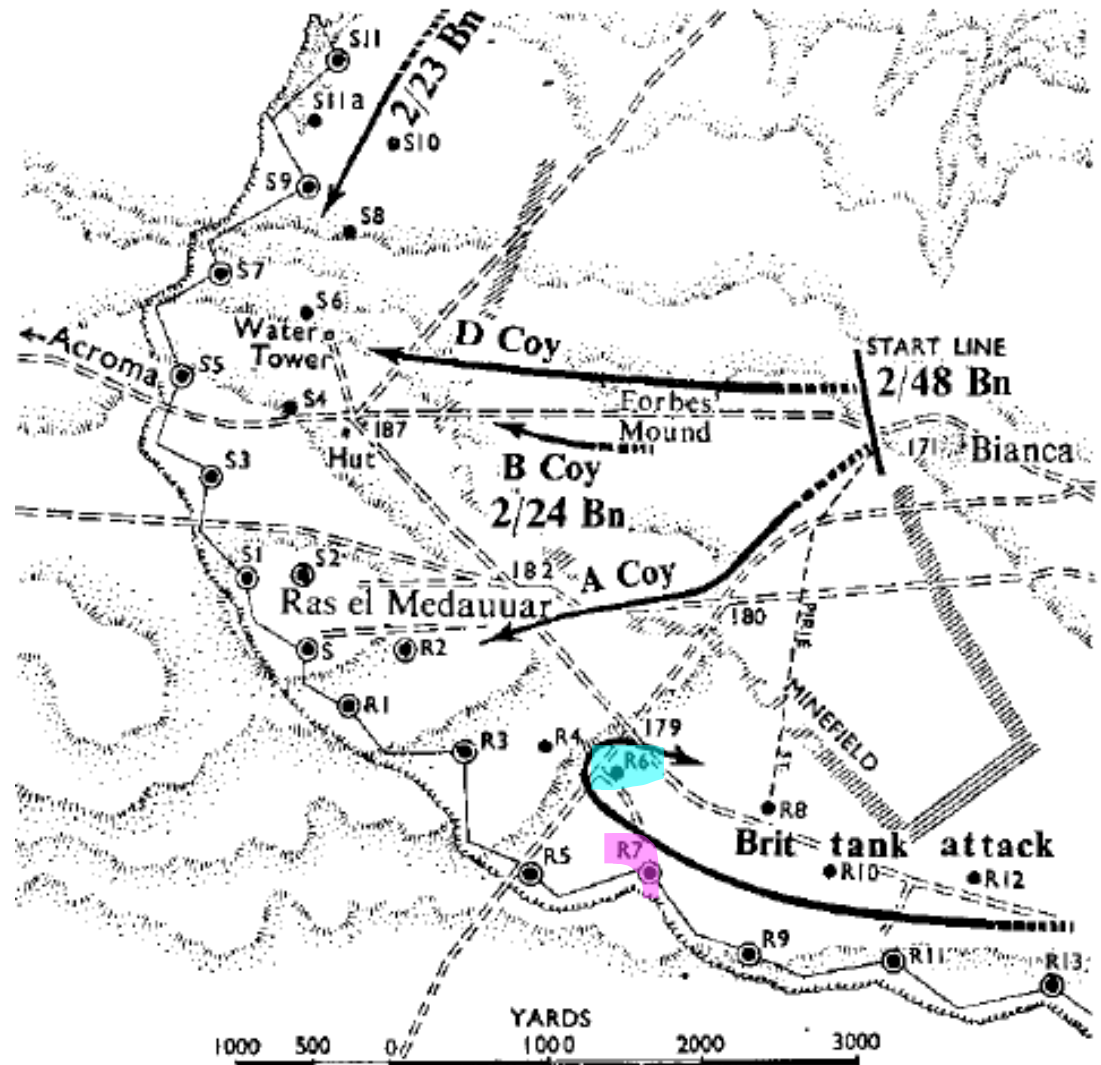
- Captain Provan's company of the 2/1st Pioneer Battalion, which had been attached to the 2/15th Battalion, had been sent forward to Posts R8, 9 and 10, which had been reported abandoned earlier in the afternoon. He reached the area about 6 p.m.
- As Provan was coming forward Sergeant Thurman withdrew the garrison of Post R8 (8 out of 12 of whom had been wounded) to R10, and the garrison of R9 came back to R11. When Provan arrived, Post R9 was reoccupied and Posts R9, 10 and 11 were reinforced but R8 was left unmanned.
- The wounded of the 2/24th were evacuated.
- Provan's company then began to prepare a switch line east of the minefield, which was to become the new front line.



