

Examining Operation Exporter

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On 21 June 1941 Major General Paul Legentilhomme, commander of the 1st Free French Division in Syria, prepared to lead a triumphant procession into Damascus. The Gaullist general, who was still carrying his left arm in a sling after being wounded by a Vichy bombing raid on his headquarters at Sanamein, was waiting at the head of his motorcade when a rival procession sped past, covering him in dust. That procession was made up of Australian troops from the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Blackburn VC, keen to get into the centre of the ancient city before their Free French allies. The visibly upset Frenchman tried in vain to flag down the Australians, jumped out of their way, dusted himself off as best he could, then continued on his way.¹ The next day, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, his massive invasion of the Soviet Union, and the exploits of Legentilhomme and the Australians in taking one of the jewels of the Middle East were pushed from the front pages of the international press.

On the face of it, the anecdote outlined above can be seen as one of many amusing stories of larrikinism from the annals of Australian military history, but Legentilhomme's misfortunes have more to them than meets the eye. The behaviour of the Australians stemmed from their perception that some Allied commanders had performed so poorly in Syria and Lebanon that they did not deserve much respect; it stemmed from their belief that the Free French in particular had duped Britain into committing the Australians into fighting an unnecessary and costly campaign in Syria and Lebanon; and it stemmed from their belief that the Australians above all deserved the right to claim Damascus, despite being one of several nations contributing to the battle. On top of this, the exploits of the Australians in attacking the ancient Syrian capital were soon overshadowed by events in Russia, leading to long-term resentment that the Australian actions in Damascus, and in Syria and Lebanon more broadly, have been ignored.

¹ Richard James, *Australia's war with France: the campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1941* (Big Sky Publishing, Sydney, 2017), pp. 261-262; Gavin Long, *Australia in the war of 1939-1945: Greece, Crete and Syria* (Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1953), p. 428.

In short, this one anecdote encapsulates the key issues related to the Syria–Lebanon campaign of June and July 1941: it has at times been labelled the misled campaign, the unnecessary campaign, the Australian campaign, and the forgotten campaign. More than eighty years on, it is time to reflect on how true these perceptions are.

The campaign

The 1941 Syria–Lebanon campaign came about because of British concerns that Nazi Germany might use bases in Vichy French-controlled Syria and Lebanon to threaten Allied interests in the Middle East – notably British oil pipelines and infrastructure and the all-important Suez Canal.² Those British concerns became more intense from April 1941, when the technically neutral Vichy French government allowed German aircraft to land at Syrian airfields on their way to support an anti-British Arab nationalist revolt in Iraq. In response, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered General Archibald Wavell to draw up plans to invade Syria and Lebanon; the attack, designated Operation Exporter, began on the night of 7–8 June.³

Operation Exporter consisted of a three-pronged and two-phased invasion into the south of the Vichy-held territory of Syria and Lebanon. In the first phase, the 21st Brigade, 2nd Australian Imperial Force, commanded by Brigadier Jack Stevens, attacked along the coast heading for Beirut.⁴ In the centre, Brigadier Alfred Baxter-Cox's 25th Brigade, AIF, headed north from the Sea of Galilee towards the strategically important Bekaa valley, from where they could exploit north to the important rail hub and air base at Rayak.⁵ On the right, Brigadier's Wilfrid Lloyd's 5th Indian Brigade Group was to attack from Transjordan and take key towns and junctions such as Deraa, Kuneitra, Sheikh Meskine and Ezraa, after which Legentilhomme's Free French division would pass through and exploit towards Damascus.

² I.S.O Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II: *The Germans come to the help of their ally (1941)* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1956), p. 199.

³ Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 205; Daniel Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', *Australian War Memorial Summer Scholars Research Paper* (2019), p. 4.

⁴ Jim McAlester and Syd Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble: Australians in Syria, June–July 1941* (Headquarters Training Command, Australian Army, Sydney, 1995), p. 18.

⁵ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, pp. 340, 352.

