

## **North Africa**

### **Second Australian Imperial Force**

Australia announced on 15 September 1939, twelve days after the declaration of war, that it would raise a special military force of one infantry division and auxiliary units, totalling 20,000 men. This division would be raised for service either at home or abroad. It was also announced that the militia would be called up for home defence. Because there were already five militia infantry divisions, the new division was named the 6th Australian Division. The special military force was called the Second Australian Imperial Force (Second AIF). On 28 September Major General Sir Thomas Blamey was chosen to command the Second AIF. Half of the vacancies in the new force would be filled by serving militiamen, one quarter by men who had previously served in the militia or other forces and the rest by men with no previous military experience.

The 6th Division was regionally recruited. New South Wales contributed the 16th Brigade comprising the 2/1st, 2/2nd, 2/3rd and 2/4th Battalions, Victoria the 17th Brigade with the 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th and 2/8th Battalions and other states contributed the 18th Brigade consisting of the 2/9th, 2/10th, 2/11th and 2/12th Battalions. The prefix 2/ distinguished the new battalions from militia battalions. The Second AIF's supporting forces, the divisional cavalry, artillery, engineers, signals and others were also regionally recruited. Recruiting and subsequently training gained impetus and, almost imperceptibly, the civilians became soldiers. These soldiers keenly awaited the order that would send them abroad. At 10 o'clock on the morning of 10 January 1940, the first convoy of the Second AIF steamed under the Sydney Harbour Bridge bound for the Middle East.

At midnight on 10 June 1940, less than a week after Dunkirk, Mussolini declared that Italy had entered the war. Sandwiched between French Algeria and British Egypt, Mussolini's North African Colony of Libya was, at the outbreak of war, a vulnerable outpost of the Axis powers. However, Italy anticipated the fall of France six days later and the Middle East situation was reversed with only the British presence in Egypt barring the road to the Nile and the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf. Against the 30,000 strong Western Desert Force, the Italians could boast about 250,000 men. From the moment Italy joined the war, Mussolini's aims in North Africa were clear. He intended to sweep through Egypt, cross the River Nile and raise the Italian flag over the Middle East oil fields. On 13 September 1940 the Italian army invaded Egypt and, after a seventy mile advance through the Western Desert, the Italians stopped at Sidi Barrani and showed little disposition to press farther forward. In October and November British mobile columns harassed the enemy but there were few heavy clashes.

### **Sidi Barrani**

On 7 December, seventy miles of open desert separated the main British and Italian forces. The British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, General Wavell had only two divisions at his disposal - the British 7th Armoured and the 4th Indian. Outnumbered but with a force more spirited and expert and probably stronger in tanks, Wavell visualised an attack that was more in the nature of a massive raid rather than an orthodox military offensive. On the night of 7/8 December the British forces moved forward some forty miles. The advance went undetected due to allied aircraft keeping enemy aircraft away. The following night the attacking forces moved into position and on the morning of 9 December, the Indian and British infantry supported by artillery and armour turned the 'raid' into a decisive victory with the capture of Sidi Barrani. About 35,000 Italian troops were captured and the remainder retreated in a disorderly manner. Four days before the attack the commander of the 6th Australian Division, Major-General Ivan Mackay, was warned the 6th Division would move into the desert at the end of December to relieve the 4th Indian Division which was to move to the Abyssinian front.

The 6th Division, although still short of equipment, was in a good state of preparedness. Its officers and men had been in training for a year and had been exercising with hardened British regulars. Since October the division had been in the desert immediately west of the Delta, where it was responsible for a defensive position covering Lake Maryut and the Rosetta Nile in case the Italians overcame the Matruh position. On 12 December, by rail and road, its leading brigades set off westward. From the railhead at Mersa Matruh a bitumen road travelled through the desert to Sidi Barrani and then a dirt road went to Salum where the 600 foot escarpment, which to the east lay about twenty miles from the coast, touched the sea. Two main tracks climbed the escarpment near Salum, over to the Italian frontier and beyond. The second, a good road, ran through Bardia, Tobruk and Derna and finally to Benghazi. The British believed that the Italian army in Libya had been rendered impotent and would abandon Bardia without a fight. When General Mackay arrived at desert headquarters on 14 December, Wavell ordered one of Mackay's brigades be kept at Alexandria in case it was later able to move to Bardia by sea and land there unopposed. The remainder of the division was carried forward over roads littered with tanks, trucks and weapons discarded by the retreating Italians.