The counter-attack, 1st May

1 May 1941 - Libya

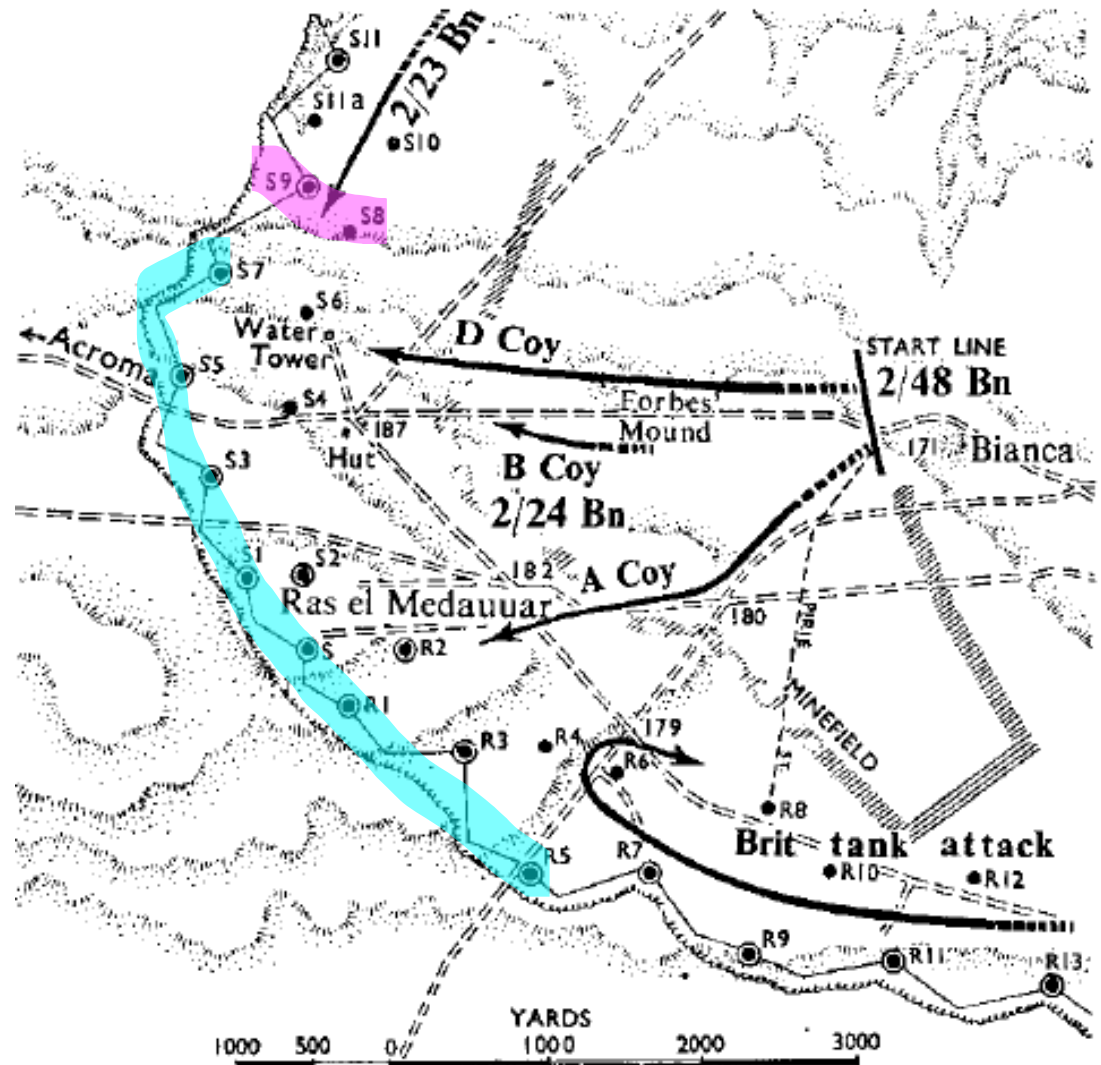
- After the British tanks withdrew, the German tanks turned to support their infantry closing in, as night fell, on Posts R6 and R7. Both posts had been under heavy fire throughout the afternoon.
- R7 managed to hold out but R6, where the automatic weapons had been smashed and the garrison of 14 men under Captain Bird had suffered more than 50 per cent casualties, succumbed at 7.30 p.m.
- R7 was then completely cut off from water, food and ammunition. Corporal Jones, the commander, described the experiences of the garrison:
- “That night the slightest move would bring a flare over our position and the area would be lit like day. We passed a night of merry hell as the pounding went on.”



