

Jump TO Article



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Jump TO Article

Australians' crucial part in turning the tide in North Africa in 1942

Bryn Evans¹



In the North African campaigns of World War II, Australians at sea, on the ground and in the air were important contributors in turning the tide against the Axis powers. Their efforts are not widely recognized, and some are unknown, but none should be forgotten. Mr Evans highlights a few lesser-known examples.

Bombing Palermo Harbour

It was October 1942 in the Mediterranean, high above the island of Malta. Australian Flight Lieutenant Bill McRae² of Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) 104 Squadron wrestled with the controls of a twin-engined Wellington bomber. He was taking off to raid Sicily's capital and major port of Palermo. In gusty winds and low cloud, groaning and creaking in its slow climb, the bomber dropped then surged upwards. "Shortly after take-off", remembers Bill, "we ran into turbulent cloud. Our course was over the sea on the east of Sicily, then a turn west through the straits of Messina and along the northern Sicilian coast to Palermo."

At the outbreak of World War II, Bill McRae was working for the Bank of New South Wales in the United Kingdom. As there were no Australian forces in Britain, he joined the RAF to train as a pilot, and, on completion, was posted first to Cairo then Malta. On that night bombing raid to Palermo, despite the increasingly poor weather, Bill was aware of the pressure to get the job done.

"As we approached the north coast of Sicily," Bill recalls, "the cloud cleared and we were able to identify some islands, and work out the bombing run. We circled off the coast at 10,000 feet until 'blitz' time, and then hugged the shoreline towards the target, Palermo Harbour. I began to lose height down to 8000 feet and increased speed to 160 knots. With the nose down I had a good view and saw a ship moored at the wharves. At first there was not a lot of flak. We had no trouble in identifying the target and let the bombs go in one stick. Then I opened the throttles, and with the engines screaming at maximum revs, did a steep climbing turn, trying to get through the flak bursts, which were now targeting the aircraft."

"When we were back to 8000 feet, I eased back on the throttles and pushed the nose down to level off. Both engines suddenly cut out. In that instant, it seemed that time stood still. It flashed through my mind that we had been hit.



Squadron Leader Bill McRae, January 2013

Then, after a couple of seconds, the engines picked up." As usual when getting clear of a target, Bill's mouth was completely dry.

On the Ground at El Alamein

Meanwhile on the ground close to Egypt's north coast at El Alamein, the desert war of over two years seemed to have reached a tipping point. The British Eighth Army and its new commander, General Montgomery, had been forced back to within 100 km from Alexandria and the Nile delta. Its final defeat by the German Axis Army under General Rommel appeared imminent.

The Allies' strategy was to strangle the Germans' sea and air supply routes from Sicily and southern Italy. Although Rommel was desperate for new supplies, especially the fuel necessary for an attack, he was maintaining his grip on the El Alamein bottleneck. It was the last remaining obstacle to the conquest of Egypt. After that his tanks could race for the oilfields of the Gulf, Iraq and Iran. It would turn the war Hitler's way (Bierman and Smith 2003: 211-335).

On the night of 23 October 1942, the crucial third Battle of El Alamein began. The 9th Australian Division made a major incursion through the German lines and captured Hill 29 which dominated the desert battlefield for many kilometres. Over the next 12 days, the Germans attempted 25 counter-attacks to retake Hill 29, but, despite heavy losses, the Australians threw them back, notably by the efforts of the 2/48th and the 2/17th Australian Infantry Battalions (Johnston 2005: 114).

Over three months in the three battles for Alamein, the 9th Australian Division lost nearly 6000 casualties out of close to 15,000 men. Never since have Australians died in such numbers in war. Three Australians at El Alamein were awarded the Victoria Cross.

Immediately after the battle was won, General Montgomery thanked the 9th Division's General Morshead, for their sacrifice which made the victory possible. The Commander-in-Chief Middle East, General Alexander, also addressed a parade of the 9th Australian Division, and said:

"The Battle of El Alamein has made history, and you ... played a major part in that great victory. Your reputation as fighters has always been famous, but I do not believe that you have ever fought with greater distinction than you did during that battle, when you broke the German and Italian armies in the Western Desert. There is one thought which I will cherish above all others – under my command fought the 9th Australian Division" (Johnston 2005: 136).³

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²Veterans' accounts: Squadron Leader Bill McRae, DFC, AFC.

