

"Tobruk is not a siege, nor a defence. It is a permanent offensive ... day after day, night after night."

The Patrolling War in Tobruk

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Image 1: Men of the 2/13th Battalion going out through the wire in Tobruk, 30 April 1941 (AWM 007.481).

Abstract

Tobruk is remembered for the eight-month siege and the aggressive policy of patrolling adopted by Major General Leslie Morshead. His strategy of "making the besiegers the besieged" kept the enemy at arm's length and enabled the Australians to dominate no man's land and in doing so, stave off the German advance towards Egypt.

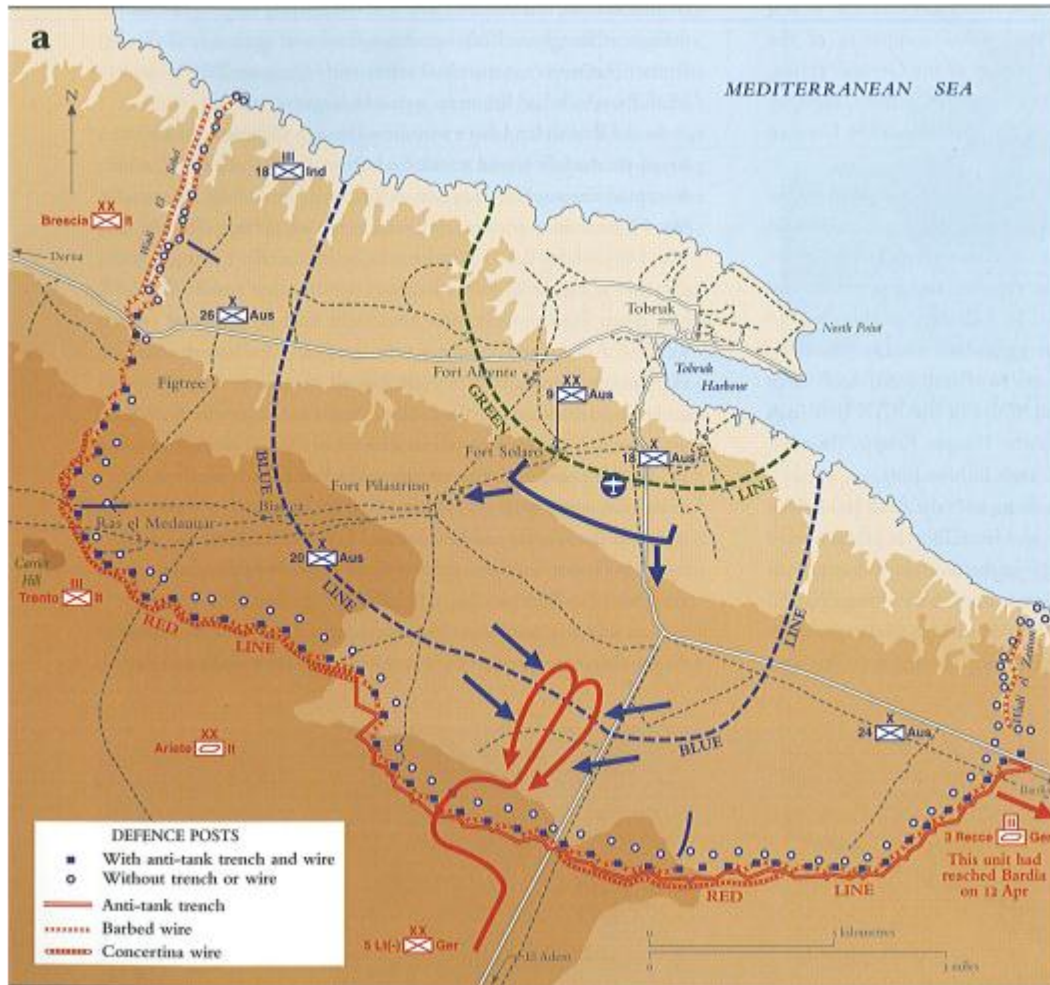
The men of the Australian 9th Division began the siege as poorly trained and inadequately equipped soldiers, yet emerged triumphant against Rommel's *Afrika Korps*. This paper will consider the patrolling tactics used by the 9th Division and the corresponding counter-measures of the Italians and Germans, to reveal that while the policy of aggressive patrolling was ultimately successful it was not without difficulties.

Introduction

Australia's experience in Tobruk is remembered for the static and prolonged siege that lasted eight months during 1941, and for securing the first victory for the

Commonwealth forces against General Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps* in eastern Libya (Cyrenaica). For much of this period the fighting that took place centred on the outer defensive perimeter, the Red Line, where troops from the Australian 9th Division, under the leadership of Major General Leslie Morshead, would carry out daily reconnaissance and fighting patrols. The aggressive patrolling policy adopted by Morshead, and his aim of making the besiegers the besieged, kept the enemy at bay and enabled the Australians to dominate no man's land and stave off the enemy's march towards Egypt.

The aim of this study is to draw on the multiple accounts of patrolling in Tobruk and to paint a broader understanding of the nature of patrolling and its operational importance to the war in the Western Desert. To achieve this, a wide range of sources have been included, drawing on official documents, unit histories and personal accounts. Not least among the sources are the hundreds of patrolling reports that document the variety and persistent nature of the patrols. The paper will focus on the period of Morshead's command of the Tobruk garrison, from April to October, with particular emphasis given to the months of June and July when attempts to relieve the garrison were unsuccessful. From this moment on, the nature of patrolling assumed a new urgency in both maintaining infantry morale and giving men the opportunity to use their training. This paper will discuss the importance of Morshead's strategy and illustrate how through its extensive patrolling policy the Australian forces in Tobruk controlled the siege.



Map 1: Tobruk defences, April 1941 (Source, Coates, *An atlas of Australia's wars*, p. 53).

A strategically important harbour

In the early months of 1941 the British and Commonwealth forces had strategic successes against the Italians in Libya. The Australian 6th Division had played a significant role in these victories, particularly in securing the small harbour town of Tobruk. The strategic importance of the port could not be underestimated in the North African campaign. As it was the only major port between Tripoli and Alexandria, and ultimately the Suez Canal, maintaining control of Tobruk was paramount to the Allies. Had they conceded the harbour, both the Italian and the German supply lines to their troops would have been drastically shortened and afforded the enemy a tactical advantage. On 8 March the newly formed 9th Division (which included the 18th Brigade from the 7th Division), now commanded by Major General Morshead, relieved the 6th Division in eastern Libya, which had been deployed to the defence of Greece. Morshead recognised that his new divisional

troops "had barely reached the standard level of platoon training"¹ when they arrived, which marked a stark contrast from the 18th Brigade which he had commanded previously.

