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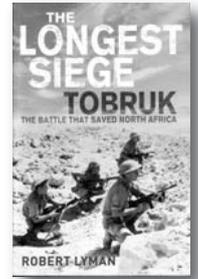
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BOOK REVIEW

The longest siege: Tobruk, the battle that saved North Africa

by Robert Lyman

Macmillan: London, 2009, 310 pp., ISBN 9781405039499, RRP \$34.99



This book is a challenging read, but reader persistence is well rewarded. *The Longest Siege* is a comprehensive, tactical-level review of the siege of Tobruk, a strategic port in North Africa, by the Axis and its successful defence by the Allies during World War II. Its author, an Australian, was an officer in the British Army for 20 years and is now a military historian who has published four earlier books.

Most of the book's first half explains the setting for this complex series of battles. These initially involved attacks by Italian troops seeking to realise Mussolini's ambitions to achieve Italian supremacy in North Africa and resulted in spectacular Allied successes in repulsing the Italian armies.

These early Allied victories were followed by a somewhat reluctant German intervention in which Hitler selected General Erwin Rommel to command what became known as the Afrika Corps, initially with the limited brief to restore Axis fortunes in North Africa, but quickly converted by Rommel's ambitions and driving energies into a major field of battle of key importance to the overall success of the war. Indeed, Rommel's aggressive tactics, which frequently ran contrary to the directives of the German Higher Command (OKW), made Tobruk the major pivot point that both sides needed to seize and hold if they were to achieve victory in North Africa.

This situation led to the main focus of this book – the repeated attempts by Rommel's German and Italian formations to capture Tobruk. The final half of the book reviews in great detail the famous defence of Tobruk by the Allies. Tobruk eventually constituted the longest siege in the history of the British Empire (242 days) in which a total of 24,000 defenders (initially the 9th Australian Division; followed by the British 70th Infantry Division) successfully repulsed the constant attempts by one of the most aggressive and respected German field commanders to dislodge the defenders and capture the strategic port.

The book's focus is the tactical level of operations. Although the geopolitical and strategic issues are reviewed, these aspects are covered only very briefly and the bulk of the analysis is at the formation, unit, sub-unit and individual soldier levels. One of the major strengths of the book is its exhaustive research into the diaries of units and individuals; and one of its great appeals for me is its frequent direct quotation of Allied and Axis soldiers describing their actual battlefield reactions in the lead-up to and during actual battles.

Many books about Tobruk have been published

previously – the bibliography in this one lists 10 earlier direct titles about Tobruk. This book's main strength is its ability to help the reader understand the feelings and attitudes of the actual troops on both sides as they took part in the relentless and endless siege conflict. It does this through skilful selection and use of many direct quotations and diary extracts describing actual battle experiences at formation, unit and individual levels. These quotations include descriptions of battle by individual soldiers who participated in the battles – including direct accounts of the events which led to the subsequent award of Victoria Crosses; many insights into the attitudes of sub-unit and unit commanders; and even reports of Rommel in direct conflict with both his subordinate field commanders and his OKW superiors, as a consequence of his relentless aggressive tactics.

Another strength of this book is its detailed recording of the 9th Australian Division's activities during the siege. It is clear that the author had access to a very rich field of primary sources and he uses these very skilfully – the book really 'comes alive' here, and is therefore of great value to Australian war analysis and history.

The book is fairly traditionally organised and presented, with a lists of abbreviations, campaign maps and acknowledgements (indicating the very wide range of resources used in compiling the work) first; followed by eight primary chapters which review the lead-up to and conduct of the siege; and concludes with an epilogue, which traces the remainder of the North African campaigns, followed by an appendix listing all Allied and Axis units involved. There is also a set of 38 photographs with a strong emphasis on the troops themselves, location shots and action shots of the defence.

The Longest Siege makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of one of the best known and important campaigns involving Australian troops in World War II. The battles were fought against a skilled enemy over challenging terrain and in exceptional climatic conditions. Although the book, especially its early chapters, is not easy to read, persistence is strongly rewarded with the reader gaining significant insights into the conduct of battles at individual soldier, unit and formation levels. Indeed, the insights into the attitudes and views of both Allied and Axis participants were a revelation for this reviewer and the author's very sympathetic and skilful presentation of the Australian contributions to the campaign add special value for Australian readers.

Michael Hough