

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

SERIES ONE

ARMY

VOLUME III

*TOBRUK AND EL ALAMEIN*

## AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

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The writers of these volumes have been given full access to official documents, but they and the general editor are alone responsible for the statements and opinions which the volumes contain.

# TOBRUK AND EL ALAMEIN

*by*

BARTON MAUGHAN

CANBERRA  
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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STAFF SERVICES

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*“Poor souls! to have never known the immortal will  
That never owns defeat, the heroic deed  
Whose doing is its only glory still.”*

(C. J. Brennan)

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## PREFACE

**T**HIS volume of the series *Australia in the War of 1939-1945* chronicles the participation of Australian military forces in the North African campaigns from March 1941 to December 1942. In the opening campaign the British forces retreated from Cyrenaica and came close to outright defeat; when the story ends, they had driven the Axis forces from Cyrenaica and were pursuing them along the Tripolitanian coast. The book tells how Australian soldiers and their leaders contributed to that achievement. Australian sailors and airmen also played a part, but their contribution, having been recorded in other volumes, is mentioned only when it impinges on the military story.

In summary, it is the story of the 9th Australian Division from its formation until its departure from the Middle East, and of other Australian formations and units while they fought with or near it in that theatre. The operations of British forces and other national forces under British command taking part in the same campaigns are also recounted, being described in greater or less detail according to their relevance to Australian operations. Thus the doings of some British units and of individual officers and men belonging to them who served under Australian command or cooperated with Australian units, particularly in the retreat from Cyrenaica and the siege of Tobruk, are in some instances related in more detail than in the British official history.

Disparagement of war histories is fashionable, as though to praise men who nobly fought were to advocate a warlike national philosophy. It is in adversity, however, that man's nobility most shines forth, whether in peace or war. The greatness of the Australian soldier, which superbly exemplifies the quality of our people, is the unsullied theme of the military volumes of the official war history, all of which have been written in the tradition that Dr C. E. W. Bean established and Gavin Long, the general editor of this series, worthily carried on. The object is to relate not only what governments arranged and generals ordered and what results they achieved but also how these were accomplished by the soldiers themselves. Their trials, their triumphs, their disasters. Their comradeship, transcending war's engendered hates. Of necessity we watch mainly those at the front of the stage, failing often to notice others moving shadowily behind them, such the signallers, the runners, the stretcher bearers, the cooks, the truck drivers, all doing their simple but essential work, sometimes across fire-swept ground. The tragedies, the extinction of full-blooded lives, these are the strongest arguments for peace.

I saw many and knew some of these men and have enjoyed chronicling their deeds, because my experiences with them transformed my own attitude to the men and women whose daily toil sustains my country, as their toil in war protected and honoured it. I was with the 20th Brigade, later transferred to the 9th Division, when it sailed to the Middle East but not when it moved to Cyrenaica nor during the retreat

to Tobruk and early days of the siege. Rejoining it from Mersa Matruh after the failure of Operation BATTLEAXE I served with it thenceforth in various minor roles, mainly with the 2/13th Battalion, throughout most of the subsequent operations described.

The story has been compiled primarily from official records and war diaries, including some British ones. These were supplemented by narratives and enemy appreciations from the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office and the unexcelled campaign narratives of the War History Branch of the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, and in particular by Mr W. E. Murphy's narrative of the second Libyan campaign, from which the main thread of the operational narrative in the Ed Duda chapter was drawn. Numerous other sources have been acknowledged in the footnotes.

Those for whom this book has been written have waited too long for it. The late Chester Wilmot was first chosen to be the author but had not started work on it before his tragic death. I began the task in 1955, and with less talent have striven to produce a volume he would not have thought inadequate. There was nothing then to distract me, but unexpected problems soon arose. Some people could doubtless have better surmounted difficulties such as subsequently confronted me; but the completion, if tardy, has not been reached without effort. Nor without help generously given. Particularly should I mention the extensive leave granted me by my employer, The Zinc Corporation, Limited.

