

Fighting against the French: Australians in the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941

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Introduction

In the nearly three quarters of a century since the end of the Second World War, popular memory of Australia's involvement in the conflict has been shaped around several key cornerstones of engagement. Tobruk, Kokoda, and Singapore, for example, are easily understandable stories of heroism and sacrifice, which have been etched into Australian national consciousness as symbols of the nation's contribution to the war. These symbols provide unambiguous displays of the courage and determination shown by Australian service personnel, fought against easily recognisable enemies: the Germans and Japanese. Where areas of conflict did not fit into these clear-cut criteria, they often became subsumed by the popular narrative of the war. An example of this is the Lebanon-Syria campaign of June–July 1941, fought against pro-Axis Vichy French forces, which has remained a far less well-known and understood area of Australian engagement to this day.¹

Though the campaign was a relatively minor event in the grand scheme of the war, it held great significance for the men, mostly of the recently-formed 7th Australian Division, who fought there. In his 1989 memoir, Corporal Anthony MacInante, a veteran of the campaign, wrote that “very little credit, if any, has been given to the Commanding Officers and troops who secured this vital northern flank of Lebanon-Syria ... In Australia we hardly get a mention”.² MacInante's complaints may have been justified. In the commemoration ceremonies held to mark the fiftieth anniversaries of the campaigns of 1941, the campaign was ignored.³ Yet 416 Australians were killed in Lebanon and Syria, amongst a total casualty count of over 1,500, and the two Victoria Crosses awarded to Lieutenant Roden Cutler and Private Jim Gordon for actions there were amongst the first four received by Australians in the war.⁴

Whilst the campaign lacked the strategic significance of the ongoing Western Desert campaign in North Africa, fought against German and Italian forces, it was certainly

¹ Mark Johnston, *The silent 7th: An illustrated history of the 7th Australian Division 1940-46* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 44; Richard James, *Australia's war with France: the campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1941* (Sydney: Big Sky Publishing, 2017); Jim McAllester and Syd Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble: Australians in Syria June–July 1941* (Sydney: Headquarters Training Command, Australian Army, 1995), p. 229.

² Anthony A. MacInante, *My Life*, vol. II (self-published, 1989), AWM PR01743, p. 184.

³ McAllester and Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble*, p. 229.

⁴ Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria, Australia in the war of 1939-1945*, series 1 (Army), vol. II (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1953), p. 526.

hard fought. The battlegrounds consisted of steep and rocky terrain, barren valleys, and swollen rivers. It was fought against an unexpectedly determined and well-prepared former ally-turned-enemy, the Vichy French, rather than familiar foes: the Germans, Italians and, later, the Japanese. Despite this, the campaign remains cloaked in obscurity. There are various reasons for this, but two under-examined areas of inquiry which may help to explain this obscuration further are 1) the conflict within the British and Australian high command, and 2) the experiences and attitudes of the ordinary Australian troops on the ground, who made up more than half of the invasion force.



Australian troops prior to launching an attack, French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon (AWM 008260, Frank Hurley, c. June 1941)

Though useful accounts of the conflicts within high command exist, such as in Brett Lodge's biography of Lieutenant General John Lavarack (commander of the Australian forces in Lebanon and Syria), they do not effectively explain how this resulted in the campaign's obscurity in Australian popular memory and are certainly not comprehensive.⁵ They instead provide narrative accounts of the action in varying levels of detail, occasionally offering brief suggestions for its obscurity.

⁵ Brett Lodge, *Lavarack: rival general* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), pp. 142–97; see, for example, footnote 2.

The experiences of the troops, meanwhile, remain understudied: the best analysis appears in Mark Johnston's *Fighting the enemy: Australian soldiers and their adversaries in World War II* (2000). Johnston's analysis provided valuable insight into this aspect of Australian service, but by focusing on all of Australia's opponents in the war his discussion of the Vichy French was necessarily brief.⁶ The most recent contribution to the historiography of the campaign, Richard James's *Australia's war with France: the campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1941* (2017), attempts to provide a more comprehensive account of the campaign, but is heavily reliant on secondary sources, rather than archival research, and provides few fresh insights.⁷

An analysis of the experiences of those at the top and bottom of the campaign conveys the complexity of events in Lebanon and Syria and may help to explain why it has been subsumed by other events in Australian popular memory, despite being an early success of the war. Before beginning this analysis, however, it is first necessary to explain the aims and outcomes of the campaign and locate it within the wider context of the Second World War.

