

*'There is to be no surrender and no retreat.'*

# Sir Leslie James Morshead

(1889 – 1959)

## Rat of Tobruk



Sir James Leslie Morshead was born on 18 September 1889 at Ballarat. He grew up in country Victoria. He was good academically and also excelled at sport, captaining his school's football and cricket teams. Morshead qualified as a teacher and worked at a number of schools. During this time he became involved in the cadet corps.



Morshead's military career spanned both world wars. When the first world war broke out, he resigned his teaching position to enlist as a private in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, the first Australian Imperial Force. He served as a captain at the Gallipoli landing and later as a major at Lone Pine. His reputation for calmness and organisation brought him promotion to lieutenant colonel. He went on to serve in France where he developed under the eye of Sir John Monash. Morshead was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and mentioned in dispatches five times.

Back in civilian life after the end of the war, Morshead was a successful businessman working for the Orient Steam Navigation Co. During this time he was active in the militia, commanding a number of battalions. He was promoted to colonel and later temporary brigadier.



On 13 October 1939, Morshead was appointed to the A.I.F. Early in 1941, Morshead was sent to the Middle East; he was promoted to major general and placed in command of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division. As a leader, Morshead was vigorous and resolute. His insistence on discipline and hard work brought him the nickname 'Ming the Merciless', which in time became 'Ming'. The 9<sup>th</sup> Division eventually reached Tobruk. By then they were almost exhausted but were still an organised force, eager to have a go. At Tobruk, Morshead initially came under the command of Major General John Lavarack. However, he quickly succeeded Lavarack as commander of the fortress of Tobruk. Talking to his men, Morshead famously said: ***'There will be no Dunkirk here. If we should have to get out, we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat.'*** Morshead was a brilliant strategist, often using tactics which were new to the Germans. Morshead and his mixed force of Australian, British, Indian and Polish troops won this important defensive battle. Not only had they denied the Axis powers the port of Tobruk, but they had also compelled General Erwin Rommel to hold a significant part of his army back from the Egyptian frontier for six months. After Tobruk, Morshead and his 9<sup>th</sup> Division went on to fight at El Alamein. In February 1943 they finally returned to Australia.

Back in civilian life after the war, Morshead was again a successful businessman. He attended many unit reunions and other special occasions, including the opening of Tobruk House. He was always received with acclaim by his men who greeted him with the rousing 'Ho Ho' cry of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division. Sir Leslie died of cancer on 26 September 1959.



Lt.-General Sir Leslie Morshead renewing acquaintances with the Rats during the review preceding the official opening on 29th September.

This is a précis of an article 'Morshead, Sir Leslie James (1889 – 1959)', by A. J. Hill which is published in Australian Dictionary of Biography. You can read the full article by using the link below:

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