The counter-attack, 1st May

1 May 1941 - Libya

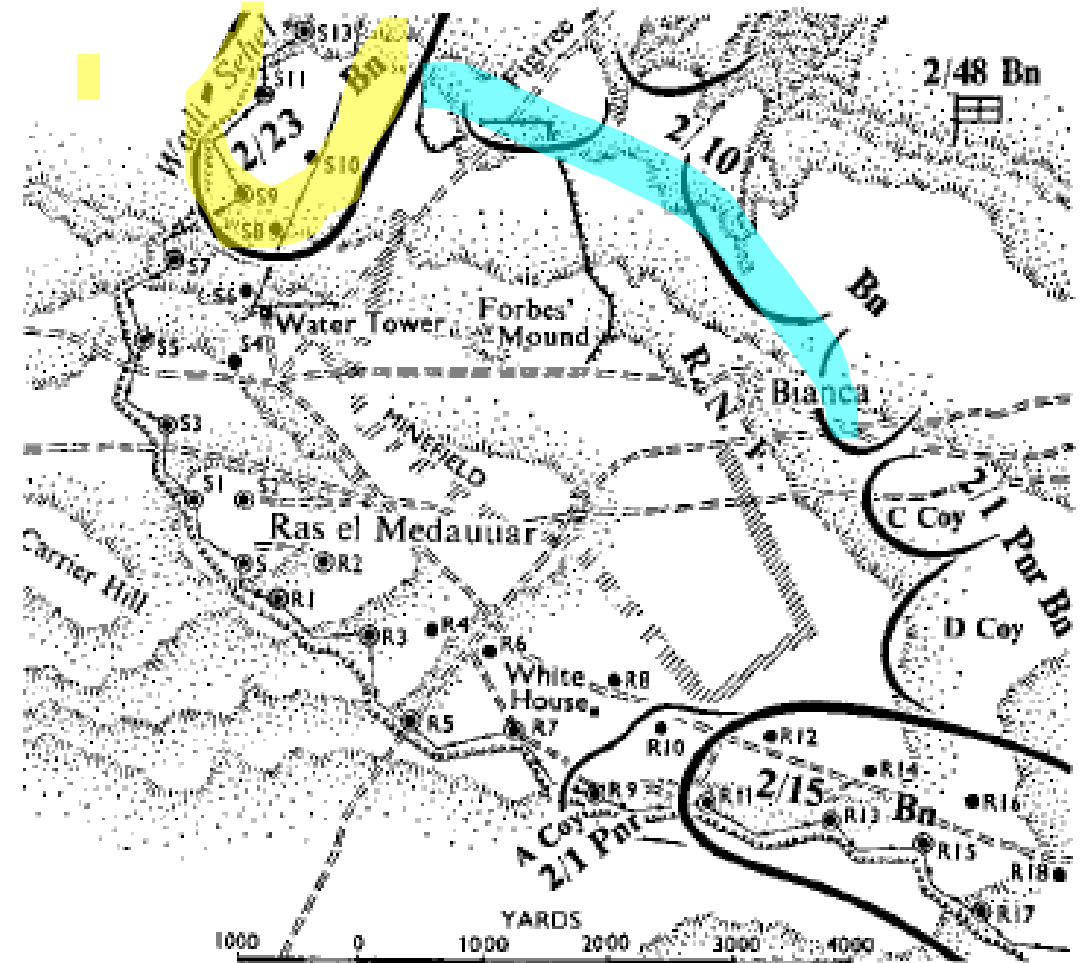
- Windeyer's orders were to retake that part of the perimeter which the enemy had seized.
- He had only four infantry companies.
- The attack was delayed so the benefit of the artillery support was lost.
- The infantry were stopped by heavy machine gun fire from both inside and outside the perimeter and some companies encountered tanks.
- Darkness caused its usual problems.
- Casualties were heavy. The defenders of S8 and S9 were reinforced but no ground was gained.