The Lebanon-Syria campaign, June–July 1941: background and proceedings

The months prior to the Lebanon–Syria campaign saw the Middle East Command of British General Archibald Wavell stretched to the limit. Faced with an ongoing campaign in North Africa and with his forces significantly depleted following disasters in Greece and Crete, by late April Wavell learnt of Churchill's desire to invade the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon.⁸ There were several reasons for Churchill's plan, chief among these being the possibility for Lebanon and Syria to be used as a base for the Germans, should they be allowed to enter the area by the sympathetic Vichy French, to launch further attacks on the Allies.⁹ This would threaten vital Allied oil supplies in Iraq and Iran, as well as Haifa in Palestine. This fear was exacerbated by the *coup d'état* of the pro-Axis Rashid Ali in Iraq on 3 April 1941, threatening oil supplies through Haifa. Had the Germans effectively supported the revolt, it may have posed an even greater threat to security in the unstable region.¹⁰ Should Germany secure a strong foothold in the region, the political and diplomatic repercussions both there and in Egypt and Turkey posed a potential

⁶ Mark Johnston, *Fighting the enemy: Australian soldiers and their adversaries in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 58-70.

⁷ James, *Australia's war with France*.

⁸ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: volume III, the Grand Alliance* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1950), p. 288.

⁹ John Coates, *An atlas of Australia's wars* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 152.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

threat to the Allies. This was due to the possibility that increased German influence in the region could encourage greater opposition to the Allies there.

Churchill recognised Lebanon and Syria's geopolitical strategic significance. On 9 May 1941 he wrote to Wavell, "You will no doubt realise the grievous danger of Syria being captured by a few thousand Germans transported by air. Our information leads us to believe that Admiral Darlan [of the Vichy French] has probably made some bargain to help the Germans get in there".¹¹ The Free French leader, Charles de Gaulle, meanwhile, also recognised the area's strategic significance. The Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon was at that time controlled by Vichy France, the puppet government set up following the German conquest of France in 1940. For de Gaulle, wresting control of the Mandate would strike a strategic blow to his Vichy adversaries, led by Marshall Philippe Pétain, and possibly result in a number of Vichy troops joining Free France should the Allies be successful there. The Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon was to be the latest in a line of extensive inter-French conflicts over command of France's colonial possessions.¹²

By ordering an invasion of Lebanon and Syria, Wavell's already extensive list of objectives was extended: he was to continue the fight in North Africa, and open a new theatre in the Middle East. Faced with the prospect of spreading his forces even thinner and having to focus on multiple areas of engagement, Wavell was from the start not shy in voicing his opposition to the new campaign to Churchill, who he believed had fallen under the influence of de Gaulle and the British head of the liaison mission to Free France, Major-General Edward Spears. "[Y]ou must trust my judgment in this matter or relieve me of command", Wavell wrote to Churchill on 21 May, "I am not willing to accept that Catroux [commander of the Free French forces], de Gaulle or Spears should dictate action that is bound seriously to affect [the] military situation in [the] Middle East".¹³ Despite Wavell's justified protestations, especially considering his more pressing demands elsewhere and the questionable nature of reports provided by Catroux which claimed that the Vichy French in Lebanon and Syria would immediately join the Allied cause were an invasion to take place, the decision to launch the campaign was ultimately forced through by Churchill.¹⁴

His hands tied, Wavell appointed British General Henry Maitland Wilson, who had previously commanded a Commonwealth Expeditionary Force in Greece in April

¹¹ Churchill, *The Second World War*, p. 289.

¹² See, for example, Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at war, 1940–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Eric T. Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African resistance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹³ A. B. Gaunson, "Churchill, de Gaulle, Spears and the Levant Affair, 1941", *The historical journal* 27, 1984, pp. 701–2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 701.

1941, as General Officer Commanding of the British Forces for the invasion. The bulk of the force was to be made up of the recently-formed 7th Australian Division (minus the 18th Brigade, which was at Tobruk), commanded by Major General (later Lieutenant General) John Lavarack, supported primarily by British, Free French, and Indian troops.

The plan for the invasion, which would march north across the border of Palestine, centred on an advance split into three separate columns. On the coast, the 7th Division's 21st Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Jack Stevens, would advance across the Litani River and continue north to the important city and port at Beirut. Further inland, the 25th Brigade, commanded at first by Brigadier Alfred Baxter-Cox, would advance across mountainous terrain, capture strategically important forts at Merdjayoun and Khiam, then push north-east to the important rail hub at Rayak. On the Australian right, the 5th Indian Brigade would capture Deraa and Quneitra, with a six-battalion strong Free French force continuing on past the Indian Brigade to Damascus, thus forming the Beirut-Rayak-Damascus line. Once this line was established, the attack was to continue north to form a second line along the oil pipeline between Tripoli, Homs, and Palmyra. This second phase of the operation never took place, however, due to the Vichy French armistice signed on 13 July.¹⁵