Morshead had first inspected the Tobruk fortress and the inherited defences soon after its capture from the Italians in January 1941. Although the outer defence perimeter remained, all defensive obstacles between it and the harbour had been weathered by time and neglect. The barbed wire was full of gaps and in poor condition and the anti-tank ditch constructed by the Italians remained incomplete. Morshead's 9th Division set about reinforcing the Red Line until 9 April, when the focus shifted to strengthening a secondary defence perimeter, the Blue Line, which would help to contain any enemy breakthrough. The final line of defence before the harbour was called the Green Line.

The Easter battle and the Salient

The first serious confrontation for the Australians in Tobruk came on 10 April, when the first shots were fired by the Axis forces as they approached from the west towards Tobruk harbour. This event would mark the start of the Easter battle. The Australians successfully repelled them but on Good Friday, 11 April, Tobruk was effectively cut off when German forces severed the supply road to its east, encircling the garrison. From this moment, the siege had begun.

On Easter Sunday, General Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief Middle East, issued a message to the fortress commander that declared the "defence of Egypt now depends on your holding your front".² The implication was that Morshead and his troops would have to hold Tobruk for eight weeks before there was a chance for relief. Over the ensuing days, Rommel's *Afrika Korps* would make several attempts to break through the defences, particularly in the vicinity of posts R31 and R33, west of the El Adem road, most notably when a group of 30 Germans armed with mortars and machine-guns engaged members of the 2/17th Battalion, who were armed only with rifles, bayonets and grenades. The poorly equipped and under trained 9th Division had secured their first victory against the *Afrika Korps*.³

The Germans were more successful a few weeks later, however, when they won the south-west sector in the bloody battle for the Salient, which resulted in horrible casualties for both sides. The brevity with which both battles have been

¹ Cited in Coombes, David, *Morshead: hero of Tobruk and El Alamein*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 101.

² Wilmot, Chester, *Tobruk: 1941*, Camberwell, Penguin, 2009, p. 117.

³ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, pp. 116-19.

retold does not reflect the aggressive fighting that took place or the casualties incurred: for his part in the Easter battle, Corporal Jack Edmondson was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions. Rather, these initial flashpoints were the oddity in the Tobruk experience, and what followed were months of static warfare that would ensnare the troops of Tobruk in months of defensive action dominated by patrolling.



Image 2: Major General Leslie Morshead (AWM 009.517).

Patrolling as the keystone of defence

Patrolling was stressed as operational policy on 11 April, and when Morshead assumed the role of Tobruk Fortress Commander on 14 April, he set about implementing a defensive strategy grounded on four key principles. Defensive improvements had begun early and would be continual; no ground would be yielded, and a strategic policy of defence in depth would shield the harbour, embodied in the tiered perimeters. Morshead also determined that the garrison should dominate no man's land.⁴ It was this final objective, through the practice of

⁴ Maughan, Barton, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1987, p. 159.

patrolling, that would come to characterise the defence of Tobruk. The aim was to hold the Tobruk defences and "patrolling would be carried out with the utmost vigour".⁵

The policy of patrolling began early in the siege; during that Easter weekend, the troops learnt the necessity of it to keep abreast of enemy movements in no man's land and to stop the enemy from reconnoitring the Red Line.⁶ In fact Morshead's experience commanding the 33rd Battalion on the Western Front meant he was well versed in Monash's defensive-offensive strategy and in all phases of patrolling, knowledge which would serve him well throughout the siege of Tobruk.

Since the First World War the principles of patrolling had been documented as a mainstay of training: military training pamphlets and manuals, such as "The fighting soldier"⁷ or "Soldier in battle",⁸ written by men who had served in the First World War, were subsequently adopted by the British War Office. In practice, the experience of First World War veterans meant that patrolling was both an implied and informal culture assumed by those in command, and also dictated by field experience. This is evident in accounts of informal patrolling, prior to its being mandated in Tobruk, that filter through the personal recollections of Tobruk veterans.⁹

In the broader context of military training, patrolling was an effective tactical means to observe the enemy, undertake reconnaissance and engage the enemy in combat, particularly at night. Patrolling was to an extent also "conceived as a means to maintain fighting spirit and to prevent morale deteriorating".¹⁰ In Tobruk the latter point would serve a significant purpose in Morshead's overall strategy and although constant and exhausting, patrolling would also provide valuable experience in intelligence gathering for the inexperienced troops.¹¹

In Tobruk Morshead's patrolling strategy emphasised three specific objectives: to engage the enemy, to undertake reconnaissance and to maintain security. Morshead had his troops undertake a variety of patrols, such as fighting

⁵ Operational order No. 8, GS War diary, 9th Division, 11 April 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

⁶ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, p. 268.

⁷ Dunlop, W.A.S., *The fighting soldier*, 8th Australian edition, British War Office, [nd].

⁸ Mitchell, G.D., *Soldier in battle*, 5th edition, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1940.

⁹ Papers of 2/12th Battalion, AWM PR00570.

¹⁰ Ashworth, Tony, *Trench warfare 1914-1918, the live and let live system*, London, Macmillan Press, 1980, p. 71.