After taking the Beirut–Rayak–Damascus line, the Allied forces would then push further north towards Tripoli on the coast, Homs in the centre, and Palmyra in the Syrian deserts in the east.⁶ The entire operation was supported in the air by Allied fighter and bomber squadrons, principally No. 80 Squadron Royal Air Force and No. 3 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force, who focused on destroying Vichy air bases – and at sea by the 15th Cruiser Squadron, Royal Navy, which prevented Vichy French reinforcement and bombarded Vichy coastal areas in support of the 21st Brigade’s attack.⁷

In the end, the second phase of the invasion plan never came to fruition. After weeks of fighting in which the Vichy French put up a much harder resistance than anticipated and launched a powerful but ultimately unsuccessful counter-attack into the Allied lines, the Allies had taken Damascus and were approaching Beirut. The Vichy French sued for peace. The fighting ended with a ceasefire on 12 July. Operation Exporter was an Allied victory.

The misled campaign?

Operation Exporter was from its very conception beset by problems at the highest levels of the Allied command. When Churchill ordered Wavell to begin drawing up plans for the invasion, Wavell complained bitterly that his resources were already overstretched and even threatened to resign over the matter. Eventually, however, he relented, drew up the invasion plan and handed command over to General Sir Henry Maitland ‘Jumbo’ Wilson, General Officer Commanding British Troops in Palestine and Transjordan.⁸

Top brass Allied commanders never saw the campaign as particularly important in the grand scheme of the war, and paid it scant attention. When the invasion began, Wilson commanded the operation from his headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, 100 miles away from the actual fighting, and it was not until 18 June, in the midst of a heavy

⁶ Dharm Pal, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–1945: Campaign in Western Asia* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan, Calcutta, 1957), pp. 186-189; John Coates, *An Atlas of Australia’s Wars, Second Edition* (Oxford University Press, Victoria, 2006), pp. 154–156.

⁷ Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II, p. 207; Christopher Shores, *Dust clouds in the Middle East: The air war for East Africa, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Madagascar, 1940–42* (Grub Street Publishing, London, 1996), p. 205.

⁸ Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II, pp. 201-203; Seaton, ‘Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941’, p. 4.

Vichy French counter-attack, that he passed command on to Australian Lieutenant General John Lavarack, who had just been promoted from command of the 7th Division to I Australia Corps – a command structure than many still believe should have been in place from the beginning.⁹

Wavell's concerns about his forces being overstretched led to poor understanding of the task at hand and poor allocation of resources. After the war, Lavarack wrote that Wavell never showed any understanding of, or indeed desire to understand, the battlefields over which the Syria–Lebanon campaign was being fought, and seemed to assume that the terrain was much the same sort of flat, sandy and rocky terrain apparently encountered in North Africa.¹⁰ Further, the Allied forces invading Syria and Lebanon were not allocated any tanks because they were deemed more necessary in North Africa, in particular for Operation Battleaxe, the unsuccessful attempt to relieve the besieged troops at Tobruk; the Allies in Syria-Lebanon were also under-provisioned in assets such as trench mortars.¹¹

At a wider level, the Allied land forces allocated to the campaign were not enough to complete the task. The campaign began with the land armies of the two combatant sides being roughly equal in size – about 35,000 troops each – but by the end of the campaign, the Allies had been forced to double the number of units committed to the fight in order to meet the unexpectedly fierce Vichy French resistance.¹² The number of troops committed to the original three columns was greatly expanded, and Allied command injected sizeable British and Indian units stationed in Iraq into the campaign, who attacked key points such as Palmyra from the east and fought running battles along the Euphrates River.¹³

Allied commanders also falsely assumed that the attack would be a walkover. Wavell reportedly thought the invasion would last only a day or two before French capitulation; and some Australian troops were ordered to wear their slouch hats rather than helmets into

⁹ Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', p. 9.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹¹ Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II, p. 205; James, *Australia's war with France*, p. 271; Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', p. 9.

¹² Henri de Wailly, *Invasion Syria 1941: Churchill and de Gaulle's forgotten war* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2016), pp. 33, 36.