The counter-attack, 1st May

1 May 1941 - Libya

- Windeyer reported the failure of his attack to Tovell and then spoke to Lloyd, who told him to assemble his battalion in rear of Bianca.
- Morshead had been forewarned of likely failure by reports from the forward observation officers and had already decided that the perimeter line should be re-formed in the area of breach.
- On the right the 2/23rd Battalion was to hold the original perimeter as far south as S8.
- the 2/10th Battalion was to link up between the left of the 2/23rd and the new 20th Brigade switch line.



Morning, 2nd May

2 May 1941 - Libya

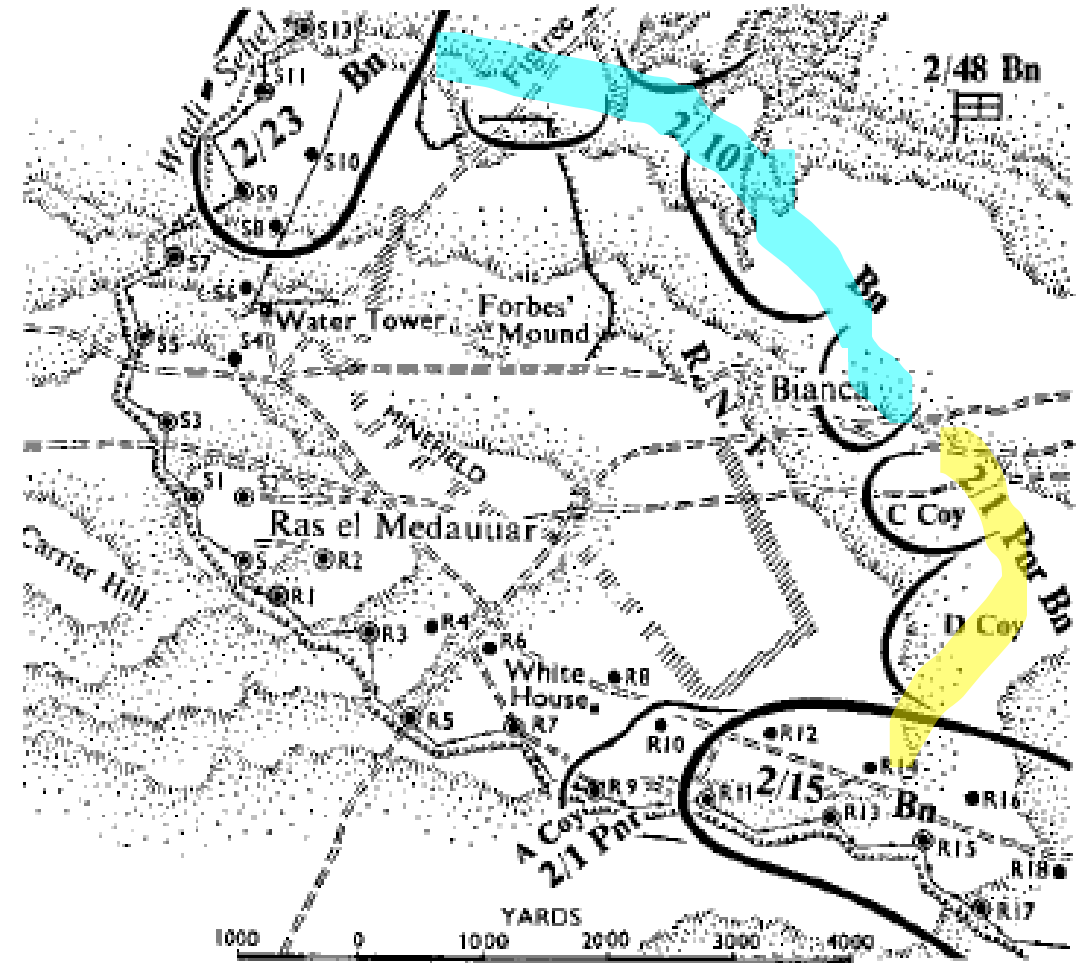
- Next morning, Jones, in R 7, made "a hurried neck-jerking survey" just after daybreak and saw infantry assembling for an attack. Powerless to hit back, he surrendered his men.
- After they had been taken back, General Rommel (photo) spoke to them. "For you the war is over, " he said, "and I wish you good luck."



Rommel talking with his staff near El Agheila, 12 January 1942.