¹¹ Hill, Alec, "Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead: Commander, 9th Australian Division", in Horner, David (ed.) *The commanders*, George Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1984, p. 181.

patrols, long distance reconnaissance patrols, and close-in security patrols.¹² Under this umbrella, more localised patrols such as standing patrols, carrier patrols, listening posts and observation patrols broadened his defensive strategy.¹³ The key objective of the fighting patrols was to harass the enemy and to capture prisoners for the purpose of intelligence gathering; these were some of the largest patrols operating in no man's land. The usual strength was one officer, two non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and 12 infantrymen, though at times they could consist of a complete platoon. Patrols any larger than this would become too difficult to manage during the night.¹⁴

Reconnaissance was essential, as maps alone could never reveal the complexities of the terrain. These patrols comprised one officer and anywhere between three and six soldiers.¹⁵ Observation patrols ventured deep into enemy territory and could be single-man operations, often staying out until the next evening, watching for signs of enemy movement. These patrols acted on information obtained from other patrols and were successful not only in supplying and confirming intelligence, but in providing cover to other patrols in no man's land. The close-in security patrols served the necessary task of both guarding against surprise attacks from the enemy and maintaining the fixed defences such as barbed wire, ditches and mine fields.¹⁶

The listening posts, which were manned by two men, were responsible for noting any noise and movement made by the enemy and informing their nearest perimeter post.¹⁷ The soldiers undertaking patrols between the defensive posts along the Red Line inventively called it the "love and kisses" patrol. This name stuck because the patrols had taken to leaving sticks in either an equals sign (love) or a cross (kisses) to indicate that their section of the perimeter had been patrolled. For example if post R53 was love, posts R51 and R55 would be kisses; when post R53 found the sticks crossed they would know that this section of the perimeter had been patrolled and they would be able to continue with their own patrol.¹⁸

In Tobruk the front line was the Red Line, which stretched a distance of approximately 45 km. The majority of patrols took place along this perimeter, with

¹² Lessons from Tobruk April–October 1941, 26th Brigade Headquarters, AWM54 523/7/6.

¹³ Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941 including the defence of Tobruk, pt. 1, 9th Division, AWM54 523/7/29.

¹⁴ Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/29.

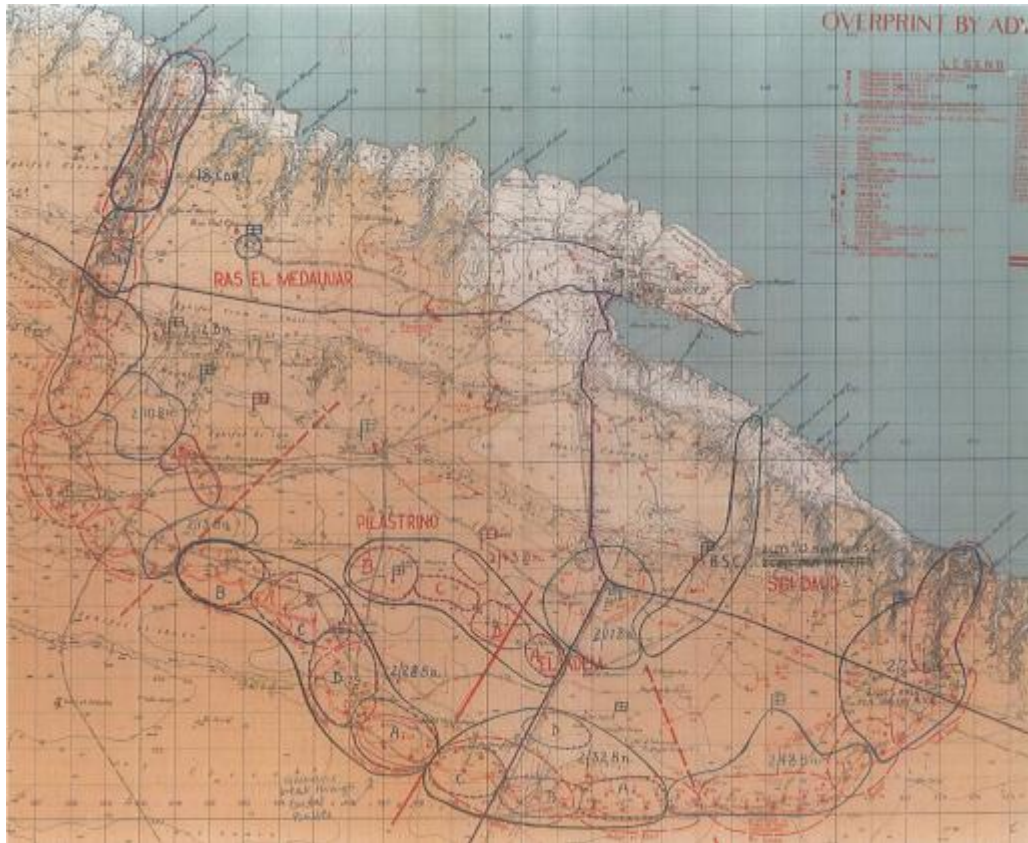
¹⁵ Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/29.

¹⁶ Lessons from Tobruk April–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/6.

¹⁷ Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/29.

¹⁸ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, pp. 268–69.

each battalion responsible for its own front, with patrols carried out by individual companies. Armed with a Thompson sub-machine gun, one NCO accompanied by three other ranks would patrol the inter-company boundaries, preventing the enemy reconnaissance parties from approaching the wire.¹⁹ The patrollers were the eyes and the ears of Tobruk, and the extent of patrolling activities can partly be judged by the fact that anywhere up to 200 men from each battalion were on active patrolling duties in no man's land each night.²⁰



Map 2: Tobruk Garrison April-June 1941, detailing battalion front lines (AWM52 8/2/20).

¹⁹ Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/29.

²⁰ Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, Victoria Barracks, 11 June 1947, pt. 1, AWM PR 3DRL 2632.



Image 3: Brigadier Raymond Tovell of the 26th Brigade inspecting the barbed wire entanglements of the 26th Brigade area (AWM 020.138).

No man's land could at different times be anywhere between one mile (1.6 km) and four miles (6.4 km) in depth,²¹ and some sections of the Red Line were only 400 metres from the enemy.²² Patrols were often accompanied by a "getaway man" who trailed behind the main patrol group. In the event of the patrol being overwhelmed or captured by the enemy, the getaway man could return to the company post with any intelligence that had been obtained up until that point. In the flat featureless terrain of no man's land, patrols could sometimes become disoriented at night and the getaway man was well positioned to shepherd any patrols or its members who had strayed from their course.²³

Eight weeks of waiting and no relief in sight

During the eight weeks after the Easter battle, the garrison was essentially a holding force. Morshead had originally commanded a garrison force of 37,500, of which 24,000 were combatant troops. The Australian troops totalled some 14,270, with the British numbering around 9,000. In addition there were other Commonwealth and Indian troops defending the fortress. To alleviate concerns regarding decreasing supplies, Morshead had gradually reduced the number of men

²¹ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941* p. 268.