I owe an immense debt to the dedicated people of the Official War History staff whose devotion to their task has sometimes been given in disregard of prospects of advancement in other directions: A. E. Field who wrote the appendixes dealing with the Haifa-Beirut railway and prisoners of war and the description of the 9th Division's Gaza parade and whose notes on operations and narratives of non-operational phases I used extensively; Jim Brill, who gave me not only diligent help but friendship in a strange city; Geoff McKeown whose painstaking research provided a solid factual basis to the maps and to many battle descriptions; Hugh Groser for his expert cartography; Mary Gilchrist, who saw the volume into the press; Ann Ellis, who typed most of the numerous drafts; and last but not least, A. J. (Bill) Sweeting who took charge of the Official War History staff after Gavin Long retired and whose scholarly judgment has saved the volume from several faults.

Many of high and low rank have helped by corresponding with me or the general editor and his staff or granting interviews, and I am specially indebted to Sir Claude Auchinleck and the late Sir Leslie Morshead for the time they spared. The book also owes much to Sir Victor Windeyer's suggestions and constructive criticism made against the background of his deep learning and extensive reading of military history; and to the well-informed criticism of Brigadier H. B. Latham (Historical Section, United Kingdom Cabinet Office) and of Mr Ronald Walker, the New Zealand historian, both of whom enabled some errors to be avoided.

I owe most to Gavin Long. His unobtrusive teaching and guidance, his unfathomable patience, his faith in me albeit misplaced. I cannot speak of his help without repeating what has been said again and again in their prefaces by other writers of the official histories, all sustained (but none more than I) by his encouragement, his scholarship, his wisdom and his strong loyalty.

It is time to say my last thanks to all these people. There are others I should name, and there is one I cannot, who gave me constant help.

B.M.

*Broken Hill,  
1st January 1965.*

## LIST OF EVENTS

FROM MARCH 1941 TO DECEMBER 1942

*Events described in this volume are printed in italics*

- 1941 31 Mar *Enemy counter-attack in North Africa*  
3 Apr *British evacuate Benghazi*  
6 Apr Germans invade Greece and Yugoslavia  
7 Apr *British and Australian troops evacuate Derna. Generals O'Connor and Neame captured by Germans*  
11 Apr *Siege of Tobruk begins*  
14 Apr *General Morshead appointed commander of Tobruk fortress*  
22 Apr Embarkation of troops from Greece begins  
20 May Germans invade Crete  
27 May German battleship *Bismarck* sunk 400 miles west of Brest  
8 Jun Allied invasion of Syria begins  
15-17 Jun *Operation Battleaxe*  
22 Jun Germany invades Russia  
12 Jul Armistice in Syria  
29 Aug Mr Fadden becomes Prime Minister of Australia  
7 Oct Mr Curtin becomes Prime Minister of Australia  
18 Nov *British offensive in Western Desert (Operation Crusader) begins*  
30 Nov *Germans capture Sidi Rezegh*  
7-8 Dec Japanese attack Malaya and Pearl Harbour  
10 Dec *Prince of Wales and Repulse* sunk off Malaya  
26 Dec British garrison at Hong Kong surrenders to Japanese  
1942 23 Jan Japanese capture Rabaul  
19 Feb First Japanese air raid on Darwin  
8 Mar Japanese occupy Lae and Salamaua  
17 Mar General MacArthur arrives in Australia  
26 Mar General Blamey becomes Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces  
5-8 May Battle of the Coral Sea  
20 May Allied forces withdraw from Burma



- 31 May-1 Jun Japanese midget submarines attack Sydney Harbour
- 4-6 Jun Battle of Midway Island
- 21 Jun *Axis forces capture Tobruk*
- 25 Jun *General Auchinleck assumes command of the Eighth Army*  
*9th Australian Division ordered to move to Egypt*
- 21 Jul Japanese land in Gona area, Papua
- 7 Aug Americans land in the Solomons
- 13 Aug *General Montgomery takes command of the Eighth Army*
- 15 Aug *General Alexander succeeds General Auchinleck as Commander-in-Chief Middle East*
- 25-26 Aug Japanese land at Milne Bay
- 30-31 Aug *Battle of Alam el Halfa*
- 1 Sep *Operation Bulimba*
- 23-24 Oct *Battle of El Alamein begins*
- 2 Nov Kokoda recaptured
- 7-8 Nov Allied landings in French North Africa
- 9 Dec Australians capture Gona