### **Bardia**

The 6th Division in December 1940 was a different organisation from the original unit formed in Australia. In the Middle East, the division had been reorganised along British lines and the 18th Brigade with the third convoy had yet to arrive in Egypt having been diverted in May 1940 to England. The brigades of the 6th Division were now the 16th, 17th and 19th. On 19 December the 6th Division relieved the 4th Indian Division

on the road south of Bardia. The town was defended along an 18-mile arc of concrete underground bunkers behind an anti-tank ditch and barbed-wire barriers. Machine-gun posts and light guns complemented the other obstacles. The rear posts were some 400 yards behind and further back still were about 110 field and medium guns. The Australians made night patrols to measure the width and depth of the anti-tank ditch, test the wire and observe the routine of the enemy. These patrols drew heavy fire from the Italian posts. The plan of attack called for the 16th Brigade (2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/3rd battalions) to cross the anti-tank ditch, blow gaps in the wire and take the posts west of Bardia. At daylight the tanks and the 2/5th and 2/7th Battalion of the 17th Brigade would follow. The third battalion of the 17th Brigade, the 2/6th, was to create a diversion at the southern end of the objective. The 19th Brigade (2/4th, 2/8th and 2/11th Battalions) was held in reserve in Alexandria.

On 3 January 1941 the assault began. At 5.30 am the guns opened fire and the two leading companies advanced. In under 30 minutes the infantry had gone through the ditch and the wire. The Italian line was already breached. The men were heavily laden with weapons, tools, ammunition and three day's rations. They were dressed in greatcoats and leather jackets over their uniforms. The Italians at some posts and bunkers fought with determination but elsewhere they surrendered with little resistance. The enemy's resolve was not strengthened by the Royal Navy's heavy bombardment of the sector north of Bardia. There was one Italian effort to counter-attack but it was soon beaten back by the 2/3rd Battalion. At the end of the day the Australians were in a position to encircle Bardia the next morning. A battalion and a troop of tanks cleared the area south of the town and the 2/2nd Battalion entered the lower town. The 2/3rd Battalion entered upper Bardia and the fortress had been cut in two. The enemy occupied an area only about one mile deep by two miles wide and the 2/6th Battalion pressed forward. The Italian commander hoisted the white flag. The allied forces had taken the 40,000 prisoners and had captured about 500 field and anti-tank guns, about 120 light tanks and 700 motor vehicles. The Australian losses totalled 130 killed and 326 wounded.

Before Bardia fell, General Wavell had decided that Tobruk also should be taken, partly because the possession of that port would ease supply problems. It was a small port on the coast of Cyrenaica with a pre-war population of about 4,000 people living in a few hundred white buildings. The square in the centre of town boasted a few palm trees. The importance of Tobruk lay in the fact that its harbour was the only safe and accessible port for over 1000 miles, between Sfax in Tunisia and Alexandria in Egypt. The advancing drive was living on the country and using captured enemy vehicles and captured petrol and rations. If the harbour of Tobruk was able to be serviced, most of the needed supplies could be carried forward from the base in Egypt by sea. On 15 January 1941, it was estimated that 25,000 Italian soldiers were at Tobruk. At that garrison, just like at Bardia, the flat hard floor of the desert sloped down towards the coast in a series of low escarpments lying from east to west. The original Italian map of the Tobruk defences show two lines of strong-points, completely sunk into the ground. These covered a perimeter of some 35-40 miles with a radius of about 20 miles. The outer defences consisted of a series of heavily concrete dug-outs - many cleverly improvised from natural caves - each holding 30-40 men. These dug-outs were inter-connected by trenches with locations every few hundred yards for machine-guns, mortars and anti-tank guns. The trenches were roofed in with thin boarding and covered lightly with sand so that they were invisible from even a few yards away. In front of the outer defences barbed wire was laid, varying in some places from a single coil in width to a belt 30 yards wide elsewhere. In front of the barbed wire the Italian's had built an anti-tank ditch, often adapting an existing natural ravine. Straight-sided, and averaging 7 feet deep and 10 feet wide, the ditch was designed to thwart any attempted crossing by a tracked vehicle. The inner defensive line was some 2,000 to 3,000 yards behind the outer line and constructed to the same pattern, but without the anti-tank ditch..

### **Capture of Tobruk**

Two main routes led westwards from Bardia to the Tobruk area. As close to the sea as the deep coastal wadis would allow travelled the straight bitumen road to Tobruk itself ten miles inland, and above an escarpment that rose 500 feet above sea level, ran the track from Capuzzo to El Adem, an airfield eight miles south of the Tobruk defences. The 7th Armoured Division advanced along the Capuzzo track, and the 6th Australian Division moved parallel to it along the main road. The advance to Tobruk was proceeding so quickly that within several days, the 7th Armoured Division had encircled the town. British and Australian troops were actually passing Italian soldiers who had escaped from Bardia and who were fleeing to Tobruk. The 17th Brigade systematically searched the wadis and took many prisoners. The campaign was going so well that the senior officers became worried by signs of what was described as a 'picnic spirit' and all troops were reminded of the realities of the situation and of certain indisciplines that were becoming evident. It should be noted that the men were living under extremely arduous conditions and were sleeping in holes dug in the stony ground.