²² Cochrane, Peter, *Tobruk 1941*, Sydney, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2005, p. 12.

²³ Letter, Archie (Tex) Allaway, papers of the 2/12th Battalion, AWM PR00570.

by evacuating all unnecessary personnel from the garrison. The expectation was that every man now remaining in the garrison was to assume a combatant role in the defence of Tobruk.²⁴

The nightly patrols carried out by Morshead's men continued to maintain the perimeter defences, gathering intelligence, harassing the enemy and capturing prisoners. Until the end of May it was noted there had been little more than slight patrol activity from the enemy, but considerable consolidation, which included the erecting of sangars and weapons pits, and the laying of booby traps and minefields.²⁵ Several Australian patrols had even heard concrete mixers and pneumatic drills being used during the night.²⁶ This pattern continued into June and again it was considered "generally quiet", though intelligence revealed that the Germans were abandoning their policy of ground aggression and instead favoured a campaign of aerial bombardment over the garrison.²⁷

At the same time the Western Desert Force had begun its strike to relieve the garrison, but after weeks of preparation and the promise of relief, Operation Battleaxe failed over 15–17 June. The failures of this operation marked a turning point in garrison life, and from this moment on Morshead and his troops were faced with the reality of an indefinite siege. Mindful that "nothing would sap the troop's morale as much as idleness",²⁸ Morshead set about further encouraging raids and active patrolling, and from June onwards patrols served as a means to give the men both the opportunity to fight and to stave off boredom.²⁹ Morshead best summarised his renewed patrolling focus:

*The enemy's positions were deeply penetrated night after night. Considerable casualties were inflicted, mines were either disarmed or shifted onto enemy tracks, or brought back for our own use and above all, the enemy kept in a constant state of fear and trepidation, so that he was awake by night and slept by day.*³⁰

²⁴ Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 159.

²⁵ A brief history of Tobruk: March to August 1941, AWM54 523/7/19.

²⁶ The use of heavy machinery has been widely acknowledged in patrol reports and reiterated in historical evaluations. A brief history of Tobruk: March to August 1941, AWM54 523/7/19; Various patrol reports, The siege of Tobruk, AWM 522/2/1.

²⁷ A brief history of Tobruk: March to August 1941, AWM54 523/7/19.

²⁸ Cited in Chester Wilmot, "Would It?" in Dapin, Mark (ed.), *The Penguin book of Australian war writing*, Viking, Camberwell, 2011, p. 210.

²⁹ Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, Victoria Barracks, 11 June 1947, pt. 2, AWM PR 3DRL 2632.

³⁰ Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, 11 June 1947, pt. 2, AWM PR 3DRL 2632.

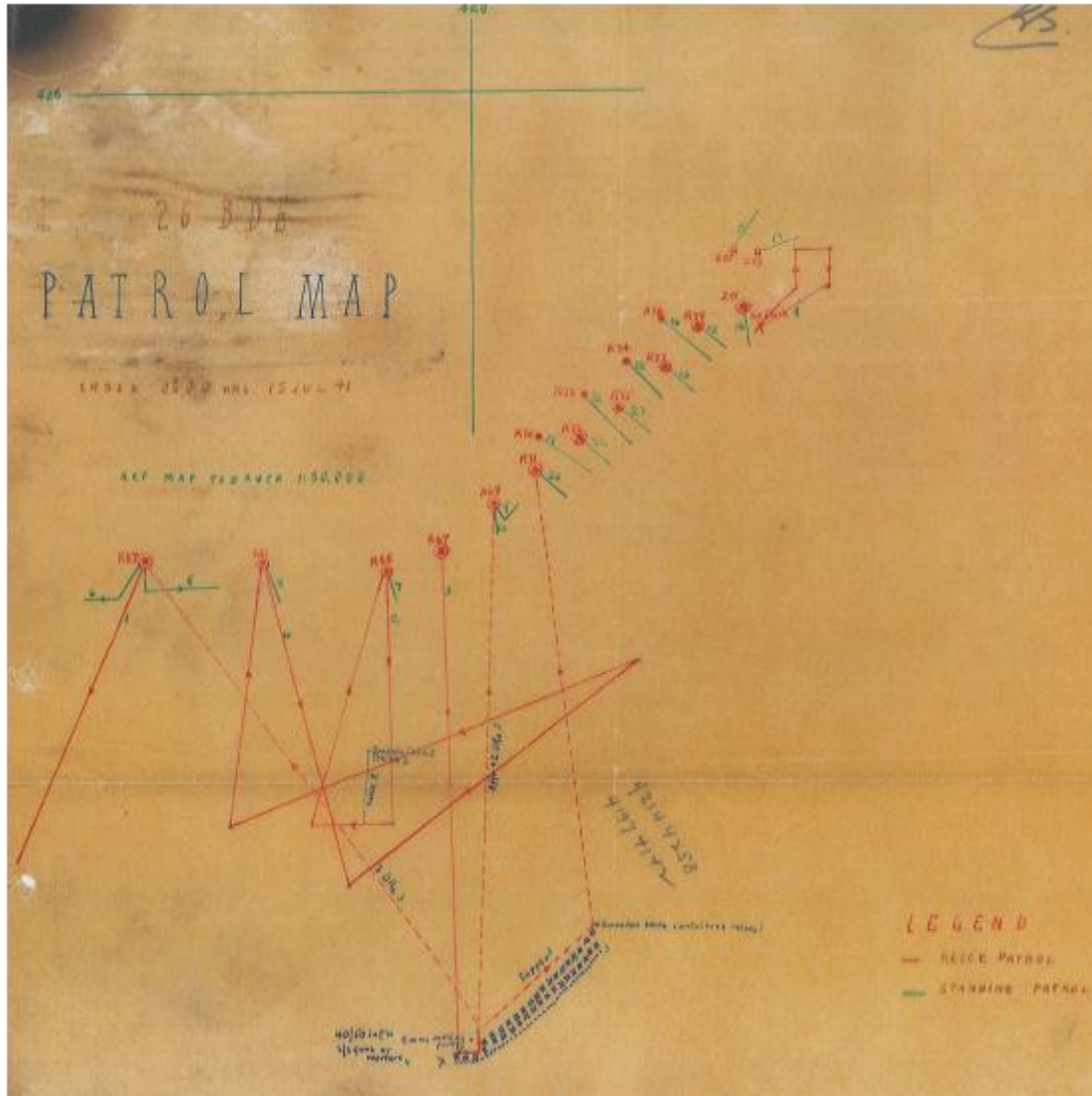
Patrolling was met with varying degrees of success. On the night of 18–19 June, a fighting patrol led by Lieutenant John Gilchrist and 13 others from the 2/28th Battalion had tracked the source of enemy digging around the White Knoll, in the western sector, to a cluster of sangars. The patrol carefully moved towards the fourth sangar, where they found three men, two of who were asleep. When Gilchrist woke them with the tip of a bayonet and disarmed them, the Italian prisoners offered no resistance; compliant and “very frightened” was how Gilchrist remembered them.³¹ In little over three hours, the patrol had successfully dismantled an enemy listening post.