¹³ Pal, *Campaign in Western Asia*, p. 220.

battle to encourage the French to remember the diggers of the Great War and lay down their arms.¹⁴ Both assumptions were wildly optimistic: the campaign lasted more than a month, and the Australians donned their helmets within hours of the beginning of the attack when they came under fierce Vichy fire. Had commanders at the higher level been less distracted by events elsewhere and allocated sufficient resources, it is possible that the course of the campaign might have been far easier for the Allied invaders.

The unnecessary campaign?

When the troops of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion thumbed their noses at the Free French commander outside Damascus, they reflected a general antipathy held by many Australians for their Gaullist allies and their role in the campaign. Many felt that the Free French troops had performed poorly in the fighting, but most of all, they felt frustrated that the Free French commanders had talked Churchill into involving them in a campaign that was not necessary at all.

When France fell to Germany in 1940, the country was divided into two halves, the northern and coastal sectors under direct military control by Nazi Germany, the rest of the country by a French government based in the city of Vichy, technically neutral but increasingly sympathetic to Germany. The Vichy government was allowed to maintain control of its overseas territories, including Syria and Lebanon, and when Germany began to use Syrian airfields to support the anti-British revolt in Iraq, Free French leader Charles de Gaulle saw an opportunity. By persuading the British to attack, he could simultaneously deal a blow to the Vichy government and potentially convince the French Army of the Levant to join the Free French cause.¹⁵ To that end, the General Georges Catroux, commander of the small Free French force in Palestine, applied significant pressure on the British to take part in the attack by exaggerating how low Vichy morale was and how easy the campaign would be. In May 1941, Catroux moved his force to the border with Vichy territory to try and force the issue of an Allied invasion, and insisted that he had reliable intelligence that the Vichy French were about to withdraw their forces from Syria and Lebanon altogether. When this

¹⁴ Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', pp. 10, 15.

¹⁵ de Wailly, *Invasion Syria 1941*, p. 64.

intelligence turned out to be false, he had to sheepishly report his error to an increasingly sceptical Wavell.¹⁶

Similarly, de Gaulle genuinely seemed to believe that Vichy troops would come over to the Free French cause en masse once an invasion began, and argued that the campaign could be won by “propaganda tactics and moral persuasion” more than anything else.¹⁷ The persuasion worked – Churchill took the bait and Operation Exporter went ahead; but when the Vichy French defence did not lie down as de Gaulle had predicted, many on the Allied side resented being drawn into a campaign that they felt was the result of de Gaulle’s political machinations more than anything else. In short, they felt they had been duped into fighting a Gaullist boondoggle. To rub salt into the wound, the Australians who fought the campaign felt that their Free French comrades did not appreciate the fight and sacrifice of their antipodean Allies. In his 1989 memoir, Corporal Anthony MacInante wrote that “The Free French treated us as though we never existed. What a thankless task for a thankless people.”¹⁸

De Gaulle’s ambitions were, of course, not the only reason for the British to invade Syria and Lebanon. Britain had long feared that Nazi Germany would use the Vichy territories in the Middle East as a base for operations, and Germany’s use of Syrian air bases confirmed many fears and suspicions in London that increasing German influence in the area would deal the Allies a decisive strategic blow. From Syrian and Lebanese air bases, Germany could attack British oil interests in Iraq, British positions in Palestine, and the all-important Suez Canal.¹⁹ Some also thought Germany might use its recent successes in Greece and Crete to land an army in Syria–Lebanon, thus seriously upsetting the strategic balance in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁰

¹⁶ Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II, pp. 199-203; James, *Australia’s war with France*, pp. 104-5.

¹⁷ Charles de Gaulle in James, *Australia’s war with France*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Anthony A. MacInante in Seaton, ‘Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941’, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Denis Richards, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945*, Vol. I: *The fight at odds* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1953), pp. 337-338.

²⁰ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. III: *The Grand Alliance* (Cassell & Co. Ltd, London, 1950), pp. 287-288.

It is now known that Germany had no intentions of landing an army in Syria or Lebanon; they were too busy planning to invade the Soviet Union.²¹ Hindsight, however, is always 20/20; and given Germany's ascendancy in the war up to that point, including the recent victories in Greece and Crete, it is fair to conclude that those making the decision to proceed with Operation Exporter were at the time justified in their conclusions: the Syria–Lebanon campaign neutralised a potential strategic threat for the British at a time when strategic threats were thick on the ground.