In the nights preceding the attack on Tobruk, Australian infantry and engineers sent patrols forward to measure the anti-tank ditch, to explore for mines and booby traps and to mark the start line. Before dawn on 21 January the attack opened. Two brigades of the 6th Division had been in position outside the eastern half of the Tobruk perimeter and the armoured division lay across the roads leading west and south-west. The tanks and the entire 16th Brigade moved in the darkness close to a sector of the Italian line supported by an eighty-eight gun artillery barrage. The 2/3rd battalion attacked on a front of 600 yards and took the five Italian posts the covered the point of the break through. The tanks and infantry pass through gap created by the 2/3rd Battalion. The 2/1st Battalion made inroads into the Italian line while the 2/2nd Battalion moved deep into enemy territory to capture the enemy's support guns. At 7.55 am the 19th Brigade moved forward and the 2/8th Battalion fought its way west along the escarpment. One company lost all but one of its officers and

sergeants and nearly half of its men before the fight was over. By nightfall, most of Tobruk had been taken and on the morning of 22 January all resistance collapsed. The Australian casualties were 49 dead and 306 wounded. Over 25,000 Italian soldiers were taken prisoner.

When Rommel launched his forces against the Western Desert Force in April 1941, the opposition crumbled before him, and he did not anticipate wresting Tobruk would take much longer than the two days it had taken Wavell to capture it from the Italians. The 9th Australian Division was to prove him wrong, and would in the process write itself into a special place in Australian military history during the ensuing siege of Tobruk

### Giarabub

Giarabub, an Italian oasis fort, was captured in March 1941 by the Australian 18th Brigade after a stiff fight during a sandstorm. The Australian units concerned were the 2/9th Battalion, a company of the 2/10th and the 6th Division Cavalry Regiment, with other units in reserve.

### Second AIF Reorganised

In February 1941, Western Desert Force which had captured Cyrenaica and reached El Agheila on the border of Tripolitania was ordered onto the defensive while forces moved to Greece. General Sir Archibald Wavell (C-in-C Middle East) proposed that the battle hardened 6th Australian Division remain in Cyrenaica and the 7th and 9th Australian divisions move to Greece. Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey (GOC AIF Middle East), perceiving that the Greece expedition would be hazardous, insisted that the contingent should be formed from his best trained troops. An extensive reorganisation and regrouping of the AIF was carried out and the composition of the 9th Division that emerged was very different from its composition when first formed.

The composition of the AIF Divisions was as follows:

Brigade	Battalion	Battalion	Battalion
<b>6th Division</b>			
16th Brigade	2/1st	2/2nd	2/3rd
17th Brigade	2/5th	2/6th	2/7th
19th Brigade	2/4th	2/8th	2/L1th
<b>7th Division</b>			
18th Brigade	2/9th	2/10th	2/12th
21st Brigade	2/14th	2/16th	2/27th
25th Brigade	2/25th	2/31st	2/33rd
<b>8th Division</b>			
22nd Brigade	2/18th	2/19th	2/20th
23rd Brigade	2/21st	2/22nd	2/40th
27th Brigade	2/26th	2/29th	2/30th
<b>9th Division</b>			
20th Brigade	2/13th	2/15th	2/17th
24th Brigade	2/28th	2/32nd	2/43rd
26th Brigade	2/23rd	2/24th	2/48th

### The Siege of Tobruk

The 6th Division was to be the first Australian division to move to Greece and was to be relieved by the 9th Division which was assigned the task of garrisoning Cyrenaica. The reorganised 9th Division comprised the 20th, 24th and 26th Infantry Brigades which were the least trained or the most recently enlisted. Although allotted for garrison duty, the enemy was in contact and it was not only possible but probable that the division would become heavily engaged in the following two or three months. The task of moulding the raw units into a division was given to 52 year old Major General Leslie Morshead, a citizen soldier who had been soldiering all his life. Morshead was every inch a general, with slight build and a seemingly mild facial expression which masked a strong personality, the impact of which, even on a slight acquaintance, was quickly felt. The precise, incisive speech and flint like piercing scrutiny acutely displayed impressions of authority, resoluteness and ruthlessness.

On 8 March, the 9th Division's 20th Brigade relieved the 6th Division's 17th Brigade in its position astride the

main road between Marsa Brega and El Agheila. Morshead was convinced that the enterprising German patrols operating across the frontier were heralded an offensive and recommended that the 20th Brigade be withdrawn from Marsa Brega leaving only a mobile armoured brigade of the 2nd Armoured Division forward. The 20th Brigade rejoined the 9th Division which occupied the escarpment overlooking Benghazi. In the last week of March, General Rommel, commander of the new German *Africa Corps*, possessing only slender armoured forces, commenced his advance. At Marsa Brega on 31 March and Agedabia on 2 April, the Germans destroyed most of the tanks of the 2nd Armoured Division leaving the route to Mechili open.

The Germans entered Benghazi early on 4 April, whereupon the 9th Division was ordered to withdraw to the second and higher escarpment east of Benghazi. By 6 April it was evident that the Germans were moving along the route to Mechili in force and the 9th Division and the infantry of the armoured division were ordered to withdraw along the northern routes towards Tobruk while the armour went to Mechili. In a confused withdrawal part of the 2/15th Australian Battalion was taken prisoner, and an armoured brigade retired not to Mechili but Derna. Mechili was surrounded and although some managed to break out, most of the garrison, including part of the 2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, were captured. Protected by this rearguard at Mechili and by the Support Group east of Derna, the 9th Division continued its withdrawal through Derna.

