

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *HEROES OF TOBRUK*

Written by David Mulligan

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DAVID MULLIGAN has always been a student of Australian history. He has been a journalist, columnist, poet and author. He is now working on a series of books for young people that combine fact and fiction to bring episodes in Australian history to life. The first of these books was the acclaimed *Angels of Kokoda* (Lothian Books, 2006).

SYNOPSIS

On Sydney Grammar School's speech day in 1939 none less than the Prime Minister announces that Johnny Fullerton, star pupil and football player, has been accepted into the Royal Military College at Duntroon. On the same day, his younger brother, Peter, writes in his diary that he 'might as well be bloody invisible.'

Several months later, Peter and his friend Tony Cantonelli give false names and put up their ages from 16 to 21 in order to join up. Tony wants to prove he's Australian and willing to die for his country, and Peter, ignored by his parents and hated by his brother, doesn't really have a reason to stay at home. In one afternoon they have gone from schoolboys to soldiers.

After training, the boys are sent to fight in North Africa at Tobruk. Besieged by the German army, they endure hardship, terror, and in between, endless boredom. But the Peter and Tony learn a lot from their situation and their comrades, and they make their contribution to holding the town. Above all they learn the value of supporting other diggers, even the ones they don't personally get on with.

When Johnny arrives as an officer at Tobruk, the importance of this vital lesson becomes even clearer to Peter. It spells the difference between life and death.

WRITING *HEROES OF TOBRUK*

David Mulligan has long written about Australian history. He was prompted to write about Australia's involvement in war as the sixtieth anniversary of the campaign waged along the Kokoda Track in New Guinea approached. When talking with his wife, children and six grandchildren, he discovered that they knew little of the events that took place there, so he decided to aim his book at young people. He feels that while previous generations of Australians have learned much about English history, today's young people need to learn about their own history. Now David has written about the only other predominantly Australian campaign of the Second World War, the Siege of Tobruk.

Before he began to write *Heroes of Tobruk*, David spent two years researching the events it covers. As he puts it, reading 'Anything where I thought I could find what I wanted to find – and I didn't know what it was until I found it – was on my list.' This meant he consulted a wide range of primary and secondary history sources. He interviewed men who took part in the campaign – soldiers on the ground, airmen and naval personnel. As well, he spoke to women whose husbands died at Tobruk and people whose fathers didn't come home. David also interviewed present day soldiers, and army personnel who specialise in the history of war.

Reading newspapers from every major Australian city between 1935 and 1943 gave David an understanding of how Australians felt during the period, about their daily

lives, and attitudes towards the events of the time. Events like the Siege of Tobruk don't occur in isolation. David decided he had to learn about life before the war and in other parts of the world during it to write about the campaign accurately.

To learn about how the men who actually fought in the campaign coped and reacted, David also read many letters written by soldiers to their loved ones, and those written in return, as well as personal journals. This allowed him to use actual incidents, no matter how small, in the story.

Throughout *Heroes of Tobruk*, David didn't shy away from ideas and attitudes that might have changed since the 1940s, nor does he leave out gritty details such as how bodies were dealt with. While the themes of supporting your mates and standing up against an enemy you believe to be very deeply wrong are a major part of the story, he does not paint the soldiers as totally honourable, but realistically informs readers of their hostile reactions to the enemy and their misdemeanours. One Tobruk veteran who read David's manuscript for him thought it was very accurate. The man 'knew first hand about Diggers stealing stores and being court-martialled and being replaced as guards by Poms, because he was one of them.'

Of course, the copious notes David took while undertaking his research contained far more information than could be included in one book. While it was necessary to include accurate facts and observations, adding as many facts as possible didn't seem necessary. He selected those facts that would keep his readers 'wanting to turn the page.' Apart from an understanding of the Siege of Tobruk, what he wanted his readers to take away more than anything was a desire to find out more, to keep reading Australian history and to think about it.

David decided to write a 'factionalised' version of the events surrounding Tobruk to create a more readable form of Australian history. By focussing on two young, fictional soldiers, he was able to explore aspects of soldiers' lives, from their motivations for joining up, their relationships with their mates and officers, and their methods of coping with the day to day hardships of the campaigns. In Tony and Peter, David has created two mature young men who live up to the task they have been set as responsibly as any of the older men they serve with.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. As students read the book in sections, discuss the events of the story and the characters attitudes towards them. For instance, discuss the reasons why men decided to join up, their attitude to the enemy, how they deal with the death of their mates, and how their attitudes have changed by the end of the book.
2. The characters in *Heroes of Tobruk* have attitudes that we today would think of as racist. How does the fact that the men are at war affect their attitudes? How do men such as the Aboriginal digger and Tony, who is of Italian parentage, cope with negative feelings towards them?
3. How do the men try to maintain some sort of normality in their lives and make the daily hardships they face more bearable? Give at least three examples from the book.
4. How do the different allied forces see themselves as different to each other? Are they proud of their differences? What part does the concept of mateship play in the Australian soldiers' attitudes?

5. Tony, Peter and Johnny go through a lot during the war. How have they changed by the time they return to Australia?
6. What part did the Siege of Tobruk play in the Second World War? What might have happened if the Allied forces had not held the German army at bay?
7. Have students research an aspect of the Siege of Tobruk. They could focus on the role played by the navy, the air force, the infantry, or medics. They could examine living conditions, the lives of individuals such as General Morshead or Rommel, or what the German troops went through. Use books, such as those listed by David Mulligan at the back of his book, the Internet using sites such as the Australian War Memorial site (www.awm.gov.au), and primary sources such as the newspapers of the time on microfiche at your library or photos on the net or published journals.
8. Using this research, students may like to either write a poem or a short story that reflects how a man involved in the siege or a member of his family at home might have felt. Facts they have read about could form the subject matter of their creative writing.
9. Imagine that Tony and Peter are working in different units when the end of the war is been declared. Write a letter from one to the other, examining their feelings now that the war is over and about what they went through at Tobruk.
10. Create a piece of propaganda from the German side sent to Tobruk. This could either be a broadcast from Lord Haw Haw (this could be read out to the class), or a pamphlet such as is shown in the book. Write a response as might have appeared in one of the Tobruk newspapers.