It should be noted that, despite the invasion being referred to as "the Syrian campaign" in the existing literature and elsewhere, the vast majority of the Australian involvement actually occurred in modern-day Lebanon. The error in naming is widespread: the cloisters of the Australian War Memorial, for example, which list major campaigns that Australians have been involved in, record only the name "Syria", and books and articles on the subject regularly repeat the misnomer.¹⁶ This error was most likely fostered by Gavin Long's referring to the campaign as "Syria" in the title of the Official History. Long probably was not particularly familiar with the complexities of the Mandate, and he certainly was not helped in this matter by his post-war correspondence with Australian officers involved in the campaign, who also regularly referred to it as "the Syrian campaign".¹⁷ Due to this widespread misnomer, I explicitly refer to the campaign as having occurred in "Lebanon and Syria", not least because Australians were so heavily involved in the Lebanon area.

¹⁵ Coates, *An atlas of Australia's wars*, pp. 154-8.

¹⁶ See, for example, Churchill, *The Second World War*, "Syria", pp. 287-97; Coates, *An atlas of Australia's wars*, "Syria", pp. 152-7; Johnston, *The silent 7th*, "The Syrian campaign", pp. 44-74; Lodge, *Lavarack: rival general*, various chapters ending "The Syrian campaign, 1941", pp. 142-97; McAllester and Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble: Australians in Syria June-July 1941*; Henri de Wailly, *Invasion Syria, 1941: Churchill and de Gaulle's forgotten war* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016, translated by William Land).

¹⁷ See, for example, Gavin Long papers, AWM 67 3/6, AWM 67 1/7, AWM 67 2/66, AWM 67 3/209, AWM 67 3/378.

The fighting commenced on 8 June, and was much tougher than expected. Vichy French forces used entrenched positions in difficult terrain to their advantage and capitalised on the absence of Allied tanks. The coastal column was at first slowed by the destruction of the bridge over the Litani River by the retreating Vichy French, but the 21st Brigade successfully fought its way across the river (men of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion constructed a new bridge shortly after the 21st Brigade's success) with the assistance of British forces and pushed on in the coming days to Sidon, about 40 kilometres south of Beirut.¹⁸ Their next objective was the town of Damour. The river at Damour was the last natural obstacle before Beirut.



The destroyed bridge over the Litani River (in background). Men of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion constructed a new bridge (in foreground) after the 21st Brigade successfully fought their way across the river with the assistance of British forces (AWM 128435, photographer unknown, June 1941)

¹⁸ 21st Brigade war diary June 1941, AWM 52 8/2/21/9, pp.4-8, 44-56.



Men of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion constructing the new bridge over the Litani River (AWM 008207, Damien Parer, 12 June 1941)

Meanwhile the 25th Brigade captured the strategically important fort at Merdjayoun, but found pushing beyond it difficult.¹⁹ Given this, Lavarack decided to make the coastal advance the main focus, believing it to have the highest chance of quick success. This meant transferring the bulk of the 25th Brigade to the coast via Jezzine, which was only serviceable by a road known as the “Mad Mile” upon which Vichy French artillery and mortars were accurately ranged. It was hoped that the 25th Brigade could now provide vital protection for the 21st Brigade’s right flank. This left Merdjayoun weakly defended, and it fell to a well-organised Vichy French counterattack on 15 June. The campaign stalled as Lavarack sought to recapture Merdjayoun, eventually reclaiming it after multiple costly attempts by Brigadier Frank Berryman’s “Berry Force” on 24 June.²⁰ The capture of Damour followed on 9 July. Faced with the loss of Damour and continuing attacks by British and Free French forces in the Damascus sector, Vichy commander General Dentz signed an armistice agreement on 13 July, bringing the campaign to an end.

¹⁹ 25th Brigade war diary May–June 1941, AWM 52 8/2/25/6, pp. 73–5, 142–53.

²⁰ Report on the operations of “Berry Force” 16 June–29 June 1941, AWM PR 84/370 series 5, items 75–7.



"The Mad Mile", Jezzine, Lebanon 1941, oil on canvas (AWM ART27683, William Dargie, 1970)



The "Mad Mile", Jezzine, French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon (AWM 009036, George Silk, c. July 1941)

High command: tension and conflict

Relations between the British and Australian high commands were strained from the very beginning. Lavarack, who assumed command of the 1st Australian Corps on 18 June and overall command of the majority of the campaign, increasingly clashed with Wavell and Maitland Wilson, and believed that his British superiors failed to understand the nature of the terrain and severely underestimated the enemy. Lavarack wrote to Gavin Long in 1952 that, "I was, and am, convinced that Wavell and Wilson hoped that the Vichy French would not put up even a token resistance. Wavell once expressed to me the hope that we should be in Beirut in one day, or two at the most".²¹ He added, "I believed he had not the least comprehension of the differences between the Lebanon and the African desert ... He must have thought us complete mutts. He knew nothing of the rough rocky slopes over which our turning movements had to struggle".²² This frustration characterised the Australian leadership of the campaign and reflected the fact that Wavell's strategic priorities lay elsewhere.