On 6 April it was decided that Tobruk should be held even if isolated and that the 7th Division (less its 18th Brigade which would reach Tobruk on the 7th) go to Mersa Matruh rather than Greece. On 14 April Morshead took complete control at Tobruk, where the garrison consisted mainly of his division. Within the thirty mile Tobruk perimeter there were some 31,000 troops of whom 24,000 were fighting troops. There were the three brigades of the 9th Division, the 7th Australian Division's 18th Brigade, the 3rd Armoured Brigade (two regiments), four regiments of British field artillery, and two of anti-tank and two of anti-aircraft artillery. Of the twenty seven infantry, artillery, and armoured units fifteen were Australian, eleven British and one Indian.

Morshead had 13 infantry battalions, 12 Australian and 1 Indian at his disposal. He placed 7 of his infantry battalions on the perimeter each with a reserve company half a mile behind it. Thus each forward company usually held a front of more than a mile. About two miles within the perimeter an inner line, the Blue Line, was gradually dug and wired; each forward brigade had one battalion in this line. Farther back Morshead held in reserve one brigade and his tanks, armoured cars and carriers. By 11 April (Good Friday) the Germans were astride the road leading east from Tobruk. The siege had begun. On the 13th, Rommel had most of the German 5th Light and part of the Italian Aries Armoured Division outside Tobruk. He attacked that night using a tank regiment and a machine-gun battalion, just west of the El Adem road in the 2/17th Battalion's sector. A group of Germans who established themselves inside the wire with two guns, a mortar and eight machine-guns were dislodged with grenades and bayonets by Lieutenant F A Mackell, Corporal J H Edmondson and five men. Edmondson fought on after being severely wounded and died the next day. He was awarded the Victoria Cross, the first won by an Australian in the 1939-45 war. At dawn some fifty tanks thrust on towards the escarpment overlooking the port. The forward infantry waited in their posts for the German infantry to follow up. When the tanks came under fire from the guns of the 1st RHA and anti-tank guns of the 3rd RHA and 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, eight were soon knocked out. The infantry in the perimeter shot down the German infantry and gunners as they advanced to join the tanks, which by 7 am were being attacked on all sides by artillery and the defending tanks. The Germans fled, leaving seventeen wrecked tanks, 150 dead and 250 prisoners within the perimeter. As the tanks were fleeing forty German aircraft attacked, and ten were shot down. The garrison suffered only eighty casualties.

While this fight was in progress the Germans reached Bardia where British forces supported by naval fire halted the advance. Decisive successes in Abyssinia in late March and early April enabled Wavell to order the 4th Indian Division to return to Egypt. In order to prevent a concentrated axis offensive against the eastern flank in the Middle East, Syria was attacked on 8 June 1941. The 7th Australian Division (less the 18th Brigade in Tobruk) reinforced by units of the 6th Australian Division played a major part in the campaign which ended with an armistice on 12 July. Operation Battleaxe designed to relieve Tobruk opened on 15 June with some success on the first day, but Rommel, using tanks from Tobruk counter-attacked and forced the British-Indian force to withdraw having lost more than half of its tanks and leaving Tobruk still besieged. On 21 June, shortly after the Battleaxe failure, General Wavell learnt that he was to change places with General Sir Claude Auchinleck (C-in-C India). Wavell was held responsible, in part or wholly, for the reverses in North Africa, Greece and Crete despite the fact that it was Churchill and his advisers in London who decided to denude North Africa to send an expedition to Greece. Ironically, Wavell heard the news of his sacking the day Damascus fell.

In Tobruk the 9th Division continued to fight on what was now the most active front in the Middle East. Throughout May the positions in the Salient had been improved and the vigorous program of night patrolling continued. Morshead insisted that every forward unit must strive to gain and retain mastery of no-man's land. It was in this phase that the *bush artillery* came into its own. Before the siege opened infantry units in Tobruk had begun to equip themselves with captured Italian guns, often in imperfect condition but with an inexhaustible supply of ammunition. In mid-May the garrison began to press forward more strenuously all along the line and particularly in the Salient to incessantly exert pressure upon the enemy and relentlessly drive him back. The Germans were also active and on 16 May attacked the northern corner of the Salient but without success. In June the 20th Brigade pressed systematically and steadily forward and succeeded in shortening the line in the Salient by about 600 yards and this arduous process was continued until by early July the line round the Salient had been advanced by about 2,000 yards, leaving the Salient about 3,000 yards

deep at its middle.

The ships supplying Tobruk in the face of enemy air attack had brought in only bare essentials in the weeks before Battleaxe, but the failure of that offensive made it necessary to increase the monthly tonnage. To ease the supply problem the base personnel were drastically reduced in June and July until the total garrison was 22,076 of whom only 1,400 were in base units. The Royal Navy kept open the supply line to Tobruk. All the Australian destroyers in the Mediterranean, including the new *Napier*, *Nizam* and *Nestor* took part but it was one of the old Australian destroyers, *Vendetta*, that made the record number of thirty-nine trips. Lost on the supply run were two destroyers including HMAS *Waterhen*, three sloops including HMAS *Parramatta* and twenty one smaller vessels.

