# The Siege of Giarabub

## December 1940 – March 1941

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**Introduction**

Between December 1940 and March 1941 a British Commonwealth force, composed primarily of Australian troops, besieged the Italian outpost of Giarabub, on the Egyptian–Libyan border. After three months of skirmishing around the fortress, on 21 March elements of the 18th Brigade, 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF), assaulted and captured the oasis. The entire siege cost the Australians 17 men killed and 77 wounded; the Italian garrison, of roughly 2,000 men, had either been killed or captured.[1] By any standards it was a resounding victory.

The story of Giarabub has been outlined before, both in the Australian official history and in unit histories of those involved. This study has aimed to integrate those histories into a single narrative and also to put Giarabub into a broader political and military context. Frustratingly, the Italian perspective of the siege remains largely untold in Australia, due to barriers of language and technology. Nonetheless, this study draws on as wide a range of sources as possible and in doing so explains how and why several thousand soldiers fought in this remote part of desert that, at first glance, lacks any appreciable relevance to the struggle further north.

**Giarabub: an introduction.**

Giarabub is a small oasis that lies on the edge of the Libyan plateau, approximately 320 kilometres south of Bardia and 65 kilometres west of the Egyptian border. To the immediate south lies the Great Sand Sea of the Sahara Desert, and the town stands at the western end of a series of salt marshes that extend east to the Egyptian border. Geographically, Giarabub is the westernmost of the series of oases stretching along the edge of Sahara into Egypt. Strategically, in 1940 it was the southernmost of a series of Italian frontier outposts that marked the border with Egypt.

Giarabub also had a value beyond geography. As the final resting place of Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ali as-Senussi, a reforming Muslim cleric whose particular

[1] Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 302.

strand of fundamentalist Islam had been adopted by the local Bedouin, Giarabub had since the start of the 20th century been the spiritual centre of local resistance to European colonialism. The decision by the Egyptian government, under pressure from the British, to cede Giarabub to Italian-occupied Libya in 1925 was enormously unpopular with the Egyptian public, and the resulting outrage helped bring down the government.[2] Although never a primary consideration of operations in the area, this spiritual and cultural dimension appears to have had some influence on British thinking; at the very least it would put operational restrictions on the Australians, who were forbidden under any circumstances from damaging the tomb of Senussi or his mosque.

An Italian garrison had occupied Giarabub since 1925, acting as both a frontier guard and a garrison to control the Bedouins. When war broke out, the garrison consisted of approximately 2,000 troops, of which roughly 1,200 were metropolitan Italians and the remainder colonial Libyan troops. The oasis itself, located at the western edge of a dry salt marsh that extended eastwards for about 24 kilometres was heavily fortified. The surrounding gullies and re-entrants were defended by entrenched positions equipped with machine-guns, artillery pieces and automatic cannon, and a belt of barbed wire enclosed the town itself.

The greatest asset of the Italian garrison, however, was their commander. Major Salvatore Castagna's early career was fairly typical for a member of the Italian officer corps in 1940 – decorated for valour while serving as junior office in the First World War, he had left the army post-war but had returned in 1937.[3] Tactically aggressive, his determination to fight and hold Giarabub as long as possible stood in stark contrast to the attitude of many of his compatriots and ensured that should the garrison be challenged, there would be a siege. A story was recounted by one Australian officer that Castagna had had 20 men shot when they had suggested surrender after the siege began. Though almost certainly apocryphal, it demonstrates the respect the Italian quickly earned among his foes (the Australian

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[2] Lawson, "Reassessing Egypt's Foreign Policy during the 1920s and 1930s", pp. 48–53.
[3] 'L'eroe di Giarabub che fermò gli Alleati', *La Republica Palmero,* <http://palermo.repubblica.it/dettaglio/leroe-di-giarabub-che-fermo-gli-alleati/1428019>.

going on to say that in captivity Castagna was regarded as "a pleasant fellow and very much a soldier").[4]

But if Giarabub's immediate defences were strong, its position made it otherwise precarious. Located deep in the desert, Giarabub's isolation was compounded the woeful state of Italian logistics. Under-motorised at all levels, the Italian army simply did not possess the mobility to maintain their outposts in the face of any sort of opposition, and had only a rudimentary airlift capacity that could not properly compensate for this deficiency.

This lack of mobility, coupled with Castagna's stubborn determination, made Giarabub into a military mirage, with the apparent safety of the fixed defences hiding the operational precariousness of its position within an isolated oasis. It would take an opposing force to uncover this weakness. This condition was satisfied when on 2 December 1940 B Squadron, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, AIF, was ordered by the Headquarters Western Desert Force to move to the Egyptian oasis of Siwa – a scant 65 kilometres east of Giarabub.

**Skirmishes along the frontier.**

B Squadron's arrival in Siwa marked the beginning of the effort against Giarabub. The Australians relieved a British force which had been at Siwa since September. Detached from their parent regiment, B Squadron were – like the members of their parent division – a well drilled, well motivated and eager group of men who had been serving and training together for more than a year.

Despite having trained for months in Australia in anticipation of a mechanised reconnaissance role, the harsh realities of equipment shortages and limitations soon forced a reorganisation in Egypt. In theory the entire 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment was to have been equipped with a mixture of Vickers light tanks and open-topped Universal (or Bren gun) carriers. In practice, not enough light tanks and carriers were available in Egypt and those that were available proved mechanically unreliable over the course of long desert treks. As a result, B and C

[4] Taylor correspondence with Long, AWM67, 3/393.

squadrons were re-equipped with trucks of 15 and 30 cwt [hundredweight, equal to 750 and 1500 kg], and the armour was concentrated in A Squadron.