The following day, after four nights observing the enemy’s habits, Lieutenant Henry Nicholls from C Company 2/1st Pioneer Battalion had planned to intercept an enemy ration truck, but a last-minute change in route derailed this plan. Nicholls decided instead to intercept the carrying party heading towards the truck. But again he failed. As a last resort Nicholls ventured towards four enemy sangars. It was known that the enemy occupied the sangars and that they were heavily armed, but Nicholls deliberately woke the enemy, rushed the sangar and bayoneted eight occupants. Corporal Lorrie Raward followed suit and killed a further five enemy. As they retreated, enemy machine-gun fire opened up and Corporal Raward was shot and left in no man’s land. The remaining members of the patrol retreated back to their lines, with one prisoner in hand. Thirty minutes later a second patrol was mounted with the intent of finding Raward’s body. After two and a half hours of searching the vicinity of no man’s land, they returned unsuccessful.³² These examples highlight the range of achievements, successes and failures that patrols met. The key to successful patrolling may have rested with the “compact, resolute and enterprising”³³ initiative of the troops, but on occasion such actions also contributed to the wounding and deaths of soldiers.

³¹ Patrol reports and summaries, Tobruk, April to July 1941, 2/28th Battalion, AWM54 522/7/4.

³² Nicholls’s report does not indicate whether the enemy was German or Italian. Patrol reports and summaries, Tobruk, AWM54 522/7/4.

³³ Lessons from Tobruk Apr–Oct 1941, AWM54 523/7/6.



Map 3: This 26th Brigade patrol map is a composite of each company's patrolling route for the night of 15 July and illustrates the complex nature of patrolling (AWM54 522/2/1).

Going out beyond the anti-tank ditch and reconnoitring deep into no man's land required a certain level of skill, not to mention a good sense of direction. Many patrol members had become adept at navigating by the stars, while other members were responsible for calculating the distance by compass or counting the paces. Some were said even to have memorised maps.³⁴

Reconnaissance patrols were a continual annoyance to the enemy through placing their movements constantly under surveillance.³⁵ Identifying the enemy through reconnaissance patrols built up a broader picture of action in the Western

³⁴ Lyman, Robert, *The longest siege: Tobruk: the battle that saves North Africa*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2009, p. 255.

³⁵ Lessons from Tobruk April–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/6.

Desert. Lieutenant Leo Payne of the 2/32nd Battalion was informed that the brigade commander, Brigadier Arthur Godfrey, was keen that a prisoner be captured in the Salient region to gain enemy intelligence.³⁶ Although Payne was unsuccessful on that occasion, the capture of prisoners, enemy documents, military insignia and ephemera, even remnants of cable from enemy working parties, all gave an indication of the troops operating in the region. Evidence of engineers could indicate that enemy troops were laying minefields, and such intelligence helped commanding officers to plan their tactical strategies.

In July foot patrols and carrier patrols were both penetrating deep into the enemy positions along the southern and eastern fronts and returning with solid intelligence.³⁷ The tactical advantage of using carrier patrols was their mobility and ability to withstand considerable artillery fire and provide protection from shrapnel. Armed with medium machine-guns, they were tasked with providing cover to working parties, evacuating the wounded, and supplying ammunition to outposts during attacks. Although patrolling during the day was dangerous, the carrier patrols had become adept at using the *khamisin*, or dust storms, as camouflage, which enabled them to confirm intelligence supplied by the previous night's patrols. In some instances patrols even built into their carriers improvised ladders, which they climbed up to get a better view of the battlefield.³⁸ In the west, the objective of harassing the enemy was met nightly; in July alone it is estimated that the bombs and bayonets of the Australian patrols killed 180 enemy troops, wounded at least 230 while capturing 11 prisoners.³⁹

The cyclical nature of patrolling had well and truly set in by July, and often the banality of patrolling would be illustrated with the comment "nothing to report". A divisional intelligence instruction called for "normal patrol activity" to be embodied in the daily brigade intelligence summaries, "unless they were reports that referred to 'special patrols', 'set pieces', [and] fighting patrols etc."⁴⁰ From this distinction, and considering the widespread and elaborate system of patrolling that existed, the evidence suggests that decisions regarding routine patrolling were largely made at the discretion of the battalion commanders. This theory is supported by Morshead's acknowledgement of the leadership of his junior commanders. Their "careful planning and resourceful leadership" produced

³⁶ History of the 2/32nd Battalion during the Tobruk Campaign, AWM54 523/7/3.

³⁷ War diary, 9th Division, 18 July 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

³⁸ Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, 11 June 1947, pt. 2, AWM PR 3DRL 2632; Report on operations in Cyrenaica including 9th Division preparation for the defence of Tobruk 1941, AWM PR 3DRL 2632.

³⁹ A brief history of Tobruk: March–August 1941, AWM 54 523/7/19.

⁴⁰ Intelligence instruction No. 6, GS War diary, 9th Division, 23 July 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

successful patrols, a remark that points to a level of independence in the implementation of patrols. Greater communication and coordination were required between battalions, brigades and divisional headquarters when tanks and heavy artillery assisted patrols.⁴¹



Image 4: A patrol from the 2/13th Battalion making its way through a gap in the barbed wire protecting its unit. This image shows the harsh and unforgiving terrain of Tobruk which patrollers would traverse each night. In all likelihood this photograph was staged for the cameras because of the danger of daylight patrols (AWM 020.780).