Further, by accepting de Gaulle's assertions that it would be an easy campaign, and Allied High command produced a plan for the invasion that has been described by Anthony Mockler in 1976 as "the most obvious, the easiest and possibly the least effective way to proceed".²² Every invasion of Syria and Lebanon that has taken place since antiquity has been heavily influenced by the region's geography. Lebanon is extremely mountainous country, and any movement through it is pre-determined by the naturally occurring valleys and rivers. The country has two main mountain ranges, the Lebanons and the Anti-Lebanons, which force any invader to attack either hemmed in along the coast or through the Bekaa Valley that runs between them.²³

Further east, in Syria, it is flatter desert country, but movement is similarly hemmed in by rocky outcrops, particularly the Jebel Druze in the east, which in 1941 was practically impassable to motor vehicles. Wavell's plan was understandably dictated by this geography, but the criticism comes from opting to attack with three prongs simultaneously. By attacking with three prongs at once, Wavell could not muster the strength to overwhelm the Vichy French defenders and bring about a swift victory. He could, for instance, put the overwhelming weight of the invasion on either Beirut or Damascus. This was certainly the view taken by Lavarack, who thought the invasion should have been aimed singularly at Damascus.²⁴ Wavell and those around him were convinced that the Vichy French would only

²¹ See, for example, Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II, p. 205.

²² Anthony Mockler, *Our enemies the French: being an account of the war fought between the French & and British, Syria, 1941* (Leo Cooper, London, 1976), p. 77.

²³ McAlester and Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble*, p. 7.

²⁴ Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', pp. 12-13.

offer token resistance, so chose what they thought would be the safest option, which was not to stress about French dispositions or whether it would be best to take Damascus or Beirut first, and instead work on the assumption that all questions would be rendered moot by a swift Vichy French capitulation.

This was an error. In this respect, it was a misled campaign.

The Australian campaign?

Operation Exporter is often thought of, at least in Australia, as nearly exclusively an Australian campaign. Looking at the formations of the attacking units at the beginning of the campaign, this assessment appears somewhat justified. Australian troops after all formed the bulk of two of the main attacking columns and were instrumental in some of the key battles as the campaign proceeded – including Sidon, Merdjayoun, Jezzine and Damour. The only two Victoria Crosses awarded in the campaign both went to Australians – Private Jim Gordon and Lieutenant Roden Cutler – and from 18 June the operation was commanded by Australian Lieutenant General John Lavarack. On top of that, 416 of the approximately 1,000 Allied deaths in Syria and Lebanon were Australians, more than any other Allied contributor.

It should be remembered, however, that Australians ultimately formed less than half of the entire Allied forces that took part in the campaign. As the campaign wore on, the Allies were forced to commit additional units, such as the entire 6th British Division and the 10th Indian Division, to cover heavy losses and overwhelm the Vichy defenders. The Australians, who had formed the majority at the start of the operation, ended up fighting alongside troops from Britain, India, France (mostly troops from its African colonies), Syria, Lebanon, and even Czechoslovakia.²⁵

Australia was not the only country to suffer considerable losses. On 16 June the bulk of the 1st Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, was forced to surrender to the Vichy French after hard fighting at Kuneitra. Sources vary, but it is thought that around 180 men from that unit were taken

²⁵ David Sutton, *Syria and Lebanon 1941: the Allied fight against the Vichy French* (Osprey Publishing, Great Britain, 2022), pp. 11-15.

as prisoners of war.²⁶ Just four days later, the 3rd Battalion, Punjab Regiment, and the 4th Battalion, Rajputana Rifles – the other two units that made up the 5th Indian Brigade – suffered a similar fate at Mezze on the outskirts of Damascus, losing more than 200 men killed or captured in one fell swoop.²⁷ When the Vichy French took the survivors of these units as prisoners of war, it amounted to the effective loss of three entire battalions that had formed part of the original attacking force of Operation Exporter. None of these were Australians.