After just over a week of patrolling around Siwa, the cavalry were given their first task – a raid on the Italian frontier outpost of Garn-el-Grein, 65 kilometres to the north of Giarabub. Leaving Siwa at 2200 on 11 December, the 96 men of B Squadron sighted the low stone and mud walls of the outpost at 0715 the next day.[5] Captain F.H. Brown, commander of B Squadron, quickly moved to isolate the fort by cutting the border fence and telephone wire to the north and south. This accomplished, at 1000 the Australians opened fire, beginning the first ground engagement of the 2nd AIF.

Engaging with small arms, the Australians quickly came under fire from the artillery within the fort, the Vickers machine-guns receiving particular attention. The cavalrymen's heaviest weapons were Vickers guns and Boys anti-tank rifles, and they were thus at a firepower disadvantage from the beginning of the engagement. After half an hour of combat, three Italian CR.42 fighters appeared overhead and began strafing runs, once again concentrating on the Vickers troops. The cavalry threw up a curtain of small arms fire that disrupted the Italian efforts, but it wasn't until 1130 that the CR.42s, ammunition apparently exhausted, finally withdrew, having wounded one Australian.

With it now increasingly clear that surprise had been lost, and with the artillery fire increasing, the Australians withdrew to outside artillery range. At 1400 Lieutenant G.C. Cory's troop made a brief reconnaissance of the fort, again coming under fire, and at 1630 the cavalry spotted an Italian relief convoy moving into the fort's perimeter. With his opponents now reinforced and honour seemingly satisfied, Brown withdrew his men.[6]

Four days later, Brown had another chance to strike at the Italians. On the morning of 16 December, Headquarters Western Desert Force informed B Squadron that an Italian convoy would be moving between Garn-el-Grein and Fort

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[5] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond* pp. 82–83.
[6] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond* pp. 82–83.

Maddalena, the next northernmost frontier outpost, that evening. Boarding their vehicles, the squadron departed Siwa at 1130 and arrived at their chosen ambush location six hours later. At 1930 the lights of the convoy appeared, and as it stopped to make its way through the frontier fence, the Australians opened fire. Return fire from the escorting vehicles was quickly silenced and for an hour the cavalry raked the convoy. An arching Very light was the signal to withdraw, a manoeuvre the Australians accomplished successfully. They had sustained no casualties and had completely destroyed the convoy.[7]

The twin actions at Garn-el-Grein and Fort Maddalena demonstrated both the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian cavalry. Their mobility allowed them to choose when and where to strike with virtual impunity and, as the ambush of the convoy showed, this could be devastating. It also demonstrated the fundamental truth behind Napoleon's old axiom, "the mental is to the physical as three is to one". At Garn-el-Grein the appearance of the marauding raiders had caused a series of panicky Italian wireless transmissions demanding help, and the ambush of the convoy prompted the abandonment of both frontier outposts. Their garrisons withdrew to Giarabub, getting lost in the process, in consequence avoiding the ambushes the Australians had set for them. The Australians had established a moral superiority they would not lose for the rest of the campaign. However, vastly outnumbered by the Italians and with no heavy weaponry, the Australians had no real way of attacking their dug-in opponents in any kind of strength. As a result Giarabub would remain in Italian hands for another three months.

**Closing the noose**

On 18 December C Squadron and Regimental Headquarters arrived at Siwa, and Colonel M.A. Fergusson, commander of the regiment, assumed command. Fergusson – nicknamed "Ruthless" by his men for his attitude to training and discipline – had served in the ranks of the artillery during the First World War, had

[7] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond*, p. 85.

been commissioned, and spent the inter-war years in the Militia, rising to the command of an infantry battalion.[8]

Fergusson had been the commander of the 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment since its raising in 1939, and despite his lack of experience in this particular branch of servic, his training programs and his conduct around Giarabub suggested he quickly grasped the principles of mobile operations – speed, aggression, and deception. Although he had only two squadrons at his disposal – A Squadron remained with the main body of the division throughout the fighting around Giarabub – Fergusson quickly began an aggressive patrolling program. It was designed to properly reconnoiter and isolate Giarabub, in preparation for an assault at a later stage.

On 24 December a troop from B Squadron attacked the outpost of Ain Melfa, which lay at the eastern edge of the Giarabub salt marshes. After a brief firefight, the dozen or so Libyan colonial troops abandoned their two concrete bunkers and retreated, leaving them and a handful of wells in the cavalry's possession. Though the water was undrinkable, Melfa provided the Australians with a site for a forward base that allowed patrols to stay around Giarabub longer. Another raid on El Qaseibieya, a well at the south-western extremity of the salt marshes, also evicted a small Italian garrison and gave the Australians complete mastery of the western end of the marshes.[9]

With this accomplished, Fergusson could begin the task of reconnoitring Giarabub proper. C Squadron had already made a close inspection, unseen, of the outer defences on 20 December, but the next Australian incursion would meet a hotter reception.[10] On Christmas Day a reconnaissance in force was met with heavy artillery fire and air attacks, though both were ineffective. Having assembled the necessary information, on 29 December Fergusson submitted a report to Western Desert Force detailing the state of Giarabub's defences and outlining a possible plan of attack.

