

TOBRUK 1941

Peter Cochrane

Reviewed by Bill Deane

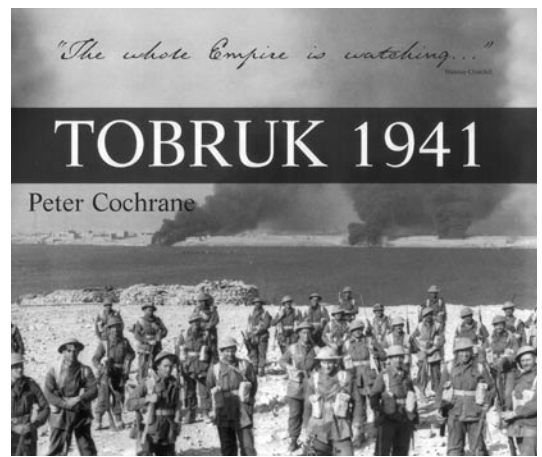
In early April 1941 Tobruk was a sun-scorched, fly-blown, rat-infested, former Italian garrison town on the Libyan coast 120 kilometres west of the Egyptian border and almost 600 kilometres from Alexandria. It had three saving graces for the previously victorious Allied forces now retreating eastward following General Erwin Rommel's landing in North Africa in February: it was the only deep water harbour between German-occupied Benghazi to the west and Allied-held Mersa Matruh to the east, it possessed the only adequate water supply for a 100 kilometres to the west and 200 kilometres to the east, and the Italians, before losing it to the Allies in January, had extensively fortified it with a 50-kilometre perimeter arc of trenches, mutually-supporting strong points and anti-tank ditches blasted out of the rocky and practically featureless desert.

No army could advance eastwards in strength on the Suez Canal without capturing Tobruk. It was decided that the retreating Allies would make a stand there for two months to buy time for the assembly of reinforcements for the defence of Egypt. In fact, their siege lasted nine.

Allied forces at Tobruk, commanded by Australian Lieutenant General Leslie Morshead, initially consisted of his nearly 15,000-strong 9th Division plus a brigade from the 7th Division, and almost 18,000 British. Demands in Greece, Crete and elsewhere had reduced the latter figure by half three months later, leaving mostly Royal Horse Artillery, tank crews and an Indian cavalry complement. The surrounding enemy were superior in numbers, armour, combat experience and in the air — re-supply vessels from Alexandria called the last 65 kilometres into Tobruk “bomb alley”.

Within a few days of the Allied withdrawal into Tobruk, Rommel's forces launched an attack that broke through the defenders' outer perimeter. This was eventually repulsed with heavy German losses — the first sizeable defeat of German tanks in World War II. Another partially successful attack at the end of April that seized a stretch of the western perimeter was so costly that “Ultra” radio intercept intelligence indicated Rommel had been reprimanded by his Mediterranean Supreme Command and ordered to consolidate and launch no more attacks.

With his supply lines from Italy threatened by Allied naval and air forces and the Germans about to invade the Soviet Union, Rommel's resources were now in a parlous state anyway. As freelance writer and military author Peter Cochrane puts it: “In a sense, both sides were trapped in the desert — Morshead by geography, Rommel by logistics — and both shared the ordeals of desert existence...,” ordeals characterised by heat, cold, sand storms, sulphur-tasting water, infestations of flies, lice and rats, poor diet, dysentery, periods of boredom punctuated by aggressive patrolling, and the constant threat of shelling and bombing.



Overriding it all was “that other sharing — the ubiquity of death.” Eight hundred and thirty two Australians died in the siege before all of the 9th Division — less a battalion that later fought their way out when the siege was lifted in December — were evacuated by sea between August and October, following General Blamey's insistence that Australian formations in the theatre should fight together.

With its glossily wide-paged format, *Tobruk 1941* is basically a photographic record, from mostly official but some private sources, of the AIF's time in Tobruk and the operations of the war cameramen from the Department of Information's Cinematographic and Photographic Unit that accompanied it for propaganda purposes. No photographs of Allied dead were allowed, and the time lapse between shooting newsreel footage of initial battlefield triumphs and their screening at home caused problems when cinema audiences complained about watching newsreel victories while reading newspaper reports of subsequent reversals.

At various intervals Frank Hurley of Antarctic fame and Damien Parer were among the team of DOI cameramen, journalist Chester Wilmot was also there with a “Box Brownie”. Apart from shots of artillery being fired, there appears to have been no filming of ground combat so some footage was faked by Hurley during quiet periods, with troops acting out repelling an attack — sometimes to their annoyance — and wrecked tanks and planes being set on fire, although he and Parer did film the occasional bombing raid. Most photos in the book are of diggers either going about routine tasks with a cheerily resilient insouciance that belies the harsh primitiveness of their environment, or adopting appropriate poses of lynx-eyed alertness while manning their weaponry.

All good stuff for home-front consumption — stacks of fortitude but, as the author points out, “Very little of human loss and suffering survives on the visual record”. Still, what the pictures lack in action is made up for in the numerous personal accounts of combat from both sides in the text and accompanying most photographs — ironically, the telling of the siege is more graphic than its photography. ♦

Peter Cochrane, 'Tobruk 1941', ABC Books, Sydney, 2005, Casebound and jacketed, 116pp., RRP \$49.95.