This lack of understanding of the enemy and the terrain was compounded by Maitland Wilson's decision to base himself in the luxurious King David Hotel in Jerusalem, nearly 200 kilometres away from the main fighting, from which he attempted to run the entire campaign prior to Lavarack's promotion on 18 June.²³ General Blamey's aide-de-camp, Norman Carlyon, remembered that Maitland Wilson's Jerusalem headquarters "appeared to operate on the same leisurely, peace-time basis that had applied in the British Palestine command when the Australians arrived earlier in the war ... Once more, it seemed, the influence of the British generals was [until 18 June] limiting the scope for Australians to exercise high command".²⁴

Wavell, meanwhile, was primarily concerned with operations in North Africa, and from the beginning stated his opposition to the campaign on the grounds that he did not have the available resources. Torn between numerous fronts, Wavell focused his attentions on Operation Battleaxe, launched one week after the beginning of the Lebanon-Syria campaign, which unsuccessfully sought to wrest control of Cyrenaica from the Axis and raise the siege of Tobruk. Wavell's focus on North Africa meant that the Lebanon-Syria campaign was not provided with any tank support, much to Lavarack's chagrin. He wrote to Gavin Long later that

²¹ Lavarack letter to Gavin Long, 26 September 1952, AWM 67 3/209, p. 1.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²³ Stuart Braga, *Kokoda Commander: a life of Major-General "Tubby" Allen* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 142.

²⁴ Norman D. Carlyon, *I remember Blamey* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1980), p. 58.

some straight reference should be included in the story on the subject of the lack of supporting weapons under which our men, especially the Australians and the 5th Indian Brigade, suffered during the campaign. Tanks and trench mortar ammunition were the worst of these; it is not too much, in my opinion, to say that a reasonable provision of these two items would have saved hundreds of Australian casualties.²⁵

Lavarack made no secret of his frustration, and though his complaints are understandable, Wavell's prioritising of operations in North Africa was equally justified. In reality there was little indication that the Germans had serious plans to enter Lebanon and Syria to launch further attacks on the Allies.²⁶ The relatively small number of German aircraft which had been flying in and out of Syria, primarily during the Anglo-Iraqi War of May 1941, were reported by British code breakers to have been ordered to return to their units on 3 June as their base in Athens was being disbanded.²⁷ But, as Hinsley has noted, "such was the fear that Germany would advance into the Middle East that no attention was given to negative evidence".²⁸ While Hitler allowed Vichy French aircraft to fly over Axis territory to reinforce Lebanon and Syria, Dentz firmly rejected the offer of German air support on 13 June.²⁹ The Germans and Italians were, however, already in North Africa, directly threatening the Suez Canal and control of a significant area of the Mediterranean.

Lavarack probably did not appreciate the difficulty of Wavell's position and, as his letters to Gavin Long show, blamed him and Maitland Wilson for the severe underestimation of the Vichy French forces. His 7th Division (minus the 18th Brigade at Tobruk) and their allies were faced by a determined Vichy French force consisting of around two and a half divisions, consisting of 35,000 regulars of whom 8,000 were French and the remainder Senegalese, Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan.³⁰ They were also faced by 10,000 Levantine troops of, according to Long, "doubtful value".³¹

This opposing force was certainly underestimated by the planners of the invasion. British and Free French leaders hoped that French-speaking officers attached to each battalion would be able to persuade the Vichy forces to swiftly surrender and join de Gaulle by approaching them with white flags and speaking to them through

²⁵ Lavarack letter to Gavin Long, 1 October 1952, AWM 67 3/209.

²⁶ F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1994), p. 85.

²⁷ Harold E. Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East, 1939-1941: a study in generalship* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), n.p.

²⁸ Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, p. 85.

²⁹ de Wailly, *Invasion Syria, 1941*, p. 246.