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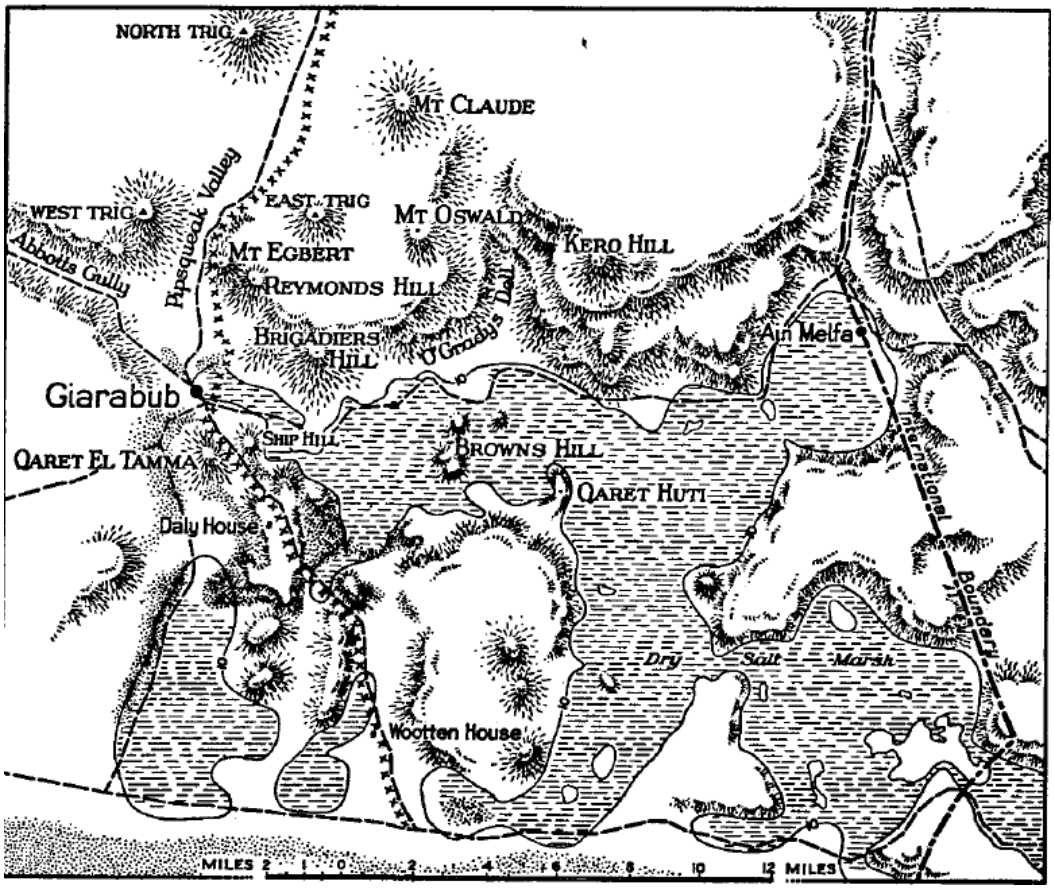
[8] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond,* p. 4.
[9] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, December 1940, appendix 5A, AWM52, 2/2/7.
[10] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, December 1940, appendix 5, AWM52, 2/2/7.

Fergusson's report was a model of optimism, particularly given that his knowledge of Giarabub's fortifications remained incomplete. His report stated that with the addition of two companies of infantry, the armoured squadron of his regiment, and supporting detachments of artillery and engineers, he could take the fort. He argued the imbalance in force would be made up through deception: "A cunning use of positions and rates of fire can be used to persuade the enemy that there is a much greater force of artillery present that [*sic*] needs to be sent."[11]




**Map 1** Giarabub and surrounding salt marshes. Note Abbots Gully and Pipsqueak Valley to the north of Giarabub, and Wootten and Daly House to the southeast. Source: Long, *To Benghazi,* p. 291.

Fergusson clearly felt his men had the measure of the Italian defenders and that, as in the previous weeks, mobility, aggression and deception could make up for the imbalance in numbers and firepower between them. It was an attitude reflected later

[11] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, December 1940, appendix 8, AWM52, 2/2/7.

in the official history, and Long wrote that after the raids on Ain Melfa and El Qaseibeya, "the Italians ceased to emerge beyond their wire defences".[12]

An incident on 31 December demonstrated, however, that Fergusson's assessment was perhaps overly optimistic. On that day, B and C Squadrons moved out for a reconnaissance of the approaches to Giarabub, specifically Pipsqueak Valley, immediately to the town's north, and the airfield within it. At 1030, as Corporal Riedel and Trooper Fuller moved onto a ledge to photograph the airfield, Italian artillery opened fire. Both men fell wounded, and Fuller was carried by Trooper Marchant 200 yards (180 metres) to some safety. Marchant's efforts (which earned him a Distinguished Conduct Medal) were in vain, however, as Fuller's wounds proved to be fatal.

With at least one vehicle bogged, B Squadron remained in position despite the continuing artillery fire. At 1045 Italian patrols were spotted attempting to flank the Australian position and were engaged with small arms fire. C Squadron was called up in support, but due to a communications fault it was 1155 before it arrived. As the action continued the decision was made to withdraw. Both squadrons moved 1,800 metres under fire; two vehicles were hit and another trooper killed in the process.[13]

Little more than a skirmish, it showed that Fergusson's optimism was misplaced. Castagna was not going to give in without a fight and was prepared to be aggressive. As at Garn-el-Grein, the cavalry had had no real way of countering Italian artillery, and suffered accordingly. The small skirmish demonstrated that without reinforcements, well in excess of the two companies of infantry that Fergusson had requested, Giarabub would not fall.