German counter-measures

Patrolling was not without its dangers, and the Australian troops were often met with German and Italian counter-measures. In evaluating the strategic results following the battle for the Salient in May, Morshead noted there had been a marked decrease in enemy activity in front of Tobruk, where aggressive Australian

⁴¹ Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/29.

patrolling had taken place. Morshead had maintained that neither the Germans nor the Italians had ever really excelled at patrolling.⁴²

Unlike the Australian and Commonwealth troops, who had greatly inferior resources during the siege, Rommel and his elite *Afrika Korps* had at the centre of their campaign access to tanks and heavy artillery, which won them success on the ground. The Germans were superior in the skies too, and engaged in aerial battle which repeatedly saw Tobruk harbour overwhelmed by Axis domination. But despite the availability of superior weaponry, the Germans were deficient in infantry, and the Italians lacked a co-ordinated attack.⁴³ The Italians' mind-set differed greatly from their Axis partners and that of the Commonwealth forces. They maintained a level of comfort and were unwilling to adapt to the hardships of desert life, preferring instead to indulge in an "Imperial ambition" which glamourised the war.⁴⁴ After their early defeat by the Australian troops, the Italians' spirit took a blow, realising the harsh reality of desert warfare. Perhaps it was the Germans' arrogance that dismissed the importance of patrolling, and the Italians' unwillingness to patrol that led Morshead to offer this explanation. In fact, the Axis troops did participate in counter-patrolling, with similar objectives, but they failed to match the unorthodoxy of Australia's methods and their formidable spirit.

Certainly the Germans used aerial and ground reconnaissance and made probing attacks to determine the strength and location of the Tobruk defence, but they neglected to maintain the accuracy of their reconnaissance maps, which may have been their greatest tactical oversight. In contrast, Morshead had taken those initial steps to familiarise himself with the inherited defences and to implement a program of improvements. As part of continuing field works, he charged each brigade with the responsibility of maintaining their defensive maps and each week these were submitted to divisional headquarters to amend the divisional maps.⁴⁵ This, together with the continuous patrolling undertaken by Morshead's troops, had afforded the Australians superior intelligence and ultimately denied the Germans any element of surprise in their planned assaults. On occasion the Australian intelligence even revealed the location of intended German attacks.⁴⁶

⁴² Report on operations, Cyrenaica, March–October 1941, AWM54 523/7/29.

⁴³ Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, 11 June 1947, pt. 2, AWM PR 3DRL 2632.

⁴⁴ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ Instruction No. 73, Improvement of field works, GS War diary, 9th Division, 9 August 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

⁴⁶ Miller, Ward A, *The 9th Australian Division versus the Africa Corps – Tobruk, Libya, 1941*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas Combat Studies Institute, 1986, p. 37.

"The Germans were very wary of [our] patrols," infantryman Neville Williams recalled, so much so that German troops would seek them out using a truck fixed with a light "to find the patrols and shoot them".⁴⁷ A prisoner had alluded to Germans patrolling only as far as their "safety posts", except for the "occasional reconnaissance patrol which went as far into our [Allied] territory as it [could]".⁴⁸ The Germans had also taken to crafting dummy tanks out of cardboard to confuse Allied aircraft about the point from which an attack would come, and to conceal the new location of the actual tank.⁴⁹ They also created the illusion of soldiers manning their stations by filling bags with sand to deceive Allied patrols.⁵⁰ The Germans were regularly outwitted by the Australian troops when they would "delouse" the German mine fields and incorporate the removed mines into the Allied mine fields.

In his patrolling report, John Oates, a member of the military history field team, documented the more macabre tactics employed by the Germans. Patrols during the night of 11 September in the Salient area found Italian corpses wired with German booby traps. Surrounded by mines, the first corpse was discovered with wires "attached to his waist, shoulder straps and helmet". The following night a second body was found in much the same way, but propped in an "unnatural position so as to invite investigation".⁵¹



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Image 5: A dummy rangefinder in a dummy anti-aircraft position. (Source, Cumpston, *The rats remain: Tobruk siege 1941*, p. 215).

In their arrogance, the German command had underestimated the Australian defensive strength, believing the troops to be completely demoralised and unwilling to fight.⁵² The ceaseless and aggressive patrolling by the Australians during the siege had demonstrated otherwise and on occasion, despite this, the Germans appeared confident enough to call for Australian patrols to surrender when they encountered them, in an attempt to avoid any conflict.⁵³

Oates's proximity to the men going out on patrols imbued his report with the nuances often absent from the official narratives. Many men found it useful to have knowledge of German and Italian, particularly phrases like "surrender" or "lay down your arms"; NCOs and infantry alike brushed up on their German and Italian before embarking on their patrol. The Germans likewise tested their linguistic skills by brushing up on commands such as "Come on, Aussies. It's no use, you better put your arms up."⁵⁴

Italian counter-measures

The counter-measures employed by the Italians do little to challenge the assumption that they were quick to surrender to Allied forces. Their nervous disposition on the battlefield is frequently noted in both patrolling reports and historical recollections. The Italian troops may have shown more resistance to Allied

⁵² Ward, *The 9th Australian Division versus the Africa Corps – Tobruk, Libya, 1941*, p. 37.

⁵³ Operational order No. 12, War diary, 18th Brigade, 17 August 1941, AWM52 8/2/18.

⁵⁴ Oates, J.R., "Australians on patrol", AWM54 523/7/36.

patrols when they were supported by German troops and artillery, as suggested by Oates, but their reluctance to patrol was evident. Chester Wilmot supports this observation:

*The best the Germans could do was to induce the Italians to attack the garrison's outposts at dusk ... [but] the Italians would often make so much noise in their approach due to their nervousness or else give early warning that we could open fire at long range in the hope that they could withdraw in safety without losing too much face.*⁵⁵

In the patrol reports surveyed for June and July, there are references to Italian troops using dogs (Alsations or German Shepherds) to give warning of approaching patrols.⁵⁶ On other occasions the Italians' singing and the strong smell of their cigar smoke made them easily identifiable to roaming patrols.⁵⁷ Whether this was evidence of careless behaviour or a deliberate attempt to be captured is a matter for conjecture.