³⁰ Johnston, *Fighting the enemy*, p. 58

³¹ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 334.

megaphones.³² This plan failed resoundingly when met by a well-fortified and motivated enemy, and was severely criticised by Lavarack and his deputies, who saw this episode as yet another example of their British superiors' continuous underestimation of the Vichy French. Arthur Allen, who succeeded Lavarack as commander of the 7th Division upon Lavarack's promotion to Lieutenant General on 18 June, said after the war:

The heads said that the F[rench] w[oul]d give in in Syria. When we went to Brummana [and spoke to Vichy French commander Paul-Hippolyte Arlabosse] ... He said that [the] thing that hit him was [the] fact that we used Free French. They looked on them as renegades. That made them fight. It wasn't a walkover. It hasn't got the publicity because the heads will not admit they underestimated [the] fighting spirit of [the] French. The country was ideal for defence ... Each one of those battles was equivalent to the big New Guinea battle.³³



A Free French liaison officer with the Australian forces preparing to signal to the Vichy French, demanding their surrender, Fort Khiam, French Mandate for Syria

³² Johnston, *Fighting the enemy*, p. 59.

³³ Gavin Long interview with Arthur Allen, AWM 67 2/66, pp. 23-5.

and the Lebanon (Damien Parer pictured second from right) (AWM 008203, Ron Maslyn Williams, 9 June 1941)

Lavarack went even further in his criticisms, which began before the campaign had commenced. Writing in his diary on 31 May, he questioned General Headquarters' decision to make the advance on the coast road the main focus "under the original belief that there would be no resistance by the French", stating that it took "the nature of a gamble".³⁴ The lack of understanding of his British superiors intensified Lavarack's frustration. When Wavell visited the 7th Division's headquarters on 12 June, for example, Lavarack noted in his diary that:

He seemed not at all amused at our efforts ... My opinion of Sir A[rchibald] continues to decline. A man not equal to a difficult job. He was (literally) querulous at our failure to provide him with frequent reports to Mr Winston Churchill, quite forgetful of the fact that we knew nothing of Mr Churchill's need of such reports. After all I am merely a Div[ision] Commander. He left us about 1150 hours, still not amused ... This smacks of my Tobruk adventure. Archie has failed, but we may save him.³⁵

It is clear, therefore, that the Australian commanders in Lebanon and Syria understood the severity and difficulty of the campaign in a way which their British superiors, they believed, failed to comprehend until well into and after the fighting. According to Lavarack, Wavell even privately confessed to him at the end of the campaign, for example, that "a company, or even a battalion, of 'I' tanks would have been better invested in Syria than they were in the Western Desert".³⁶ The tension between Lavarack and Wavell irreparably damaged their relationship. "I cannot forgive him", Lavarack later wrote, "despite my knowledge of his troubles. He seemed to believe that I was making difficulties, whereas the fault was in himself and his advisers, who believed that the French would not resist ... He never realised ... how difficult was the task he had given us to perform in one or two days".³⁷ And indeed, even Lavarack's great rival, General Blamey, rang Maitland Wilson at the King David Hotel on 19 June to support Lavarack's plan to transfer the 6th Division's 16th Brigade from Jezzine to operations against Damascus.³⁸ This was followed up by a visit to Jerusalem to persuade Maitland Wilson further.³⁹ In late June, Blamey even wrote to Vernon Sturdee, the Minister for the Army, that Wilson

³⁴ Lavarack diary, 31 May 1941, transcribed from his hand-written entries by his son James W. Lavarack, Version 2001/10/01 (diaries held in archives of the Australian Defence Force Academy).

³⁵ Lavarack diary, 12 June 1941.

³⁶ Lavarack letter to Gavin Long, 26 September 1952 AWM 67 3/209, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁸ Lodge, *Lavarack: rival general*, p. 172.

³⁹ John Hetherington, *Blamey: controversial soldier* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service, 1973), p. 172.

“was fighting the battle from Jerusalem and I found a grave lack of grip on the part of his staff in the early stages of the operation”.⁴⁰

Though tensions between British and Australian commanders are, of course, not unique to this campaign, the lack of cohesion at the highest levels of command in part helps to explain the difficulties of the confused command structure in place during the fighting in Lebanon and Syria, as well as the complexities of the invasion’s execution. Lavarack and his deputies, being present in Lebanon and Syria throughout the campaign, quickly understood the difficulties they were faced with, but when this was communicated to Wavell it was often met with an unwillingness to act due to his understandable prioritising of events in North Africa. This contributed to the deprioritisation/deputation of the campaign in the wider context of the war and to some extent the suppression of the Australians’ achievements in Lebanon and Syria. This was not helped by the opening of Operation Barbarossa in the Soviet Union on 22 June, which was arguably the most important development of the war to date.⁴¹ This further overshadowed events in Lebanon and Syria as press coverage increasingly turned to this vital new theatre of war.

