

The Rats of Tobruk

Windy Hollow Books

Teacher's Notes

Mark Wilson

Introduction

'Go to Tobruk and stay there Omar,' my mother yelled. 'We will find you. Just stay in Tobruk.' Her voice trailed off as the trucks engine roared into life, and I stood there in the heat, dust and flies...

The Rats of Tobruk follows the story of Omar, a Bedouin boy living in the desert south of Tobruk, a port city in Syria during WW2. Omar and his people struggle to survive as the desert war rages around them. When Omar's parents are taken away to a concentration camp, he goes to the port city of Tobruk, where Australian soldiers have captured and taken over the city.

Omar befriends two Australian soldiers, Bluey and Albert, who bake the bread for the troops. They take Omar in and look after him as the Axis armies attack Tobruk over and over again, trying to re-take the port from the Australians. When Bluey goes missing one night while out on a dangerous patrol, Omar uses all his Bedouin skills to track and find his friend in a hostile desert occupied by enemy soldiers.

Literacy

During World War 2, the Senussi tribe and others provided vital support to the allies in North Africa against the Axis forces. Research how they did this and how it played a role in the outcome of the war.

Research WW2 and Australian soldiers' experiences in the desert war, particularly the battle for Tobruk. Write a short piece about the conflict and its outcomes.

What was so special about the Australian soldiers who defended Tobruk? What did the German soldiers call them, and why? Write a short piece to profile them.

What other nationalities played a role in the defense of Tobruk against the Africa Korps, and what were their roles?

Research Anzac day and write a short piece about what you think it stands for today.

Mark Wilson's text is spare and suggestive. The horror of war is hinted at, but it is not

graphically confronting. How and where in the text has he done this?

Research and write a short piece on how the Australians lived and survived during the battle for Tobruk.

Discussion Points

What does the term 'bravery' mean to today's youth? Compare this with the term in the context of the story.

What desert skills did Omar use to track and find his friend at night in the desert?

What armies constituted the 'Allies' and 'Axis' forces?

What happened to the Bedouin people living in the desert during WW2 and after its conclusion?

What might have been in the young boy's mind as he went out into the desert, into enemy territory, to find his friend Bluey?

Two famous generals faced off in the battle of Tobruk. Who were they and what did they do?

Discuss how Mark Wilson conveys a strong sense of place and character in the work.

Along with Omar's parents, who were the ten thousand inmates kept at the concentration camp in El Aghelia in North Africa During WW2?

Research and discuss the effect WW2 had on Australian society.

The Rats of Tobruk is a story told in simple language, and the visual and written narrative conveys a strong sense of place and character. Discuss this narrative style.

Look up 'Words, Expressions & Terms' popularized in 1942.

Visual Literacy

The illustrations are impressionist on some spreads, while others are stark and confronting. A sense of nostalgia is created through these images, as if we are looking at an old photograph book. Discuss.

Discuss the cover of the book and what it conveys about the story, particularly the setting.

How does the format and design of the book influence your reading of it? Discuss.

Mark Wilson focuses his story on the soldiers that cook the bread for the troops. Why has he done this, and how significant is this in the context of the story.

Do a drawing or painting of Tobruk Harbour as it looked in 1942.

The medium is mainly acrylic paint on paper. Try to create your own painting in this medium, showing the impressions of war you gained from the story.

Some illustrations are just pencil sketches. Discuss why Mark Wilson may have used this medium for particular illustrations, and your impression of them.

Research the Battle for Tobruk and have students interpret the maps of the battle in an illustration.

How do the colour themes on various pages affect your interpretation of this work?

The Australian War Memorial has much information on the 'Rats of Tobruk', which you can research. Create your own Tobruk display.

Further Research

The study of statistics relating to WW2, in particular, the battle for Tobruk - the loss of lives, and casualties, including amongst the Bedouin People, might lend itself to related mathematics activities.

Research the work of Mark Wilson, particularly his historical fiction.

What were the lessons learned from WW2?

Conclusion

The audacious Australian soldiers defence of Tobruk was a turning point in the Allies war against Axis forces in the desert during WW2. This book is a tribute to those who paid the ultimate price during the siege, both civilian and military. This work should encourage students to read more widely about the battle for Tobruk, WW2 in general, and its aftermath – particularly the fate of the Bedouin people. It should also remind students that the sacrifice of so many civilians and those who have served should never be forgotten.

I think children are not only more interested in Australian military history today, but also have a greater understanding of the significance that these battles hold for generations of Australians. Today there is an increasing interest, pride and participation in ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day. There is also a poignant sense of appreciation amongst children of the sacrifices their forebears made. The battle for Tobruk was a test of fortitude, endurance and determination against overwhelming odds. The fact that many allied soldiers and airmen owe their lives to the Bedouin people is something that should never be forgotten.

Bibliography

T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Unabridged, Oxford, 1922

Metzenthien, David, *Boys of Blood and Bone*, Penguin 2005,

FitzSimons, Peter, *Tobruk* HarperCollins Publishers (Australia), 2006

Harrison, Frank, *Tobruk: The Great Siege Reassessed*, London: Arms and Armour, 1996

Latimer, Jon, *Tobruk 1941: Rommel's Opening Move*, Oxford: Osprey, 2001

Further resources may be found online in particular at the following sites

<http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/>

<https://www.awm.gov.au/>

Mark Wilson

Author/illustrator Profile

Mark Wilson is a multiple award-winning author/illustrator with seventeen books in print worldwide. Mark grew up with a love of comics and drawing, and has a particular passion for Australian history and the environment, particularly endangered species, exploring these themes through his picture books and workshops. He has won five Royal Zoological Society of N.S.W. (Whitley) Awards for children's literature, nine CBCA Children's Book Awards, including a 2018 CBCA Notable Picture book Award and the 2015 CBCA Eva Pownall Notable Children's Book Award for *The Afghanistan Pup*. He also has three Wilderness Society Picture book Awards and was shortlisted in the 3rd C.J. Picture Book Awards International.

Mark was also presented with the 2011 Dromkeen Medal for Services to Children's Literature. Mark hopes his books not only encourage students to study their own family history and Australian native species & habitat, but to have confidence in their own writing and illustrating.

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