2 May 1941 - Libya

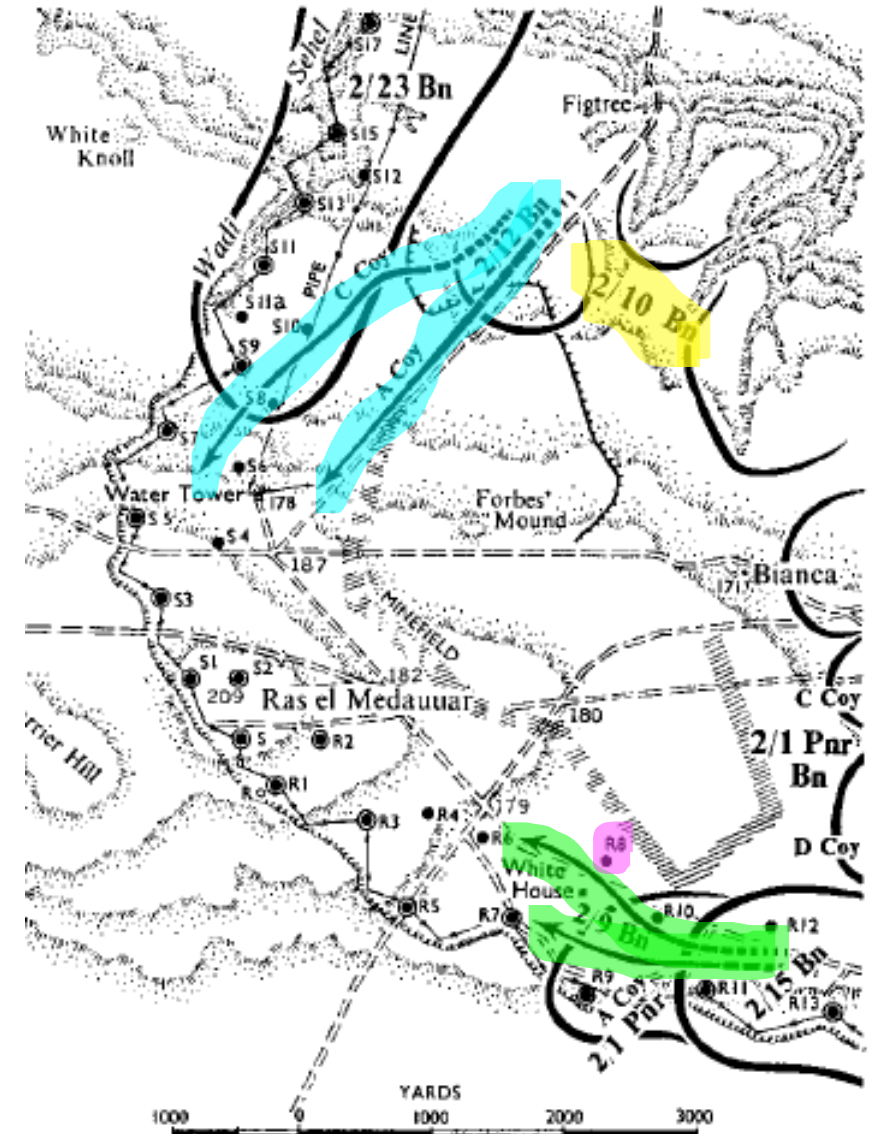
- The diarist of the 2/10th noted that at 6 a.m. all companies were moving to their new positions: no reconnaissance had been made; all movement was by map and compass. They advanced with three companies forward. The move was completed by 6.30 a.m.
- Before first light "D" Company of the 2/1st Pioneer Battalion had moved forward to take up a line running north from R14 to the left flank of "C" Company, thus completing the new front line.
- Three gun detachments of the 3rd R.H.A., overrun and missing in the previous day's operations, found their way back, bringing their breech blocks with them.



Morning, 2nd May

3 May 1941 - Libya

- Morshead planned to use his reserves in a counter-attack to retake the lost territory. Orders were issued on the morning of 3rd May.
- The 2/12th Battalion was to attack on the right, the 2/9th on the left. Three artillery regiments were to support the operation. The start-time was fixed at 8.45 p.m.
- The attack was made in almost pitch darkness with little aid from a low moon obscured by a slightly overcast sky.
- The forward companies ran into machine gun cross-fire from both inside and outside the perimeter. This put the troops to ground, and the noise and darkness combined to render coordinated movement forward extremely difficult. Many of the men simply got lost.
- R8 was recaptured and casualties were inflicted on the enemy but the battalions had become disorganised and Morshead ordered the attack broken off.