News of Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union even reached Lebanon and Syria, where its significance was immediately recognised: Neville Blundell of the 2/3rd Battalion wrote in his “diary in retrospect” (he had returned to his wartime diary and added extensive annotations), for example, that “the big news of the day was the announcement that Germany had attacked Russia. This aroused some excited comment about the future prospects of a favourable effect on the progress of the war”.⁴² With troops now tied down in North Africa and on the Eastern Front, this meant that there was little possibility that the Germans would seek to gain a significant presence in Lebanon and Syria, or anywhere else in the immediate vicinity. The fighting elsewhere, particularly the colossal Operation Barbarossa to the north, gave the Lebanon-Syria campaign a sense of sideshow status from near the very beginning.

It is also important to note just how complicated command of the campaign was. Friction was not limited to that between Australian and British commanders, and the shifting command structure of the campaign probably resulted in a general air of confusion which filtered down to the ordinary troops on the ground. Command structure shifted multiple times during the fighting, one of the most notable changes

⁴⁰ Blamey to Vernon Sturdee, 26 June 1941, AWM 3DRL 6643 5A.

⁴¹ In his epic account of the twentieth century, Paul Johnson described 1941 as the “watershed year” of the century and noted Barbarossa as perhaps its most significant event (as one would expect, he does not mention the Lebanon-Syria campaign: Paul Johnson, *A history of the modern world: from 1917 to the 1980s* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), pp. 372-97.

⁴² Neville Blundell, *A diary in Retrospect*, AWM PR88/192.

being the replacement of Wavell as Middle East Commander-in-Chief by Claude Auchinleck, who arrived in early July. Lavarack, meanwhile, essentially took control of the Allied Forces in Lebanon and Syria from Maitland Wilson on the 18 June after his promotion to Commander of the 1st Australian Corps, being replaced as 7th Division Commander by Arthur Allen. With the notable exception of Brigadier Stevens of the 21st Brigade, brigade and battalion commanders changed multiple times during the fighting as Lavarack split up his forces to account for changing situations on the battlefield (such as his move to and from Jezzine), as well as when he felt that his own deputies were not up to the job, as was the case with Brigadier Baxter-Cox, the original commander of the 25th Brigade. Lavarack referred to Baxter-Cox as a “baby”, possessing a “pessimistic attitude” and “not an ideal leader” – this in spite of the fact that Baxter-Cox was seriously unwell and was later evacuated to Australia on medical grounds.⁴³

High command during the Lebanon-Syria campaign was fragmented and plagued with tension. Lavarack could not accept that Lebanon-Syria was not a priority for Wavell’s Middle East Command, resulting in a verbal battle primarily concerning the deployment of resources and the nature of the campaign’s progress. This impacted the way in which the campaign was run, as Lavarack, dealing with a lack of important resources such as tanks, sought to convert initial progress made on the coast into a quick victory – an ambition soon brought crashing down to earth by a well-organised Vichy French counterattack. This confusion on the battlefield characterised the campaign as well as the structure of command, which changed multiple times during the course of the fighting. In part these complexities may help to explain why Lebanon and Syria do not feature prominently in Australian national memory, despite the ultimate success of the campaign. This becomes clearer when the attitudes and experiences of the troops are examined.

“What a thankless job”: understanding the attitudes and experiences of Australian participants in the Lebanon-Syria campaign

In his diary on 8 July 1941, Signaller George White wrote from Damour, Lebanon: “bullets flying all around. Had no sleep. Packed ready to move on.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Corporal Jack Estens of the 2/6th Field Regiment recollected that “We often slept in them [shell holes] at night. There were no tents in action and it was hard to get real rest. You were going day and night ... you were in action for pretty much the whole time.”⁴⁵ Though only lasting five weeks, the fighting in Lebanon and Syria was an

⁴³ Lavarack diary, 26 June 1941 and 11 June 1941.

⁴⁴ Diary of Signaller George Arthur White, 8 July 1941, AWM PR00510.

⁴⁵ Papers of Bombardier Robert Webb, AWM PR03080, p. 11.

intense and tough introduction to combat for the inexperienced men of the 7th Division. Despite the hard fighting, a common theme in the contemporary and retrospective accounts of the campaign is that many of the men had little understanding of why they were in Lebanon and Syria, or the nature of their adversary.

It was a complicated campaign fought against an ambiguous enemy. Private John Robinson of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion wrote home to his mother in early July that “As a matter of fact we know less about the situation here than you folk at home ... As for casualties, they are always with us, so to speak, of one sort or another.”⁴⁶ Sergeant Peter Gibson of the 2/5th Field Regiment after the war stated that

We’d been told nothing. Didn’t even know why we were going ... there was no information at all ... We didn’t know the strategy ... We didn’t really know that until, well, a long time afterwards, why we ever went there. Half the fellas had never heard of the [Vichy] French you know. We soon found out.⁴⁷

Captain George Connor of the 2/33rd Battalion was no doubt speaking for many participants when, asked how much he actually knew about the campaign and the Vichy French at the time of the fighting, he replied, “Nothing. Not a thing”.⁴⁸ The men clearly found themselves in a confusing situation – the nature of the campaign had not been adequately explained to them, and on top of this they had little understanding of their enemy.