**Next step forward**

Although Fergusson's plan was rejected, Western Desert Force had not given up on this operation or the idea of attacking Giarabub. In late December 1940 the

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[12] Long, *To Benghazi,* p. 291.
[13] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, December 1940, appendix 7, AWM52 2/2/7.

commander of the 18th Brigade, AIF, Brigadier Leslie Morshead, had been told by General Thomas Blamey, commanding the 2nd AIF, that his men, recently arrived from England, would most likely have the job of assaulting Giarabub. Consequently, between 7 and 9 January Morshead made a series of aerial and personal reconnaissances of Giarabub and its defences. His report, submitted on 14 January, was a contrast to Fergusson's and acknowledged the tactical competence of the Italians and the strength of their defensive positions. Morshead wrote:

> *Morale will be the deciding factor and if the enemy were to put up a determined resistance, his dispositions are sufficiently good to require the use of a complete Brigade instead of only 2 Battalions supported by a complete Fd. Regt. instead of one battery as proposed.*[14]

This was a far cry from the two companies of infantry and three squadrons of cavalry Fergusson had envisaged. Morshead was impressed by the determination of the Italians and wrote that Castagna was "reputed to be an efficient and determined leader". He also quietly highlighted the failure of the cavalry to make a close reconnaissance of Giarabub's defences, noting that "it would be essential for … strong recce patrols to secure detailed information of his outer defences" and that there was a need for "photographs of the whole of the defences" as "those we now have are quite inadequate".[15]

Morshead's report did not immediately lead to action from Headquarters Western Desert Force (retitled XIII Corps in January 1941). Grappling with the problems of providing forces for the Greek Campaign, it seemed for a while that the 18th Brigade would be unavailable for any attack on Giarabub. In the interim, it was hoped that the garrison could be starved out. On 8 January an Italian relief convoy was bombed and destroyed by the Royal Air Force (RAF) short of Giarabub. This marked the final effort by the Italians to relieve the oasis by land. There had also been fitful efforts by the *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Air Force) to resupply the oasis by air, with transports landing at the airfield that lay within Pipsqueak Valley.

[14] Morshead, 'GIARABUB', report to 1 Aust. Corps, 14 January 1941, AWM52, 1/4/1.
[15] Morshead, 'GIARABUB', report to 1 Aust. Corps, 14 January 1941, AWM52, 1/4/1.

The ability of the Australian cavalry to interrupt this supply effort was boosted when, on 4 January 1941, a troop of four 25-pounder field guns arrived at Siwa to join Fergusson's force.[16] The young British commander of the troop, Captain P.H.V. O'Grady, had earned the nickname "One-Shot" for his ability to employ his guns accurately, and he and Fergusson soon established a formidable partnership. On 9 January, covered by the two cavalry squadrons, O'Grady's guns shelled the airfield in Pipsqueak Valley, damaging a transport aircraft and silencing two field guns that returned fire. Morshead, watching the action unfold, remarked that he had wanted "a quiet reconnaissance, not a battle".[17]

The arrival of O'Grady's guns all but completed the isolation of Giarabub. The convoy destroyed by the RAF on 8 January had been the last effort to relieve Giarabub by land, which reflected the collapse of the Italian position along the coast in Cyrenaica. On 3 January the Australian 6th Division had attacked and captured Bardia; three weeks later, on 21 January, Tobruk fell to the British. The remaining Italian forces in Libya were concentrating, along with frantically despatched reinforcements, further westward in Tripolitana. The possibility of relief for the garrison at Giarabub had been all but extinguished; it was now purely a question of the length of time Castagna and his garrison could survive.

Castagna's worsening supply situation was the main development of the next six weeks. Although air drops continued, they proved insufficient to feed the entire garrison, and consequently Castagna's Libyan troops began to abandon their posts. By the end of February, 620 had been captured by the Australians in the desert around the oasis.[18] In a further effort to stem the flow of supplies and starve the Italians out, an airfield was established forward of Siwa for RAF fighters to stage out

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[16] The sources are not clear about which regiment supplied this troop, though its commander at least was from the 8th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery.
[17] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond,* p. 90
[18] As noted above, the exact number of Libyan soldiers present at Giarabub remains unclear, with Australian estimates ranging from 600 to 800. The cavalry captured a total of 620 (O'Leary, *Green fields,* p. 93) throughout the month of February in the desert around the oasis, most of them apparently moving on foot toward Tobruk. The discovery by the cavalry of the body of a Libyan soldier who had died from natural causes suggests one grim explanation for the disparity – those who were not captured perished.

of; but in the event, none could be spared and the supply drops to the garrison continued.[19]

February turned into March, with no appreciable change in the situation. On 5 March an Italian prisoner was captured delivering food to an Italian outpost in Abbott's Gully. Under interrogation, he reported that daily rations had been reduced to one biscuit and one small tin of bully beef; but his interrogators also recorded that "there is no talk of surrender, the commandant spurring them on to fight to the end."[20]

Two days later a group of Australian war correspondents, including the future official historian Gavin Long, arrived at the cavalry headquarters to report on the siege. Fergusson offered to take the correspondents forward to get a view of Giarabub. As they approached, two Italian aircraft could be seen circling over the airfield. Post-war, Fergusson would write that he decided that "despite the risk…[I had to] know whether the planes were dropping supplies, loading supplies or loading troops", believing that any sign of evacuation could demonstrate that Rommel was not yet ready to counter-attack along the coast.[21] As he moved onto the heights over the airfield, several Italian shells exploded around him. A piece of shrapnel pierced his chest, causing a grievous wound. [22]

Hastily evacuated to Egypt by air, Fergusson would survive and eventually go on to command a brigade in the south-west Pacific. But his loss was a serious one for the Australians. Even if his natural aggression had sometimes resulted in an unrealistic optimism, no one could deny that he and the men he trained and led had done an admirable job in executing their mission. The loss of this excellent leader was compounded by the fact that, after two months of uncertainty, Headquarters XIII Corps had finally resolved to attack and capture Giarabub. So, just as the 18th Brigade was committed to an attack, the man with the most knowledge of the target was in a hospital bed in Egypt, unable to assist.

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[19] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, February 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7.
[20] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, appendix 1d, AWM52, 2/2/7.
[21] Letter, Fergusson to Long, AWM 93, 50/2/23/330. Somewhat strangely, Fergusson describes his wounding to Long in the third person.
[22] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond,* pp. 95–97.