On 2 August, in the belief that the enemy was thinning out along the Salient, an attack was launched by a company of the 2/43rd Battalion along the perimeter from the north and a company of the 2/28th Battalion from the south. In fact there were three German battalions in the Salient, facing two Australian battalions and the left flank of a third. The attack was carefully planned and supported by more than sixty guns but the enemy artillery swiftly replied, and his infantry were ready. The attack was gallantly pressed but failed with heavy losses. This was the last effort to straighten the line and from then on the main task was to hold the perimeter while making aggressive patrols into no-man's land. From July, Blamey urged that the 9th Division be withdrawn from Tobruk, a request supported successively by the Menzies, Fadden and Curtin Governments. Auchinleck considered the relief would unnecessarily endanger naval ships and impede preparations for a desert offensive. The issue reached Cabinet level with Churchill supporting Auchinleck and Curtin supporting Blamey who was concerned the troops were becoming physically weak and run-down. In August the 18th Brigade was withdrawn to rejoin 7th Division in Syria, and was replaced by a Polish Brigade. In September and October the 9th Division was replaced by the 70th British Division. On the last night of the relief the convoy proceeding to Tobruk was attacked from the air and turned back with the result that the 2/13th Battalion remained at Tobruk until the siege ended.

In late September the British command structure in the Western Desert was reorganised and the Eighth Army came into existence. Operation Crusader, the relief of Tobruk was launched on 18 November. After nine days of heavy and costly fighting the attacking force linked with a force, including the 2/13th Battalion, which had attacked eastward from Tobruk. Rommel counter-attacked, and cut Tobruk off again, but a British flanking move at length persuaded the enemy to abandon the whole battle area. By 10 December the Germans and Italians were in retreat. They stood west of Tobruk, but were forced back again, this time to the El Agheila position from which Rommel had begun his advance nine months before.

The siege of Tobruk lasted eight months. Barton Maughan wrote in the official Australian history:

'If the greatest single factor in repelling the German assaults and holding the besiegers off was the steadfast, efficient and brave work of the field artillery which for some of the time was solely and for the whole time preponderantly from the British Army; if the greatest call on deep resources of courage was laid most often upon the anti-aircraft gunners who stood to their guns day and night even when they themselves were the direct target of the strike; if the most dreadful burden borne by the defenders was the constant manning of shallow and sun-scorched diggings and weapon-pits in the regularly bombed, bullet-raked Salient, in which to stand in daylight was to stand for the last time; these judgements only illustrate that each man had his own job in the conduct of the defence. The spontaneous respect of all arms and services for the performance of the others and the loyalty with which they combined were the things that made Tobruk strong in defence and dangerous to its besiegers. General Auchinleck summarised the garrison's achievement in his dispatch:

'Our freedom from embarrassment in the frontier area for four and a half months is to be ascribed largely to the defenders of Tobruk. Behaving not as a hardly pressed garrison but as a spirited force ready at any moment to launch an attack, they contained an enemy force twice their strength, they held back four Italian divisions and three German battalions from the frontier area from April until November.'

That such success was achieved was due most of all to Morshead's own insistence on an aggressive conduct of the defence; his determination that the enemy should be attacked wherever he came within reach; his single-minded rigid resolve, to which he adhered in the face of counsels for a more flexible defence that his forces should never yield ground nor give quarter, that if any place was rested from them, they should not relent until they recaptured it.

The three Australian divisions in the Middle East in 1941 saw hard fighting. In Cyrenaica, the 9th Division suffered 3309 casualties including 788 killed; in Cyrenaica, Greece and Crete, the 6th Division lost 750 killed, 1500 wounded and over 5000 captured; and in Syria the 7th Division and attached units suffered 1600 casualties including 416 killed.

## **El Alamein**

The Battle of El Alamein in late 1942 was the decisive battle of the North African campaign that lasted from 1940 until 1943. El Alamein was located 70 miles west of the main Egyptian port of Alexandria and could not be outflanked because movement of vehicles was restricted to a corridor of 40 miles between the sea and the impassable Quattara depression. Although the 8th Army had overwhelming superiority in men, tanks, guns and aircraft and could not have lost the battle the prospect of a clear cut and decisive victory hung in the

balance for eleven days.

The North African campaign opened at the end of 1940 when General Wavell launched a successful offensive against the Italians. The Germans responded three months later by introducing into the desert the *Africa Corps* led by General Erwin Rommel. However, the successful Australian defence of the besieged fortress of Tobruk thwarted the Germans who were eventually pushed out of Cyrenaica. In January 1942, Rommel again attacked and drove the British 8th Army to Gazala, just west of Tobruk. There was a lull in the desert war for four months until Rommel resumed the offensive. Tobruk capitulated on 21 June and the 8th Army first fell back to Mersa Matruh and then to the defensive positions at El Alamein where the long retreat halted. Rommel, confident that he could smash his way through to Alexandria, attacked the El Alamein defences on 1 July but, in three days of fighting, the 8th Army held against the German and Italian thrusts.