From mid-July, several of these reports also document the Italians' use of high-powered searchlights attached to the back of vehicles and used to sweep no man's land in search of patrols.⁵⁸ Brigadier John Field of the 18th Brigade called them "unsettling" because they could blind his troops.⁵⁹ In response, members from each battalion participated in simulated searchlight exercises to determine how visible men were when stationary or moving.⁶⁰ One night, while on patrol, Lieutenant Leslie Maclarn of the 2/17th resolved the issue by skirting behind the Italian line and cutting the cables that powered the lights.⁶¹

In the same month, to combat their reluctance to patrol, the Italian troops were forced to build stone cairns at the end of their patrol routes as evidence that their patrol had been performed. When the 2/48th Battalion encountered the cairns, they initially thought they were a new style of booby trap until an Italian prisoner revealed their true purpose. From that moment on, the Australians were careful to dismantle the cairns before dawn, leaving the Italians confused and at the mercy of their superiors for disobeying orders.⁶²

⁵⁵ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, p. 286.

⁵⁶ Various patrol reports, The siege of Tobruk, AWM54 522/2/1; Operational order No. 10, War diary, 18th Brigade, 23 July 1941, AWM52 8/2/18.

⁵⁷ Oates, J.R., "Australians on patrol", AWM54 523/7/36.

⁵⁸ Patrol reports submitted by the 26th Brigade, 15 July 1941, Various patrol reports, The siege of Tobruk, AWM54 522/2/1.

⁵⁹ Unpublished manuscript, Brigadier Field, John, "Warriors for the working day", AWM MSS 785.

⁶⁰ Searchlight demonstration, GS War diary, 9th Division, 26 July 1941, AWM552 1/5/20.

⁶¹ Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, p. 287.

⁶² Wilmot, *Tobruk: 1941*, pp. 285–86.

Tex Allaway of the 2/12th Battalion recalled one instance when the Italians were far from passive. Amid fears that enemy tanks had broken through the perimeter line, C Company headquarters sent out another patrol to determine the extent of the breakthrough. The enemy had been digging in on the flank of C Company; when contacted by the patrol, they surrendered. Yet when the patrol moved to disarm them, the Italians announced their numbers and ambushed the patrol by hurling grenades at them. There were multiple casualties and the patrol leader, Sergeant Arthur Browne, was killed in the event.⁶³



Image 6: Italian and German prisoners captured by the Australian forces and held in Tobruk (AWM 007.482).

Oates made the observation that can be deduced from many of the reports: the "Germans at times made no man's land untenable while the Italians were no more than a nervous nuisance".⁶⁴ While these summaries have been drawn from Allied sources, a more complete review would benefit from access to translated documents to provide balance.

⁶³ Letter, Archie (Tex) Allaway, AWM PR00570.

⁶⁴ Oates, J.R., "Australians on patrol", AWM54 523/7/36.

Fighting declining morale

The persistent nature of patrolling was a psychological battle that played out on both sides. Morshead's intention to keep the enemy at a distance and off balance was evident in the text of the following captured documents. The "Australian is unquestionably superior to the German soldier," wrote Major Ballerstedt, who commanded the German II Battalion of the 155 *Infanterie Regiment*.⁶⁵ Lieutenant Joachim Schorm from the 5th Tank Regiment echoed similar sentiment; in his diary he refers to Australians as "men with nerves and toughness, tireless, taking punishment with obstinacy, [and] wonderful in defence".⁶⁶ Tony McGinlay of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment recalled the war weariness of a German prisoner, who wrote of the Germans' "desperate state of nerves and lack of sleep because of the wretched Australians".⁶⁷ An Italian prisoner painted a similar account of morale: "We do not want to fight. We are suffering like hell from fever and stomach troubles caused by swallowing sand. We are waiting for you to tell us to put our hands up."⁶⁸

Combined, these observations paint a powerful image of an enemy in decline, and the Tobruk defenders' improved morale can be attributed to the successful outcomes of patrolling.⁶⁹ When Operation Battleaxe failed to relieve the garrison, Maughan noted that the news was "met with great disappointment" by the troops and could have had a depressing effect on morale.⁷⁰ Speaking to an audience of servicemen at a lecture he gave after the war, Morshead remembered the failure "was received with little but silent despondency" by the garrison, but Morshead rallied their confidence and morale by shifting the emphasis from the failed chance of relief to a lost opportunity to fight.⁷¹ When news of Germany's declaration of war against Russia on 22 June was heard, "nobody in Tobruk considered the possibility of the Germans capturing the fortress," Tex Allaway recalled.⁷² The entry that day in the battalion war diary noted that the troops were "expectant" that Germany would exhaust itself in the European theatre of war, offering the garrison some relief.⁷³ Despite the fortress's invincibility, what is evident from the war diaries, as revealed

⁶⁵ Appendix A, Translation of captured documents, Intelligence summary No. 74, GS War diary, 9th Division, 30 June 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

⁶⁶ Appendix A, Diary of Lieutenant Joachim Schorm, Intelligence summary No. 73, GS War diary, 9th Division, 27 June 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

⁶⁷ Cited in Lyman, R, *The longest siege: Tobruk, the battle that saved North Africa*, p. 212.

⁶⁸ Intelligence summary No. 98, GS War diary, 9th Division, 26 July 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

⁶⁹ Lessons from Tobruk Apr-Oct 1941, AWM54 523/7/6.

⁷⁰ Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 286.

⁷¹ Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, 11 June 1947, pt. 2, AWM PR 3DRL 2632.

⁷² Letter, Archie (Tex) Allaway, AWM PR00570.

⁷³ War diary, 2/12th Battalion, 24 June 1941, AWM52 8/3/12.

by Maughan, is that the arrival of letters from home had the greatest impact on troop morale.⁷⁴

On 24 June the Germans initiated a propaganda campaign of leaflets dropped from skies: "Aussies, you cannot escape, surrender" read the text.⁷⁵ The leaflets were met with the garrison's good humour and were in high demand as souvenirs. So too were Italian counter propaganda attempts. The *V per vittoria*, or V for victory sign, is clearly a hand-made effort made from whatever was available to the Italian soldier who made it.⁷⁶

Despite the good humour and larrikinism that thrived between the men, there were valid concerns regarding the health and morale of the garrison. Gunner Lindsay Laurence remembered the monotony of Tobruk, "training, training all the time and doing nothing of importance".⁷⁷ This, coupled with the continual maintenance and improvements made to the defences, the oppressive heat and the dust storms that the men endured would certainly have impacted on morale. The living conditions were made worse by plagues of fleas and supply shortages, most importantly water, which had at one point been rationed to a gallon of water per day for each man. It was barely drinkable and often referred to as "brackish".⁷⁸ The men's health had deteriorated for lack of a balanced diet too, and by May most men had shed at least 10 kilograms. "An occasional tot of rum before patrols" was the only luxury the men ever enjoyed.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 286.