**Enter the 18th Brigade**

Blamey's insistence that the 6th Division be the first Australian division sent to Greece meant that XIII Corps's original intention, to use the 18th Brigade to capture Giarabub, was once again viable. Consequently on 10 March Brigadier G.F. Wootten, who had replaced Morshead as commander of the brigade, received orders to go to Cairo and report to General Richard O'Connor, Commander XIII Corps. Wootten arrived at headquarters wanting to take the entire brigade south, believing that it would provide a valuable chance to exercise the entire brigade and "blood" them before proposed deployment to Greece. O'Connor soon disabused him of this notion, however. The limited availability of motor transport would restrict Wootten's to a reinforced battalion, and he was expected to complete the attack and return to Alexandria in ten days. When Wooten asked what air support he would have available, O'Connor replied that neither of his two Wellington bombers could be spared from trying to interdict the convoys ferrying the *Afrika Korps* into Tripoli.[23]

"Wootten Force", as it was quickly named, would also not have any armour support and would be operating under severe ammunition restrictions for its artillery. As Wootten would write post-war:

> *It seemed strange in modern war against an enemy in a strongly prepared and wired defensive position, and who had good observation, and was well equipped with guns and machine guns, to move against and attack him without any tanks or air support.*[24]

Nonetheless, Wootten had his orders. He selected the 2/9th Battalion for the attack, reinforced by D Company and the Mortar Platoon of the 2/10th Battalion, a composite machine-gun platoon of Vickers machine-guns from the 2/10th and 2/12th Battalions under Captain T.J. Schmedge, and the Protection [Anti-Aircraft] Platoon of the 2/12th Battalion. Also attached were the twelve 25-pounder guns of C Battery, 4th Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery, which, with the guns already

[23] Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 294.
[24] Wootten commentary on Long's initial draft chapter, AWM67, 3/435.

deployed, would give Wooten 16 guns in direct support. While the force organised to move south, Wootten and his staff went ahead to reconnoitre the oasis.

This composite force had waited some time for its first taste of combat. The 18th Brigade was the third brigade to be raised in the 2nd AIF; it had originally been part of the 6th Division, but had been diverted to Britain while at sea in the wake of the fall of France. It returned to the Middle East in December 1940 and January 1941, when it was placed under the command of the 7th Division. Although personnel had been detached from the brigade to form a new brigade in Britain (the 25th) and the long periods spent at sea had resulted in a small drop in combat efficiency, the core of the 18th was still a group of well-trained and strongly-motivated volunteers who had answered the first call to arms in September 1939.

Their commander was not short on combat experience, but Giarabub also marked a new chapter in the career of Brigadier George Wootten. One of the few commanders in the 2nd AIF who possessed a formal military education, Wootten was a Duntroon graduate who had waded ashore on the first morning at Gallipoli but had made his reputation – and been awarded his Distinguished Service Order – for staff work on the Western Front. A successful businessman, lawyer, and Militia commander in the inter-war years, Wootten would go on to become one of the outstanding Australian commanders of the war, serving with distinction at Tobruk and in Papua. But Giarabub would be the first time he had commanded men in action since Gallipoli; it was an important test for Wootten, who had nearly been passed over for command due to his physical condition (standing at just 175 cm, Wootten he weighed 127 kg).[25]

Wootten made the first of numerous inspections of the Giarabub defences on 12 March. In his after-action report, he described the reconnaissance as "very brief and not entirely satisfactory"; the depth of the Italian outposts in the north, extending up Pipsqueak Valley, prevented an examination of the posts around Giarabub proper and the location and strength of these positions was only "very

[25] There is no biography of Wootten, so various sources have been used. The entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* is concise but accurate. Wootten's private papers (PR00560) give more detailed information, containing as they do an autobiographical summary of Wootten's career and a variety of testimonials.

approximately" known.[26] What lay to the south of the town was an almost complete mystery, a situation Wootten resolved to correct immediately.

It was here that the loss of Fergusson was keenly felt. Postwar, Fergusson wrote that he had emphasised reconnaissance in the north to distract Italian attention from the south; his "very tentative" plan of attack, in development since his late December report, was to attack from the south into the Tamma heights above the town. As Wootten was soon to do, Fergusson recognised both the central importance of the southern heights in Giarabub's defence and the shallow depth of the position here compared with those in the north. However, he had not informed any of his subordinates of this line of thinking for reasons of "operational security", and as a result when he was wounded they were none the wiser as to their commander's intentions.[27] When Wootten consulted Major J.E. Abbott, who had assumed command of the regiment after Fergusson's evacuation, about Fergusson's vision of any attack, all he could offer was the vague "opinion that it [Fergusson's plan] was to attack in a W or NW direction from an area to the north of SHIP HILL", that is, from the south-east.[28]

On 16 March, Wootten and his senior commanders made another reconnaissance of the area. Arriving approximately 11 kilometres south of Giarabub along the frontier wire, Wootten and his party were unable to make a close examination of the southern defences. but did establish that a track existed across the southern marshes and that there was a gap in the frontier wire fence sufficiently large for vehicles to pass through. Although he did not mention it in his report, they were almost certainly seen by the Italian observation post at what became known as Wootten House, about 17 kilometres south-east of Giarabub. A force of truck-mounted guns was despatched by the Italians in an attempt to outflank the reconnaissance party. Artillery fire drove them off without Australian loss, but the

[26] War diary, 18th Brigade after-action report, AWM52, 8/2/18/6.
[27] Letter, Fergusson to Long, AWM93, 50/2/23/330.
[28] Wootten commentary on Long's initial draft chapter, AWM67,3/435.

sortie demonstrated that the Italians, despite their precarious supply situation, were not prepared to give up without a fight.[29]

