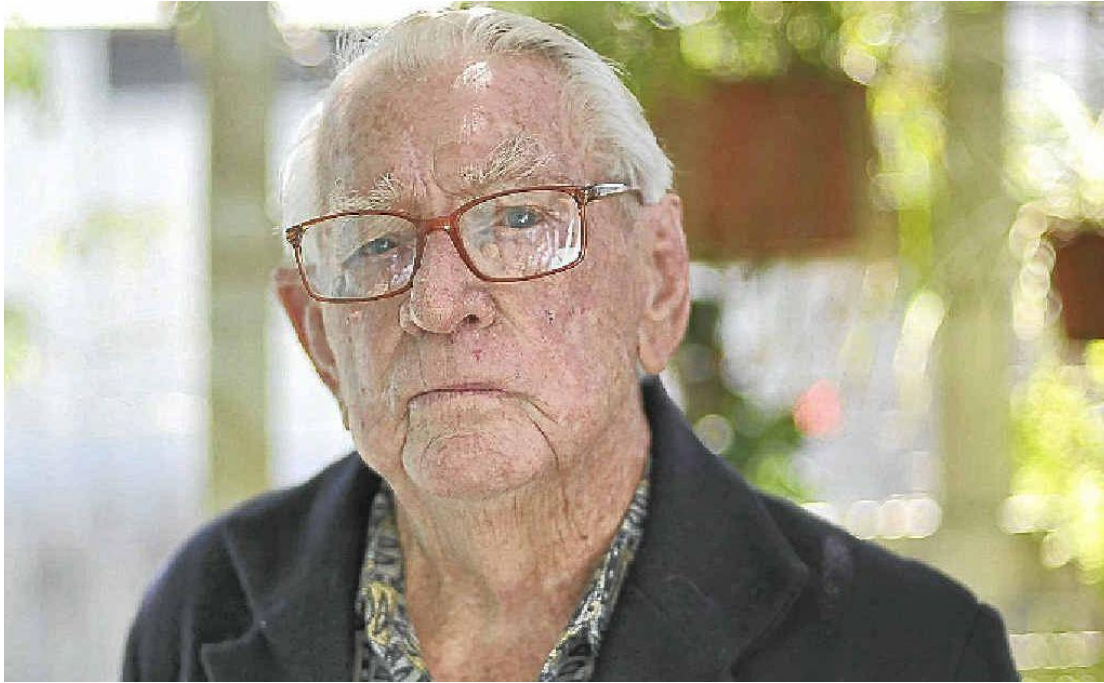


'Rat' recalls Siege of Tobruk

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John Shallcross served with the 7th Battalion in the Siege of Tobruk.

WHILE most 21-year-olds get to celebrate the special age milestone with their loved ones, Bundaberg man John Shallcross spent his birthday fighting in one of the world's most famous battles of the Second World War - the Siege of Tobruk.

Mr Shallcross, now 92, was a 7th Battalion private who fought during the eight-month siege to hold the Libyan port of Tobruk against the German Afrika Corps in April, 1941. "We fought our way from Tobruk up to Benghazi," Mr Shallcross said. "That's when we got stopped by the Germans. "They chased us back to Tobruk - at a very fast rate too." Mr Shallcross said the Tobruk harbour had a lot of tunnelling into the cliffs, and it was these tunnels that protected the soldiers during the crossfire."(The Germans) used to bomb us every day, but they couldn't touch us," he said. "We even had hospitals set up in the cliffs." Mr Shallcross said German general Erwin Rommel had coined the term "Rats of Tobruk" because of the extensive tunnel networks the Australian soldiers dug. Mr Shallcross is one of two remaining "Rats" in Bundaberg, with only seven still alive in Queensland. The siege ended on December 7, 1941, and the Australian troops were then at a standstill. "We thought we were coming home, but we went into Java instead to fight the Japs," he said. "It was all futile - everywhere we went we got taken prisoner." Mr Shallcross said he was in Java for about a year before he was captured and taken as a prisoner of war in Siam (now Thailand) for more than three years. "It wasn't very nice," he said. "We lost heaps of men to illness, disease and just about any tropical disease you could think of." Mr Shallcross will reflect on his past memories at the Rats of Tobruk 71st anniversary memorial service held this Sunday.