The 9th Australian Division which, under the command of General Leslie Morshead, had formed the bulk of the Australian garrison at the siege of Tobruk in 1941 and was retained in the Middle East in 1942. The Australian Government sought its return to help fight the Japanese but before it returned home it was to play a notable part in the decisive battles for Egypt in the second half of 1942. After its withdrawal from Tobruk, the division moved to Palestine where it was brought up to strength, was re-equipped and where training recommenced. In January 1942 it moved to Syria where it was stationed on 25 June when orders were received that it should move to Egypt.

The Australians joined the British XXX Corps at El Alamein on 4 July and five days later attacked along the coast towards Tel El Eisa. The division mounted four attacks on 10, 17, 22 and 26/27 as part of XXX Corps operations. In the attack on 22 July, Private A S Gurney of the 2/48th Battalion won a posthumous Victoria Cross. His citation stated:

'For gallantry and unselfish bravery in silencing enemy machine-gun posts by bayonet assault at Tel el Eisa on 22nd July, 1942, thus allowing his Company to continue the advance. During an attack on a strong German position in the early morning of 22 July 1942, the Company to which Private Gurney belonged, was held up by intense machine-gun fire from posts less than 100 yards ahead, heavy casualties being inflicted on our troops, all the officers being killed or wounded. Grasping the seriousness of the situation and without hesitation, Private Gurney charged the nearest enemy machine-gun post, bayoneted three men and silenced the post. He then continued on to a second post, bayoneted two men and sent out a third as a prisoner. At this stage a stick of grenades was thrown at Private Gurney which knocked him to the ground. He rose again, picked up his rifle and charged the third post using the bayonet with great vigour. He then disappeared from view and later his body was found in an enemy post. By this single-handed act of gallantry in the face of a determined enemy, Private Gurney enabled his Company to press forward to its objective, inflicting heavy losses upon the enemy. The successful outcome of this engagement was almost entirely due to Private Gurney's heroism at the moment when it was needed .' ( London Gazette 11 September 1942)

Allied offensives in late July by the New Zealanders against Ruweisat Ridge and by the Australians against Miteiriya Ridge failed to drive Rommel from Alamein but effectively blocked his drive to the Nile. On 30 August, Rommel made his last attempt to break through to the Nile Delta but was defeated by the strongly fortified Alam el Halfa position south of Ruweisat Ridge.

In August 1942, Winston Churchill made sweeping changes in the army high command to the Middle East. General Sir Harold Alexander became Commander-in-Chief and Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery was given command of the 8th Army. Alexander, on 19 August wrote to Montgomery with orders to prepare to attack the Axis forces with a view to destroying them at the earliest possible moment. The two armies were in close contact on a front of nearly forty miles between the sea and the Quattara depression with both sides improving their positions and adding to the profusion of mines supporting their defences. The initiative moved from the Germans to the British with Rommel having depleted forces with critical supply problems whereas the British were daily growing stronger on land and in the air. Moonlight was considered essential for the start of the attack since it was only in moonlight that defended minefields could be tackled. Montgomery insisted that with reinforcements to absorb and train, new equipment to master and other preparations to be made, that the September moon period would be too soon. He recommended 23 October for the attack; a date Alexander accepted.

Troops and armour as well as ammunition and supplies were moved into position in the period leading up to 23 October 1942. Careful planning, with much work done at night, using both concealment and deception, covered the intense preparations for the attack. The infantry completed their moves by the night of 22/23 October and at daylight all was ready. At 10 pm on 23 October, three simultaneous attacks were to be made, the main attack by XXX Corps and two diversionary attacks by XIII Corps. The task of XXX Corps was to secure, before dawn on 24 October, a bridgehead beyond the enemy's main defended zone and to help the two armoured divisions of X Corps to pass through the defended zone. The task of X Corps was to follow XXX Corps and pass through its bridgehead with the aim of bringing on an armoured battle where full use could be made of the superior weight of British armour and armament to destroy the enemy. Both XXX Corps and XIII Corps were then to proceed with the methodical destruction of the enemy's static troops.

Four infantry divisions from XXX Corps - 9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand and 1st South African were to launch the main attack. On the first night they planned to drive a corridor six miles wide and four miles deep through the enemy defences. Once the assault divisions had cleared the minefields, the 1st

and 10th Armoured Divisions of X Armoured Corps would advance along two corridors to deal with the enemy armour. It was hoped the enemy guns would be reached the first night. The Australians, in addition to their frontal advance to the west, were to establish a firm front facing north in the heavily defended enemy area near the coast road.