Wootten had decided, unknowingly like Fergusson, that the heights south of the town were the key to Giarabub's defences, and if possible the attack should concentrate on them. Yet Wootten remained uncomfortable with the lack of information about the southern approaches. The Australians had never moved within 11 kilometres of Giarabub from the southern side of the marsh, so he decided to mount a more aggressive reconnaissance. Thus B Squadron of the 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment was ordered to attack and occupy the Italian observation post at Wootten House and then move further north-west up the existing track toward Giarabub.[30]

Moving off in the pre-dawn darkness on 17 March, B Squadron had taken Wootten House, which had been left unoccupied overnight, by 0600. At 0830 the garrison of the post approached in two vehicles, which the Australians promptly brought under fire. Two Italians were killed, three wounded and 15 taken prisoner. Amongst the prisoners was an officer who quickly provided the Australians with an accurate description of the town's defences: valuable intelligence at any time, but particularly so in light of the failure of the Australians to mount a close reconnaissance.[31] Having taken its prisoners, the squadron quickly advanced up the track. The cavalry advanced a further 7 kilometres and were able briefly to drive the Italians out of Daly House, the next post along the track and the only major obstacle before Giarabub proper. Artillery fire quickly ejected them, however, and from then on heavy fire from the automatic Breda cannons within the post kept the cavalry at bay. A reconnaissance by staff officers from 18th Brigade was also beaten back with the loss of a staff car shortly afterwards.[32]

The reconnaissance had been of only limited use due to the failure to get beyond Daly House, and a further attempt to eject the Italians failed before it began when the patrol's vehicles got lost. With time rapidly passing, and the need for

[29] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7.
[30] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7.
[31] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7.
[32] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7.

information acute, on 19 March Wootten ordered an attack by two companies of the 2/9th Battalion along the southern track. The first objective was Daly House; the second the securing of "a line running N.E. and S.W. through the second 'B' in GIARABUB [on the map] and the northwest extremity of QARET EL TAMMA". In effect, Lieutenant Colonel J.E.G. Martin, commanding officer of the 2/9th Battalion, and his men were to drive the Italians back into the final line of the main Giarabub defences and secure a position from which an attack on the southern heights could be mounted.[33]

The major concern around this attack was that the artillery could not be moved across the marshes into a position from which it could support the infantry. This problem was quickly solved by the commander of the battery, Major Goschen, who had his men drag two 25-pounders through the marsh in the wake of the infantry. It would be the marsh that provided the most serious opposition through the day; so great were the delays from vehicles bogging, that it was not until 1500 that the two companies arrived at Daly House. They found it unoccupied, though inaccurate artillery and machine-gun fire came from the town defences when they appeared. Alongside Martin was Major T.J. Daly, Brigade Major for the 18th Brigade, after whom Daly House was named. Standing in for Wootten – who was stricken with a stomach complaint – Daly realised that the day's events meant "that the plan was 'on'", but time was still of the essence and the second objective remained unoccupied.[34] He suggested that Martin mount his force in trucks and conduct an impromptu charge down the track toward Giarabub.

Rushing forward, the Australians carried their second objective – the Tamma heights south-east of the town – in the face of minimal opposition, and in doing so began one of the most remarkable episodes of the operation. Captain B.N. Berry, commander of C Company, decided not to waste the momentum of the attack and ordered his company forward. 13 Platoon was sent to Ship Hill, the easternmost feature of the Tamma heights, to provide covering fire, while the other two platoons

[33] War diary, 18th Brigade, March 1941, appendices, AWM52, 8/2/18/6.
[34] Daly correspondence with Long, AWM67, 3/94.

advanced towards the town. By dark they had reached the south-eastern corner of the Italian position, where the wire had been covered by sand. Berry decided to make a personal reconnaissance into the Italian position, which he described in a letter to his wife:

> *Our wanderings led us to some wire, I thought I'd like to see what was on the other side so climbed through and meandered on – someone said something to me in Italian so I wandered back again.*[35]

Berry returned to his force and, with two sections of 14 Platoon, advanced back into the Italian position. Berry's meanderings had evidently scared the Italians, however, as the position – Post 42 – had been abandoned. Berry left Lieutenant R.W. Forster and the newly-arrived 10 Platoon within the Italian lines with orders to exploit and explore while he returned to battalion HQ to report.

Thus Forster and his men were left in the extraordinary position of being within the main Italian defensive position, virtually unopposed, with what amounted to a free licence to roam. This they did, occupying Post 36, overturning the 44 mm gun within it, and taking the sole occupant prisoner. It was not until 0200 – four hours after Berry had departed – that an Italian patrol counter-attacked the Australians. In compliance with his orders to avoid serious action, Forster withdrew, but not before sustaining casualties; one man was killed and another seven wounded, one of whom later died.[36]

On the morning of 20 March it was now clear to Wootten where the main attack would go in. For over four hours the Australians had been within the Italian wire and had encountered almost no opposition. Subsidiary operations, namely a demonstration by the cavalry to the north and the occupation of the Italian observation post (Post 76) on Brigadiers Hill by D Company, 2/10th Battalion, had secured the flank of the attack and left the Italians guessing as to the location of the next assault.

The Australian plan was relatively straightforward. The initial assault would be made by two companies of the 2/9th Battalion, supported by mortars and

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[35] Letter, Berry to his wife, 26 March 1941, donated by Berry to Long postwar, AWM67, 3/29.
[36] Manuscript of R.W. Forester, AWM PR01981.

machine-guns on Ship Hill and the battery of the 4th Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery. This attack had as its objective the complete occupation of the southern redoubt. Once this was accomplished, the other two companies of the battalion would attack on the flanks of the redoubt. To support the main thrust, D Company, 2/10th Battalion, would advance forward from Brigadiers Hill to open a track across the marsh, shortening the lines of communication supporting the main attack. The cavalry would also mount a subsidiary attack from the town's northern approaches down Pipsqueak Valley, their eventual objective being the occupation of the airfield.[37]

By this time a sandstorm had blown up and it proved to be both a blessing and a curse as the Australians prepared for the attack. Fiercest in the morning, the storm clogged every automatic weapon in the forward companies, necessitating the laborious dismantling and cleaning of the Bren guns. The sandstorm diminished in intensity in the afternoon but was still strong enough to conceal the movement of the remaining companies moving forward to their start lines.

