

## The Campaign in Syria 1941

When ill-equipped but predominantly Australian Allied forces rolled across the Syrian border in 1941, the British High Command confidently believed that the Vichy French occupying forces would offer only token resistance, and their defence would collapse like an eggshell. In fact the Vichy French, including the famed French Foreign Legion, fought like 'tigers'.

In 1941, the British were concerned that enemy occupation of Syria was endangering the surrounding countries and oil supplies from Iraq. Consequently, General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, was directed to gather the largest possible force to occupy Syria at the earliest date. It was wrongly assumed by the British High Command that the Vichy French would offer only token resistance to the Allies.

In fact, the Vichy forces, mainly composed of professional soldiers, including the tough Foreign Legion, as well as Algerians and Moroccans, demonstrated great bitterness towards the Free French cause and had been ordered to resolutely oppose any Allied invasion. In almost all areas they had a large military advantage over the attacking forces - greater numbers, more and heavier armour, a more formidable air force, ample time to prepare their defences and rugged terrain that would support the defence.

British General Henry Maitland ('Jumbo') Wilson, who had recently commanded the disastrous campaign in Greece, was appointed to command the Allied forces. He planned three separate thrusts, one each for (from west to east) Beirut (capital of Lebanon and the main thrust), Rayak, and Damascus (capital of Syria). His main force was the 7th Australian Division, minus the 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which was attached to the 9<sup>th</sup> Division for the defence of Tobruk. Despite the Beirut thrust being identified as the most important, Wilson distributed his forces fairly evenly, allocating a brigade group to each of the left and central advances (Australian 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Brigades respectively), and the 5th Indian Brigade Group and a Free French force of infantry, guns and cavalry to the right or eastern column. Major-General J D Lavarack, commander of the 7th Australian Division, urged changes to the

plan, but to no avail. Planning was rushed, and characterised by an air of unreality - it had been suggested that the Vichy French could be won over with wine and coffee, or the displaying of the Australian slouch hat. Instead of using the Australian I Corps Headquarters which was available, Wilson chose to exercise command himself from the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. However, he intended to hand over command to Lavarack for the second and final phase. In other words, the Australian Corps would have to take over command in the middle of a campaign.

Outnumbered in the air and on the ground, with little chance of the various forces offering mutual support, with inadequate maps and no effective anti-tank measures against the Vichy tanks, the Allies crossed the border into Syria early in the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1941.

The western column ran into enemy fire almost immediately. The higher commands' prediction that the Vichy defence would be like an eggshell - once the perimeter collapsed and honour had been satisfied the Vichy forces would capitulate - was not realised. The advances along the coast and in the centre became difficult slogging matches. Roads and bridges were blown, and the enemy was well armed with machine guns, mortars, artillery and aircraft. They had had time to train, establish range markers, dig in and hide their positions well. In the absence of armour and air support, the Australians had to rely on taking positions by infantry assault and hard fighting, supported whenever possible by their 25-pdr batteries.

Slow progress was however made by all three columns, until a successful Vichy counter-attack took ground behind the eastern and central thrusts, stopping the advance and upsetting Allied plans. As reports of these reverses reached Jerusalem, Wilson decided to hand over command to Lavarack. Fortunately, much of the inevitable confusion of such a decision was avoided, by the Australian Corps Headquarters having had the foresight to place liaison officers with the attacking troops at the start of the campaign.

On 18<sup>th</sup> June, Lavarack took command of all the Allied troops scattered throughout Syria and

immediately established a better command structure. Major-General J S Evetts of the 6th British Division (now arriving) was appointed to command all troops east of the Litani River and Major-General A. S. Allen, commanding the 7th Australian Division, would concentrate on the western advance to Beirut. Lavarack used his last reserves to hold the Vichy counter-attack, and decided to exploit any successes that may develop. Believing the capture of Damascus would do much to break the Vichy defence and morale, he diverted troops to the eastern sector. After heavy and confused fighting, Damascus surrendered on 21 June.

Lavarack could then focus his attention on the western sector. Moreover, as operations around Tobruk subsided, additional forces were sent to Syria. The advance continued towards Damour, on the road to Beirut, but the Vichy forces continued to fight hard. At this stage Indian Bde HQ received a message from Captain PK Parbury of the Australian 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Parbury's diminished company was astride the Beirut-Damascus road as he wrote 'Water, rations and ammo almost depleted and troops becoming exhausted. Enemy on high ground dominate this position from both sides of the road and at dawn position will become untenable. I intend to attack.' He left a section to guard the company's roadblock, which had already provided the Australians with many prisoners and vehicles. This section was attacked by tanks and two were men killed, whereupon CPL Copeman took on the tanks with hand grenades, hand-thrown 2" mortar bombs and eventually an enemy pistol. He appears to have killed the gunner in one of the tanks, which withdrew.

In the fighting between 19 June and 6 July, LT Roden Cutler of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division's 2/5th Field Regiment, repeatedly did great service by engaging enemy tanks, infantry, anti-tank and machine posts with 25pdr field gun, Boyes anti-tank rifle, Bren gun or .303 rifle. He lost his leg in the process but was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions. Cutler is the only Australian artilleryman to be awarded the Victoria Cross.

Western Australian, Private Gordon of the 2/31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was also awarded the Victoria Cross whilst fighting in Syria. When his company suffered casualties from intense machine gun fire, Gordon

took it on himself to crawl forward and neutralise the enemy post with rifle and bayonet.

Parbury's message and Cutler, Gordon and Copeman's exploits perhaps typify the AIF's fighting and the spirit in which it was conducted in the Syrian Campaign.

Under pressure from constant allied attacks and with reserves exhausted, the Vichy French signed an armistice at Acre on 13 July. The Vichy French forces were to be granted full honours of war, including the keeping of their individual arms. Later they were given the option of joining the Free French – most preferred to remain loyal to Petain and return to France.

The Syrian campaign was won by hard fighting in heat and difficult terrain, against a well-trained and tenacious enemy. The lack of adequate support for the attacking forces undoubtedly prolonged the campaign to 'five bloody weeks' and resulted in the loss of more 'good men' than necessary.

Casualties in Syria (killed and wounded) were: Australian 1600 (including 416 killed) out of 18000 taking part; British and Indian 1200 out of 9000 and 2000 respectively; Free French 1100 out of 5000. The campaign is noteworthy as being the first occasion the 7th Division was committed to action. In early 1942 the Australian CGS, LTGEN Vernon Sturdee, threatened to resign if the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, which he considered an elite unit, was not returned for the defence of Australia. His demand was granted and the 7<sup>th</sup> went on to serve in the Owen Stanley Campaign. Lavarack continued to command I Australian Corps until 1942, but did not receive another fighting command after this. He commanded forces in Australia for the rest of the war, retired from the Army in 1946 and served as Governor of Queensland. British General HM Wilson later became Field Marshall Lord Wilson.