The vague information provided to the troops on the ground can in part be explained by the fact that many commanders were at first not convinced that the Vichy French would even offer resistance. The Vichy French were so underestimated that hastily assembled maps provided to the infantry were on a scale of 1:200,000 and proved entirely insufficient for their uses.⁴⁹ It was not thought necessary for greater detail to be provided, such was the confidence that the Vichy French would prove a walkover. A more well-known example of this underestimation is the original decision of the Australian commanders to order their men to march into action on the first day of the campaign wearing their slouch hats rather than helmets, in the mistaken belief that the Vichy French would recognise them as Australians (and thus excellent soldiers), and immediately surrender.⁵⁰ Met with ferocious enemy fire, the decision to replace the slouch hats with helmets was soon made.

⁴⁶ Papers of John Allan Robinson, AWM PR04044, wallet 2 of 5.

⁴⁷ Australians at War Film Archive, Peter Gibson interview, accession number: 12, 28 April 2003.

⁴⁸ Australians at War Film Archive, George Connor interview, accession number: 1175, 27 November 2003.

⁴⁹ McAllester and Trigellis-Smith, *Largely a gamble*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ P. C. Neasbey, *Blokes I knew: Libya – Syria 1941* (Sydney: Frank Johnson, 1944), p. 82.

Lavarack later recounted, "the High Command's notions of Vichy non-resistance had prevailed too far. I saw many little boys around the frontier in the days to come wearing Aussie hats that had been hastily discarded in favour of steel as soon as the 'push-over' complex had been cured by bullets and French mortar bombs."⁵¹ It was clear that the Vichy French were determined to fight the Free French and prove their worth. Indeed, when Arthur Allen spoke to the Vichy French General Paul-Hippolyte Arlabosse at the end of the campaign, Arlabosse told him, "We had an idea the British thought we didn't fight in France [in 1940] and we were determined to show we could fight. Pétain was our commander, we were permanent soldiers and we fought for France", while Allen added that "they would not join the Free French whom they despised".⁵² The misplaced confidence that the Vichy French would prove an uncommitted and unintimidating enemy meant that the Australian troops were deployed in an air of unreality which severely limited their ability to understand and come to terms with the campaign.

As the reality of the fighting set in, attitudes towards the Vichy French generally began to harden. The historian of the 2/33rd Battalion, William Crooks, noted that the Australian troops strongly disliked the Vichy French due to their collaboration with the Germans.⁵³ The theme of the Vichy French as collaborators features prominently in Australian accounts. In his memoir, Corporal MacInante stresses his view that "all Frenchmen were not 'Freedom Fighters' and heroes of the 'Resistance', a very considerable number were willing collaborators and in Syria fought a bloody campaign against the British and Australians."⁵⁴ He continued, "Vichy French regulars fought with a ferocity that was sadly lacking in the defence of their homeland."⁵⁵ Similarly, Lieutenant Lindsay Mason of the 2/14th Battalion remarked that "Someone who is your ally and then switches over, and starts fighting against you, you don't like them very much."⁵⁶ This greatly motivated the men in the fight against the Vichy French and they sought to punish them for their duplicity. Long recounted in the Official History how upon capturing a Vichy French soldier, Captain Murchison, when asked by the Frenchman why he was fighting, replied "because you are collaborating with the Huns".⁵⁷

This hostility towards the French occasionally extended to the Free French too. MacInante reflected that "The Free French treated us as though we never existed.

⁵¹ Lavarack letter to Gavin Long, 26 September 1952, AWM 67 3/209, p. 3.

⁵² Gavin Long interview with Arthur Allen, AWM 67 2/66, pp. 23-4.

⁵³ William Crooks, *The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, AIF in the war of 1939-45* (Sydney: Printcraft Press, 1971), p. 36.

⁵⁴ MacInante, *My Life*, AWM PR01743, p. 168.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵⁶ Australians at War Film Archive, Lindsay Mason interview, accession number: 1197, 16 March 2004.

⁵⁷ Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, p. 435.

What a thankless job for a thankless people."⁵⁸ By emphasising the fact that in Lebanon and Syria Australians fought against Frenchmen and had received little acknowledgement of their efforts, MacInante and those like him attempted to exert some degree of agency, however limited, over the Australian memory of the Second World War. Many veterans felt similarly that the campaign as a whole was a "thankless task", ignored at the time at home and abroad, and subsequently overlooked in Australia.