⁷⁵ Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 286.

⁷⁶ Counter-propaganda leaflets, GS War diary, 9th Division, 25 July 1941, AWM52 1/5/20.

⁷⁷ Letter, Lindsay Palmer Laurence, Papers of 2/12 Battalion, AWM PR00570.

⁷⁸ Cochrane, *Tobruk 1941*, p. 38.

⁷⁹ Rees, Peter, *Desert boys*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2011, p 500.



Image 7: The Italians' propaganda campaign, a hand-written *V per vittoria* sign left in the desert (AWM 009.394).

In August, when considering relief options for the garrison, General Claude Auchinleck summarised: the "health and morale of the Tobruk garrison is very good but the power of endurance of the troops is noticeably reduced and this is likely to be further reduced as time goes on."⁸⁰ A plan was considered to relieve one brigade from the 9th with one from the 6th Division, but this was dismissed amid concerns that a decline in "high morale would reduce the tactical efficiency of the garrison".⁸¹

On reflection, Morshead maintained that a significant factor in garrison morale was not just its defensive spirit, but that the garrison had developed a team mentality: "Australians, British, Indians and later Poles had all played their full part".⁸² Playing their part had come at a cost, as the siege had taken its toll on the men of the 9th Division. After months of engagement in the desert, they were presenting with a range of physiological conditions, including diarrhoea, dysentery and gastro-enteric disorders. The men were also experiencing a range of psychological disorders that were attributed to "poor emotional backgrounds" and the lack of progress in the campaign. Symptoms such as acute exhaustion were

⁸⁰ Cited in Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 350.

⁸¹ Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 350.

⁸² Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, 11 June 1947, pt. 2, AWM PR 3DRL.

attributed to enduring "long period[s] of fear-producing stimuli".⁸³

Over a three-month period, one infantry battalion averaged 1.13% of its men suffering from an anxiety neurosis. In other battalions, figures would vary between 3%, 2.7% and 2.1%, while units in high combat areas, such as artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft operations, reported extreme cases of 9.1%.⁸⁴ While the figures may not be exceptionally high, considering the environment the troops were fighting in, the acknowledgement of such conditions was an exception. In the month of June one unit reported 16 cases of anxiety neurosis and "fear states", but 360 cases of diarrhoea,⁸⁵ which possibly indicates a willingness to deal with the physiological effects of siege warfare, rather than with the psychological.

The Germans and Italians were not the only ones who would come to dread the patrols. So too would Australian soldiers like Les Watkins, for whom "night patrols ... gave time to reflect on a war that had already seen too many of his 2/13th Battalion mates killed".⁸⁶ Private Ken Pugh of the 2/12th Battalion was reminded of his experience at a listening post. Lying in a shallow trench dug in to the sand while waiting to report on any enemy activity, he was fully aware that the night would play tricks on his imagination: "the more scared you were, the more you saw," he remembered.⁸⁷ There were some, like Frank Hassett,⁸⁸ who were critical of the patrolling policies. Hassett, who was a major in Tobruk before being promoted to the rank of Brigade Major for the 18th, argued that Morshead and Brigadier George Wootten of the 18th Brigade had been too "influenced by the habits of trench fighting" in the First World War, "where men were seen as mere numbers".⁸⁹ In Tobruk a total of 749 Australians died and a further 604 became prisoners of war defending the harbour.⁹⁰

Conclusion

⁸³ Walker, Allan, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series 5, Medical vol. II, *Middle East and Far East*, p. 228.

⁸⁴ Walker, Allan, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series 5, Medical vol. II, *Middle East and Far East*, p. 228.

⁸⁵ Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 292.

⁸⁶ Cited in Rees, *Desert boys*, p. 566.

⁸⁷ Letter, Ken Pugh, papers of the 2/12th Battalion, AWM PR00570.

⁸⁸ Hassett would later go on to be Wootten's brigade major in Syria and end his military career in Canberra as Chief of Defence Force Staff. People profiles, General Francis George (Frank) Hassett, AC, KBE, CB, DSO, Australian War Memorial, retrieved 3 April 2012, <<http://www.awm.gov.au/people/8445.asp>>.

⁸⁹ Cited in Rees, *Desert boys*, p. 499.

⁹⁰ Battle of Tobruk, Australian War Memorial, retrieved 3 April 2012, <http://www.awm.gov.au/units/event_220.asp>.

The Australian troops dominated the night under Morshead's uncompromising command and repelled two major attacks from the *Afrika Korps*, in the process shattering the myth of German invincibility. The policy of active patrolling won the men of the 9th Division control of no man's land. The measure of its success was evident not only in the persistence of a daily patrolling routine endured by the men for months on end, but because the Germans and Italians failed to match the patrolling offensive initiated by Morshead, choosing instead to remain behind their defences. In both respects, the enemy was an unwilling and arguably less determined opponent, often outwitted and out-maneuvred by the sheer doggedness of the Australian troops.

The escalation of patrolling activities after June was successful in staving off idleness and maintaining levels of morale, and the aggressive spirit instilled by Morshead in his men was equally matched by a buoyed enthusiasm; but it came at a cost. The psychological impact of eight months of desert warfare had left both Allied and enemy troops war-weary and in declining health; Tobruk had been a battle for strategic control and morale in equal measure. The effectiveness of Morshead's patrolling strategy is embodied in the result. Tobruk was the longest siege in British military history and is a testament to the resilience and perseverance shown by its defenders.

The 2/13th Battalion was the final Australian contingent to evacuate Tobruk in December 1941. The defensive responsibility for Tobruk had passed to the British and South African troops. Although the British troops had participated alongside the Australians in patrolling exercises, only a few months later, in June 1942, Rommel would capture Tobruk and win what the Australian 9th Division had so valiantly claimed as their own.



Image 8: A patrol from the 2/13th Battalion patrol along the anti-tank ditch at the El Adem road, south of Tobruk (AWM 007.505).

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