Throughout the afternoon, both sides engaged each other from their positions: Italian machine-gun and artillery fire was returned by Australian mortars, machine-guns, Boys rifles (which were particularly effective against Italian sangars) and British artillery. From their position on Ship Hill, the machine-gunners of the 2/10th Battalion "could strike at will at the Italian defences ringing the oasis" and did so, suppressing a number of positions throughout the afternoon. A lone Italian sniper stalked the machine-gun positions, but no Australians were killed and firing continued.[38]

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[37] Operational orders are summarised in Long, *To Benghazi,* p. 298–99; more detailed descriptions can be found in unit diaries and also in Long's correspondence with J.E.G. Martin, AWM67, 2/13 and 2/14.
[38] L. Mulder, draft history of the 2/9th Battalion, held within AWM PR01981.


Map 2: An excerpt from a larger sketch map of Giarabub, showing the objectives of the 2/9th Battalion inside the Southern Redoubt. Source, War diary, 18th Brigade, March 1941 appendices, AWM52, 8/2/18/6.

After darkness descended, patrols were despatched to gather as much intelligence as possible on the Italian positions and to ensure the Italians were not attempting a withdrawal. A forward Australian listening post was "bumped" by an Italian patrol but when challenged, the Italians went to ground and then withdrew, neither side suffering casualties. For their part the Australians found the Italians inside the redoubt "very nervous". Private Rickard was part of a small patrol that found itself moving inside the Italian wire, unseen but nonetheless wary of the trigger-happy Italians who were firing and hurling grenades at the slightest provocation. Having done their job, the patrols withdrew and awaited the start of the attack.[39]

[39] L. Mulder, draft history of the 2/9th Battalion, held within AWM PR01981.

**The defences:** These images show Post 42, part of the southern redoubt and the area where the Australians penetrated on the 20th March.

left:
Note the entrenchments and the Breda machine-gun.

below:
Note the terraced nature of the slope and the barbed wire fence in the distance on the right.


**Map 3: The defences (part II):** A map of Giarabub from the 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment war diary. The southern redoubt can be seen at the bottom of the image. Source: war diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7.

Zero hour for the attack was 0515. A Company was to attack on the right, C Company on the left. The initial objectives were the four knolls that faced the Australians along the edge of the redoubt, two to each company. Once these were taken, A Company was to take the fifth knoll, to the rear of its initial objectives. In support of the attack, the 12 guns of the 4th Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery, would fire for ten minutes on the initial objectives, and then lift and bombard the second objective for another 15 minutes. Going in, the attack would be supported by close fire from machine-guns and mortars placed on Ship Hill.[40]

As zero hour approached, the two lead companies filed into position as another fierce sandstorm enveloped the oasis. Anxious to have his men as close to the Italian positions as possible to exploit the reduced visibility caused by the sandstorm, Captain R. F. Reidy moved A Company to within 50 metres of the Italian wire. It proved a fatal decision – the gunners miscalculated the effects of the swirling wind and the opening barrage dropped short. As the rounds fell around them, men fell to the ground and frantically tried to scratch some cover in the dirt. One member of the company wrote, "The noise and the flashes of bursting shells, with which were intermingled the cries of suddenly startled men, and the groans of the wounded, were shockingly frightening."[41] The barrage quickly cut the line between the forward observer and the battery, meaning it took some time to communicate the need to extend the range. Shells also dropped short onto Ship Hill, making the men there "uncomfortable" for roughly half an hour and causing one casualty.

When the artillery lifted, 12 members of A Company – including Reidy – were dead and another 20 wounded. The survivors re-organised and began to move forward. Corporal A. Calvert, moving through the dead and the wounded, found a dozen men and pushed through the Italian wire into the main position. Lieutenant

[40] Operational orders are summarised in Long, *To Benghazi,* p. 298–99; more detailed descriptions can be found in unit diaries and also in Long's correspondence with J.E.G. Martin, AWM 67, 2/13 and 2/14.

[41] A. Calvert, account of battle in *Stand-to!*, contained in correspondence between Loxton and Long, AWM67, 2/17.

W.H. Noyes's platoon was not badly affected by the bombardment and despite having lost contact with the rest of A Company, continued the attack.[42]

C Company had had an easier time of it. In a letter home, Captain Berry described the initial phase of the action:

> *The Sappers made a mess of the wire for us and we just walked in when the guns lifted. Shortly after we crossed the wire I got a helluva smack on the side, when I picked myself up I decided I'd been hit but couldn't see any holes or anything so, decided it wasn't serious and went on.*[43]

Despite his wound, Berry pressed on, leading his men on to the first objective. The Italians appeared too stunned from the bombardment to offer any serious resistance and the two companies were quickly on top of the first line of knolls.

What happened next is somewhat unclear in existing accounts. Noyes's platoon had made contact with C Company and came under Berry's control. Most accounts describe the Italians as being "too stunned" to offer much in the way of resistance, but the Australians still made liberal use of grenades in clearing dugouts and soon exhausted their supply. Noyes's men were also apparently operating under a "no prisoners" order (the origin of which remains unclear) that they were reluctant to follow, particularly when it became clear that many of the Italians had no intention of resisting further.[44] Berry ordered Noyes and his men to encourage the Italians to surrender, and this continued to happen; at 0726 brigade headquarters was informed that the 2/9th Battalion had occupied the first four knolls.