18th Brigade attack, 3rd-4th May

4 May 1941 - Libya

- Fortress casualties 29 April to 4 May

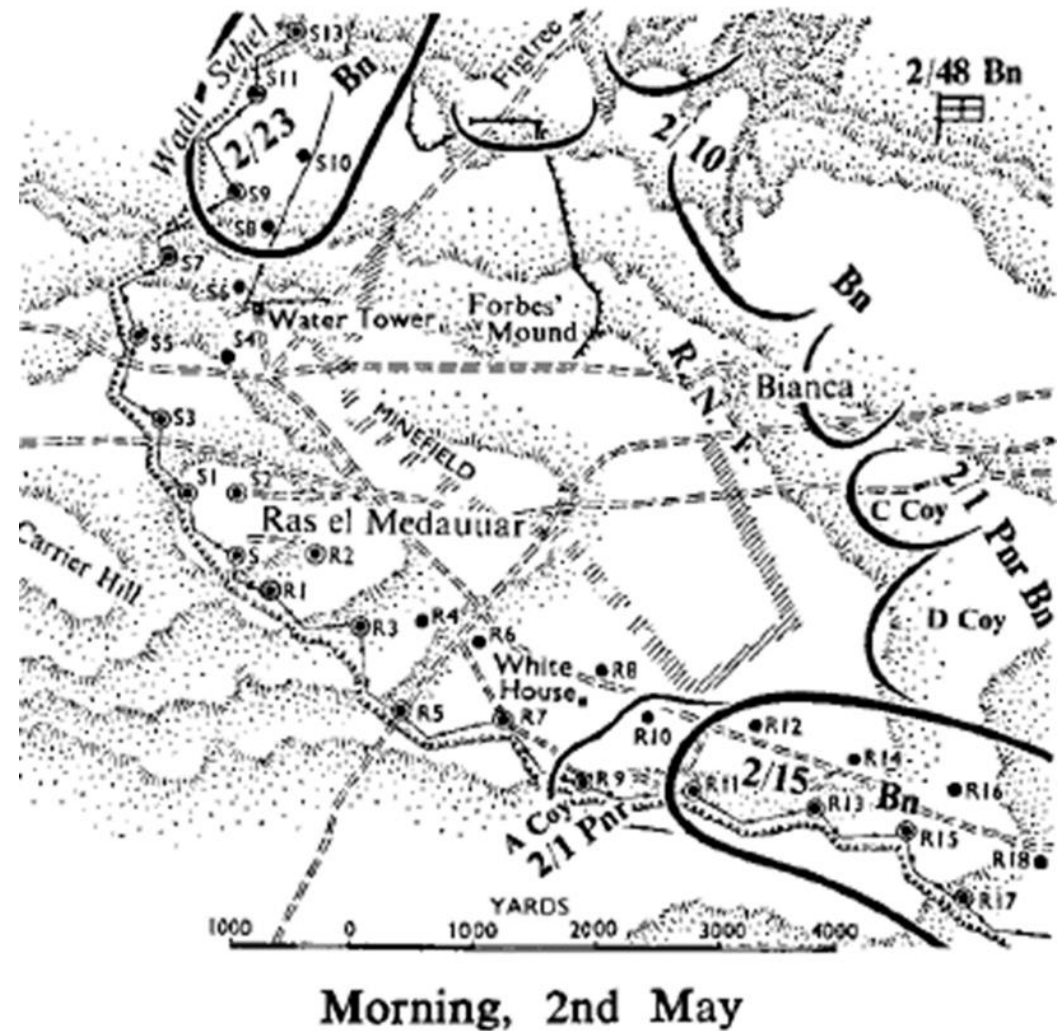
• Killed	59
• Wounded	355
• Missing	383
• Total	797

- Enemy casualties 30 April to 3 May

• Killed	167
• Wounded	574
• Missing	213
• Total	954

4 May 1941 – Libya

- Henceforward the positions in the Salient were steadily improved by digging, wiring and mining, and were edged forward when opportunity offered.
- As each side pushed their positions out towards the other, the strain on the men holding the front, particularly in the Salient, became intense.
- Morshead insisted that the defence should never be inactive. The mastery of no-man's was unrelentingly maintained throughout the siege by patrols and excursions beyond the wire.
- Rommel never again attempted to capture Tobruk before the siege was relieved by the British advance in December 1941



4 May 1941 - Libya

- Congratulations on the garrison's successful resistance reached General Morshead from all sides, including messages from Mr Menzies and General Blamey.
- General Wavell signalled Morshead:
- “Your magnificent defence is upsetting the enemy's plans for the attack on Egypt and giving us time to build up force for counter offensive. You could not be doing better service. Well done. . . .”
- And from Churchill:
- “To General Morshead from Prime Minister of England. The whole Empire is watching your steadfast and spirited defence of this important outpost of Egypt with gratitude and admiration.”



- The story of the remainder of the siege and the relief of the Australians can be followed at “Australia’s War: 80 years ago this week” on my website jerrymcbrien.com
- A copy of these overheads is also available on the website.
- Thanks for your attention.