The Battle of El Alamein opened at 9.40 pm on 23 October 1942 when 900 British medium and field guns fired an intense fifteen minute barrage against the enemy gun lines. The advance began at 10 pm with the artillery creeping forward ahead of the infantry to assist them on to their objectives. Almost immediately, the Australians ran into machine-gun and mortar fire as they threaded their way through mines and booby traps. At the enemy wire the men were held up for a few minutes until the barrage lifted and moved on ahead of them through the enemy minefields. Engineers used bangalore torpedoes to blow gaps in the wire and the infantry passed through and started to methodically mop up the enemy posts. The 9th Division's attack was made on a two brigade front with the 26th Brigade less 2/23rd Battalion on the right and the 20th Brigade on the left. The 24th Brigade continued to hold the existing Australian front near the coast. The Australian infantry battalions went into battle with strengths ranging from 30 officers and 621 other ranks to 36 officers and 740 other ranks; the war establishment was 36 officers and 812 other ranks.

The Australians attacked on a two brigade front with the object of penetrating four miles into the enemy lines. Three battalions were to capture the first objective which was two miles from the start line and while they consolidated their gains, two new battalions were to pass through the captured positions and move towards the final objective. The first objective of the right brigade, the 26th, was taken by the 2/24th Battalion which had a front of 800 yards but also had an open flank to protect. The left brigade, the 20th, had a front of 2400 yards and its first objective was taken by the 2/15th and 2/17th battalions. The first objectives were taken, without great opposition, by midnight but the second objectives, which included the main line of defence sited in considerable depth, proved to be more difficult.

The Australian's second objectives were allotted to the 2/48th Battalion which passed through the 2/24th Battalion and the 2/13th Battalion which passed through the 2/15th and 2/17th Battalions. The 2/48th, operating on the narrower front, achieved its objective but tanks that were to support the 2/13th Battalion were delayed when the main enemy minefield proved to be 1600 yards deep instead of the expected 250 yards. The 2/13th, without support, attacked the enemy defences and, suffering heavy casualties, was unable to reach the final objective before dawn.

The four XXX Corps infantry divisions had similar experiences. The first objectives were quickly taken but minefields proved to be much more extensive than expected and the strongest resistance was encountered in the drive towards the second objective. The extensive minefields, despite valiant efforts of the engineers, prevented the divisions of X Armoured Corps from breaking through the bridgehead and into the enemy's communications before dawn. The failure to penetrate the minefields lost an exceptional opportunity because dawn on 24 October saw the German forces without direction as the barrage had dislocated their communications and the German commander, General Stumme, was missing and was later found to have died of a heart attack. Furthermore, the German armour was dispersed across the desert and the German command was unaware of the intended point of the breakout.

The 8th Army attack continued on the night of 24/25 October and the previous night's final objectives were taken. However, a breakthrough was not achieved with the armoured thrusts faltering as the Germans established a new front line. With the failure of the original plan, Montgomery began preparing a new strategy and the main brunt of the battle, which increased in intensity daily to a climax on 1 November, fell on the 9th Division. The Australian's task was to shift the focus of their attack from the west to the north and destroy the enemy between them and the sea.

On the night of 25/26 October, the 9th Division made the first of three attacks that would create the conditions for victory at El Alamein. The attack opened at midnight with an artillery barrage. It was made by 26th Brigade with the 2/48th Battalion attacking towards Trig 29, a slightly raised feature on an otherwise flat plain, and the 2/24th attacking on the right. The 2/24th captured its objective but depleted by casualties it was unable to hold an extended position and withdrew 1000 yards. The 2/48th captured Trig 29, an excellent observation post which was used in subsequent days to call in artillery to break up enemy counter-attacks. Advancing with the 2/48th was Private P E Gratwick who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. The citation for his award said:

'During the attack on Trig 29 at Miteiriya Ridge on the night of 25-26 October 1942 the Company to which Private Gratwick belonged, met with severe opposition from strong enemy positions which delayed capture of the Company's objective and caused a considerable number of casualties. Private Gratwick's Platoon was directed at these strong positions but its advance was stopped by intense enemy fire at short range. Withering fire of all kinds killed the platoon commander, the platoon sergeant and many other ranks and reduced the total strength of the Platoon to seven. Private Gratwick grasped the seriousness of the situation and acting on his own initiative, with utter disregard for his own safety at a time when the remainder of the Platoon were pinned down, charged the nearest post and completely destroyed the enemy with hand grenades, killing amongst others a complete mortar crew. As soon as this task was completed, and again under heavy machine-gun fire, he charged the second post with rifle and bayonet. It was from this post that the heaviest fire had been directed. He inflicted further casualties, and was within striking distance of his objective, when he was killed by a burst of

machine-gun fire. By his brave and determined action, which completely unnerved the enemy, and by his successful reduction of the enemy's strength, Private Gratwick's Company was able to move forward and mop up its objective. Private Gratwick's unselfish courage, his gallant and determined efforts against the heaviest opposition, changed a doubtful situation into the successful capture of his Company's final objective.' (London Gazette: 28 January 1943.)