An important part of the operation's air component, commanded by South Africa-born Air Commodore Leslie Brown, was formed by No. 3 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, in their Tomahawks, though they were joined and outnumbered by a wide array of Royal Air Force units. At sea, the Royal Navy's 15th Cruiser Squadron, commanded by Vice Admiral Edward King, at times consisted of only a handful of Royal Australian Navy vessels – HMA Ships *Perth*, *Nizam* and *Stuart*. The war in the air and at sea was largely British, and Lavarack later said that the two most important factors in the Allied victory were “the bombardments provided in the coastal sector by the Royal Navy, and our superiority in the air”.²⁸

Australia played a central role in Operation Exporter, but that does not mean it should be seen as above all an Australian campaign. Operation Exporter was an Allied fight and an Allied victory, and it was through working with, above all, British, Indian and Free French comrades that Australia was able to contribute to the successful campaign. A small group of Australians had the unlikely honour of being able to proclaim themselves the conquerors of Damascus, but they by no means achieved the feat on their own.

The forgotten campaign?

The Syria–Lebanon campaign has always held an uncomfortable place in the Allied story of the Second World War. Firstly, the campaign has long been overshadowed by Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, an event that radically changed the trajectory of the war and

²⁶ See, for example, Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 402; Mockler, *Our enemies the French*, p. 131; Colin Smith, *England's last war against France: Fighting Vichy 1940-1942* (Phoenix, London, 2010), p. 229.

²⁷ Pal, *Campaign in Western Asia*, pp. 216-217.

²⁸ John Lavarack in Sutton, *Syria and Lebanon 1941*, p. 33.

drew much of the world's attention from mid-1941 onwards. Secondly, the confusing nature of the campaign, including the ambiguous enemy, has often caused Operation Exporter to fall into the too-hard basket of popular memory. Churchill, according to some Australian veterans, wanted to curtail celebration of the success of Operation Exporter – a British campaign fought against French soldiers – for fear of fostering French resentment against the Allied cause.²⁹ In Australia, the exploits of the Australians in Syria and Lebanon did receive coverage in the local press, but the campaign was always overshadowed by the defeat in Greece and Crete, the epic siege at Tobruk, and for the 7th Division, the later campaigns against the Japanese in the Pacific. The 7th Division's moniker, the Silent Seventh, expresses the perception that their exploits were often overshadowed. Their role in Syria–Lebanon is no exception.³⁰ Soldiers who fought in the campaign certainly felt their exploits had been downplayed. In his 1989 memoir, Corporal Anthony MacInante complained that “in Australia we hardly get a mention”, and despite protests from those involved, no specific medal or clasp was ever awarded for the campaign.³¹

Despite this, it is perhaps an exaggeration to fall into a cliché of military history and label Syria–Lebanon the “forgotten” campaign. Popular Australian memory of the Second World War does not extend much beyond the most famous battles and campaigns. For many, the entire Australian experience of the war would be summed up in two words – Tobruk and Kokoda. Seen in that light, the Syria–Lebanon campaign is no more or less well-known than, for example, the battles of Bardia and Salamaua or the entire Bougainville campaign. Nearly 200 pages of Gavin Long's official history of the army in the war are devoted to Operation Exporter (about the same number of pages devoted to Australian campaigns in Borneo) and numerous books have been written on the subject.³² In short, the Syria-Lebanon campaign is in some respects forgotten, in that it is not particularly well known, but that is unfortunately no truer of this campaign than of many other engagements of the Second World War.

²⁹ Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', p. 18.

³⁰ Mark Johnston, *The silent 7th: An illustrated history of the 7th Australian Division 1940-1946* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005), p. 44.

³¹ Anthony A. MacInante in Seaton, 'Fighting against the Vichy French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941', p. 1.

³² See, for example, Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria* (1953); Pal, *Campaign in Western Asia* (1957); McAlester and Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble* (1995); de Wailly, *Invasion Syria 1941* (2016); James, *Australia's war with France* (2017); Sutton, *Syria and Lebanon 1941* (2022).

Forgotten or not, the Syria–Lebanon campaign resulted in the death of an estimated 2,400 people, including 416 Australians, and for that reason alone, it deserves further study, better recognition, and better understanding of its cause and course 80 years ago.