Even British Prime Minister Churchill said that it was the turning of the tide, and wrote in his memoirs: "... the magnificent forward drive of the Australians, achieved by ceaseless bitter fighting, swung the whole battle in our favour".⁴

Years later, in October 1967 on the 25th anniversary of El Alamein, Field Marshall Montgomery returned to the Alamein cemetery. In his speech he said: "The more I think of it, the more I realize that winning the battle was only made possible by the bravery of the 9th Australian Division" (Johnston 2005: 131).⁵

In the Air at El Alamein

Yet there is another less well-known story involving Australians at El Alamein. Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadrons, and Australian airmen in the RAF, played a huge part across the Mediterranean and North Africa. It is estimated that more than 14,000 Australians served in the RAF. Interdiction operations by the Desert Air Force and RAF Middle Eastern Command hit German-held ports, shipping, transport aircraft and vehicle convoys on land, to starve the Axis armies of supplies. It was the foundation of the Allied victory at El Alamein.

In the four days leading up to the third, decisive, Battle of El Alamein, the Desert Air Force – which included RAAF Squadrons such as No. 3 and No. 450, and Australians in the RAF – imposed a 'no fly zone' on the Luftwaffe. Hindsight has shown it to have been successful beyond the dreams of the planners. Eighth Army was able to bring forward and concentrate its forces unhindered and unobserved for the surprise attack (Owen 1948: 125-157; Herington 1954: 356-379).



A Vickers Wellington Mark 2 bomber

In the Second World War, Australian airmen suffered the highest casualty rate of all three services. Squadron Leader Bill McRae was one of those who survived, and he lives today in Sydney, having celebrated his 100th birthday in January. In June 2012, Bill and other veteran Australian fliers attended the Bomber Command Memorial ceremony in London. Many other Australian airmen from those times live on in advancing years throughout Australia.

⁴Also see "Australia's pivotal role in 'the end of the beginning' remains underrated at home", 70th Anniversary of El Alamein, *The Weekend Australian* 10/11 November, 2012.

⁵See Mark Johnston, "60th Anniversary Series, Part 10 (of 13), WWII El Alamein" pages 8 – 9. Supplement to *The Australian*, 15 August 2005.

⁶Also see "Australia's pivotal role in 'the end of the beginning' remains underrated at home", 70th Anniversary of El Alamein, *The Weekend Australian* 10/11 November, 2012.

A Tunisian Puzzle

Some Australians also served in the British Army. While I was researching my last book on the British East Surrey Regiment in North Africa, I visited a Commonwealth war cemetery in Tunisia. It puzzled me that alongside two graves of East Surrey soldiers, there was one of an unidentified Australian soldier. Yet the 9th Australian Division returned to Australia after El Alamein, and no Australian Army forces served officially in Tunisia. The headstone stated: "A soldier of ... an Australian Regiment, Known Only to God" (Evans 2012: 43).

Since 1930, the 17th Battalion, the North Sydney Regiment (Militia), had been affiliated with the East Surrey Regiment, and the secretary of the Association of 17th Infantry Battalions⁶ has suggested that this unknown Australian could have been serving on secondment with the East Surrey Regiment. Records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission confirm that an Australian soldier is buried there, and his body was found with those of the East Surrey soldiers.

Conclusion

But why is all this important to us today? It was a moment of great moral choice in world history. The democracies of the world made a stand against the Nazis, fascism and the barbarity of state dictatorships. A recent study into the Holocaust in Europe has revealed that the Nazi death camps were far more numerous than generally known – more than 42,000. Incredibly, it is estimated that not 6 million, but perhaps more like 20 million people died in them. It was another time, that horror and struggle of 70 years ago. Yet some of that generation who bequeathed us our lives, our freedom and prosperity, are still with us today and must not be forgotten.

And the question is still there. Who was that unknown Australian soldier left behind in an unmarked grave in Tunisia? He had paid the ultimate sacrifice in the final victory, for the Australia of today and tomorrow. Someone somewhere in Australia still misses him.⁷

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Author's note: I am researching and writing a book on Australians in the air war in the North African and Italian campaigns of World War II. I would welcome stories and contributions from veterans (and their families) of both the RAF and RAAF from those times. (Tel 02 9438 1939, email bryn.evans@ozemail.com.au)

⁶Major Rod White, AM, RFD (Ret'd), Secretary, The Association of 17th Infantry Battalions.

⁷Bryn Evans, "Lest this man be forgotten", *North Shore Times*, Sydney, 18 January 2013.