The artillery fire had disorganised A Company, however, and in order to complete the second objective, Martin felt compelled to detach a platoon of D Company, the battalion reserve, to assist in the assault. By now Italian resistance had stiffened, with a mountain gun on the final knoll bombarding the Australians, and the Italian positions around the fort and plantation area opening fire. An attempt by

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[42] A. Calvert, account of battle in *Stand-to!*, contained in correspondence between Loxton and Long, AWM67, 2/17.
[43] Letter, Berry to his wife, 26 March 1941, donated by Berry to Long postwar, AWM67, 3/29.
[44] This was directly mentioned in Long's draft chapter but was removed after Wootten objected, AWM67, 3/435.

Berry to send a platoon across the flat into the town was met with heavy fire and the platoon, having suffered two casualties, was forced to withdraw.[45]

With heavy and effective fire coming from the mortars and machine-guns on Ship Hill and from a Vickers detachment that had pushed forward with A Company, the Australians were able to subdue resistance on the final knoll shortly after 0900. Prisoners captured in the initial attack had revealed that the garrison had not eaten for two days or nights and "would not hold out until lunchtime". By this time B Company on the left flank had moved forward and, after a brief period out of touch, re-established communications with battalion headquarters at 1000.[46]

Resistance was also ending on the northern axis. The cavalry's job during the attack had been to move down Pipsqueak Valley and occupy the airfield, providing a distraction from the main attack as well as occupying an important objective. At 0615, one hour after the attack on the southern redoubt began, B and C Squadrons moved off. Individual troops moved to occupy the prominent pieces of high ground on either side of the valley, only meeting heavy resistance at the feature nicknamed Egbert. This position was quickly subdued by shellfire and the advance resumed. By 0900 the cavalry had achieved their first objective – the occupation of a line running east-west through Egbert.[47]

In spite of the apparent cessation of resistance, Martin stuck with the plan and D Company began moving through the cultivated area north-east of the redoubt into the town proper. A minefield, spotted earlier by an RAF Lysander, necessitated a long delay so a path could be cleared. At 1125 the 2/9th Battalion began a general advance into the town and five minutes later entered the mosque which, in line with the orders received, had not been damaged. By midday the Australians had entered the fort and replaced the Italian flag with the black over blue standard of the 2/9th Battalion. The siege of Giarabub was over.[48]

**Conclusion**

[45] L. Mulder, Draft history of the 2/9th battalion,, AWM PR01981.
[46] War diary, 18th Brigade Unit Diaries, March Appendices, AWM52, 8/2/18/6.
[47] War diary, 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment, March 1941, AWM52, 2/2/7 6
[48] War diary, 18th Brigade War, March 1941 appendices, AWM52, 8/2/18/6.

The capture of Giarabub came at a cost. Total Commonwealth casualties from December to the fall of the oasis came to 17 killed and 77 wounded; all but a handful had occurred in the final few days of fighting. The Italian death toll remains unclear, as shifting sand covered many bodies before a proper count could be undertaken, though the Australian official historian concluded that it was probably fewer than 250. Another 1,300 were made prisoners.[49] In a tactical sense, the victory was total; Wootten had captured his assigned objective in the time allotted and with minimal casualties. In the broader context of North Africa, however, the capture of Giarabub was more ambiguous – as would soon be demonstrated.

On 25 March, four days after the outpost had been captured, an Australian patrol captured two German fliers in the desert sands outside the oasis. They were survivors from a Ju 88 bomber that had strafed the Australians on 21 March. The Australian patrol moved out to the wreck, saved the other two wounded crewmen, and returned to Giarabub. Surveying the cluster of plantations, mud brick dwellings and the mosque that towered over them, one of the fliers remarked bitterly that "it wasn't worth it."[50]

This anecdote demonstrates two important points about the campaign around Giarabub – the questionable military value of this tiny, isolated settlement, and the way in which the arrival of German troops in North Africa so transformed the strategic situation as to make that value minimal. Within weeks of its capture, Giarabub would be abandoned and its conquerors would swap the role of besieger for that of the besieged inside the Tobruk perimeter. Although it would later see action as a staging post for elements of the Desert Air Force, it would never see military action comparable to that of December 1940 – March 1941 again.

But Giarabub's apparent irrelevance should not be seen as a negative reflection on either the bravery of those who fought there or the lessons that can be learned about the conflict in North Africa. The men on both sides fought stoutly for the better part of three months in the harsh conditions on the edge of the Sahara –

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[49] Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 302.
[50] O'Leary, *To the green fields beyond,* p. 106.

wildly fluctuating temperatures, sandstorms, lack of water, and in the case of the Italians, borderline starvation. That the siege lasted for three months in such conditions is a testament to the bravery and dedication of those who fought.

Giarabub also confirms much of the analysis surrounding the two armies involved. If the bravery of neither side could be questioned, the enormous differences in technical quality, leadership, training, and logistics meant that the Italian forces within Giarabub were at a disadvantage from the beginning. The leaders were in a sense the exceptions that proved the rule for their respective armies. Castagna's aggression and determination marked him as immediately different from many of his compatriots, while Wootten's formal military education mattered little; he was just another in a series of excellent leaders produced by Australia's experience in the First World War. For the Australians involved, Giarabub was the first battle in a very long war. Within weeks, the 18th Brigade would be fighting in Tobruk against Rommel's *Afrika Korps*; the 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment would move east, to serve in the invasion of Lebanon and Syria. Both units would go on to see extensive service in the south-west Pacific. Put next to the Tobruk campaign or the "battle of the beachheads", Giarabub is easily obscured, but it is worth remembering.

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