On the night of 26/27 October, the 7th Motor Brigade attacked Kidney Ridge in front of the right flank of the 51st Highland division near its boundary with the 9th Division. It was here that the armoured breakout later took place but throughout 27 October, the 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade repelled strong armoured assaults without field artillery support and showed that German armour could not throw back an infantry front pushed firmly forward and protected by anti-tank artillery. The Rifle Brigade's commanding officer, Lt Colonel V B Turner, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Neither the 8th Army nor the Africa Corps continued the attack during the daylight hours on 28 October but at 10 pm, the 9th Division's 20th Brigade struck northwards towards the coast road. In heavy fighting involving many casualties the Australian line was pushed a little closer to the coast road. As a result of these operations, Rommel concentrated even more forces in the north and in the following four days the Australian sector became the focal area of the battle. The 9th Division again attempted to cut the coast road on the night of 30/31 October. Under command of 26th Brigade, the 2/24th, 2/32nd and 2/48th infantry battalions and the 2/3rd Pioneer battalion attacked and although not achieving all that was hoped for, inflicted substantial casualties and took over 500 prisoners. Sergeant W H Kibby, 2/48th Battalion, who was killed attacking a machine-gun post was awarded the Victoria Cross for heroic conduct that night and for two previous occasions beginning on 23 October The citation read:

'During the initial attack at Miteiriya Ridge on 23 October 1942, the Commander of No. 17 Platoon, to which Sergeant Kibby belonged, was killed. No sooner had Sergeant Kibby assumed command than his platoon was ordered to attack strong enemy positions holding up the advance of his company. Sergeant Kibby immediately realised the necessity for quick decisive action, and without thought for his personal safety he dashed forward towards the enemy post firing his Tommy-gun. This rapid and courageous individual action resulted in the complete silencing of the enemy fire, by the killing of three of the enemy, and the capture of twelve others. With these posts silenced, his Company was then able to continue the advance.

After the capture of Trig 29 on 26 October, intense enemy artillery concentrations were directed on the battalion area which were invariably followed with counter-attacks by tanks and infantry. Throughout the attacks that culminated in the capture of Trig 29 and the re-organisation period which followed, Sergeant Kibby moved from section to section, personally directing their fire and cheering the men, despite the fact that the Platoon throughout was suffering heavy casualties. Several times, when under intense machine-gun fire, he went out and mended the platoon line communications, thus allowing mortar concentrations to be directed effectively against the attack on his Company's front. His whole demeanour during this difficult phase in the operations was an inspiration to his platoon.

On the night of 30-31 October, when the battalion attacked "ring contour" 25, behind the enemy lines, it was necessary for No. 17 Platoon to move through the most withering enemy machine-gun fire in order to reach its objective. These conditions did not deter Sergeant Kibby from pressing forward right to the objective, despite his platoon being mown down by machine-gun fire from point-blank range. One pocket of resistance still remained and Sergeant Kibby went forward alone, throwing grenades to destroy the enemy now only a few yards distant. Just as success appeared certain he was killed by a burst of machine-gun fire. Such outstanding courage, tenacity of purpose and devotion to duty was entirely responsible for the successful capture of the Company's objective. His work was an inspiration to all and he left behind him an example and memory of a soldier who fearlessly and unselfishly fought to the end to carry out his duty.' (London Gazette: 28 January 1943)

On the morning of 31 October, the Australian battalions were concentrated in the most fiercely contested area of the whole battlefield. During the early hours of 1 November, 24th brigade took over command of the forward units and the 2/28th and 2/43rd battalions relieved the 2/24th and 2/48th battalions. At midday, a major enemy assault by tanks with aerial and artillery support commenced and continued throughout the afternoon and well into the night. It did not die down until 2.30 am on 2 November which was ninety minutes after the long awaited break-out *Operation Supercharge* had opened with an intense artillery barrage.

From the night of 26 October 1942 when the Australians started their drive northwards and brought the whole weight of the Africa Corps against them, Montgomery had been regrouping his forces to create a reserve for the break-out. On 2 November, with the Axis reserves concentrated against the 9th Division, Montgomery made his thrust through the bridgehead originally secured by the 9th Division on the opening night of the battle. The Germans did not break immediately but the overwhelming British aerial and armoured strength ensured success. Rommel first gave the order to retreat on the evening of 2 November, cancelled the order when Hitler directly intervened and finally restarted his withdrawal on the night of 3/4 November. On 5 November, the 9th Division found the enemy gone from its front and having fought the last Australian battle in North Africa, returned home in early 1943. The victorious 8th Army was unable to seize the opportunity of cutting off and capturing a sizeable proportion of Rommel's force and it was not until 13 May 1943 that North Africa was cleared of enemy forces.

The 8th Army casualties were 13,500 killed, wounded or missing. About 27,000 prisoners were taken, 450 tanks destroyed or abandoned and much equipment captured. The 9th Australian Division losses between 23 October and 4 November totalled 2,694, including 620 dead, 1944 wounded and 130 taken prisoner. Churchill in *The Second World War* said the magnificent drive towards the coast by the Australians, achieved by ceaseless bitter fighting, swung the whole battle in favour of the British. Montgomery's chief of staff, Sir Francis de Guingand said in *Operation Victory* of the Australian thrust towards the coast:

'I think this area saw the most determined and savage fighting of the campaign. No quarter was given, and the Australians fought some of the finest German troops in well-prepared positions to a standstill, and by their action did a great deal to win the battle of El Alamein.'