In his history of the 2/16th Battalion, for example, Malcolm Uren states that

Although the Syrian campaign of the Seventh Australian Division was at least as difficult and arduous as any allied campaign up to that time, many felt that the valour, determination, and plain military prowess of the Australian forces engaged had received scant recognition, from the media or in the grant of honours and awards ... The elimination of Vichy forces in Syria may well have had as telling an effect as El Alamein in completely dispelling a German threat to our vital Suez life-line.⁵⁹

This tendency to exaggerate the importance of the campaign can only be understood as an attempt to reintegrate the Lebanon–Syria campaign into the story of Australia's Second World War experience. Alan Treloar of the 2/14th Battalion echoed the argument put forward by Uren, stating that

the Syrian campaign was the first campaign our side won during the war ... But it got little publicity because Churchill preferred to think of the French as our natural allies ... it's an absurdity that those of us who served in Syria and won the first campaign ... wear the Africa Star ... our real battle was Syria and there should have been a Syrian Star.⁶⁰

The men clearly attached great significance to the campaign and, even though the 7th Division's most notable fight would come later in New Guinea, they did not forget their experiences in Lebanon and Syria, and sought greater recognition of them. To be plunged into the middle of unfamiliar terrain, facing an enemy they knew nothing about, and short of crucial support such as tanks, must have been a difficult introduction to combat. Given such a complex enemy, who had been misunderstood even by those at the highest levels of command, the men came to form generally simplistic views. The Vichy French were looked upon merely as German collaborators who fought fiercely in Lebanon and Syria, and yet had been

⁵⁸ MacInante, *My Life*, AWM PR01743, p. 173.

⁵⁹ Malcolm Uren, *A thousand men at war: a history of the 2/16th Australian Infantry Battalion, AIF* (Melbourne: Trojan Press, 2009 edition, first published 1959), p. 98.

⁶⁰ Australians at War Film Archive, Alan Treloar interview, accession number: 1209, 20 November 2003.

convincingly defeated in their homeland in 1940. The fact that they were former allies no doubt rankled with the Australian troops, who regularly employed a discourse of betrayal when describing the Vichy French.

As well as Anglo-Australian tension within high command, Australian veterans of the campaign criticised Churchill for his role in limiting the publicity of the fighting in Lebanon and Syria due to his desire for the French to be viewed as allies. As Uren wrote in his history of the 2/16th Battalion, "fighting a recent ally was conceivably repugnant to some, and probably accounted for the muted response of the media."⁶¹ Churchill was certainly one of those who did not seek to publicise the fight against the Vichy French, believing that it would confuse this, much to the disappointment of Lavarack, his deputies, and of course the men who fought there. Without powerful champions for such a complex campaign, the action in Lebanon and Syria suffered from both a lack of publicity as well as a complicated narrative which was difficult to weave into the popular commemoration of the war. As such, many veterans of the campaign sought to tell their stories in order to keep the memory of their actions in Lebanon and Syria alive. Were a Syrian Star as proposed by Treloar to exist, perhaps the men would not have felt so hard done by.

Conclusion

Having been faced with a well-prepared, numerically superior and motivated enemy, and having triumphed despite the initial mismanagement of the campaign, it is understandable that participants felt that the Lebanon-Syria campaign had been completely overlooked, both at the time and subsequently. There are various reasons for this. The campaign was highly complex at both the top and bottom levels. The tension at the top of the command structure, which changed significantly during the course of the campaign, along with a convoluted chain of events on the battlefield, presented a confusing picture for those at the top level of proceedings, let alone for those at the other end. At the same time, the achievements in Lebanon and Syria were understandably overshadowed by events such as those at Tobruk and elsewhere in North Africa, which held primary strategic importance for the Allies, as well as the British reluctance to pay full heed to these achievements. Even after the armistice had been signed, Lavarack, who had effectively run the majority of the campaign, complained about how he was treated in the official celebratory functions in Beirut: "Wilson met all & sundry. No Australians need apply, whatever the Corps

⁶¹ Uren, *A thousand men at war*, p. 98.

has done. [I] was completely ignored. They treated us as a dependent nation, or perhaps as mercenaries".⁶²

These frustrations filtered through to the ordinary Australian troops, who had borne the brunt of the unexpectedly fierce fighting. Many of them did not fully understand why they were there or the nature of their ambiguous enemy. The Vichy French had been misunderstood even by those at the highest levels of command – one could not expect the ordinary soldier on the ground to know any more than those directing the campaign, and the men came to form simplistic views of the Vichy French, viewing them merely as the lowest form of collaborators and traitors.

Ultimately, complications and tensions in command, coupled with a complex situation on the ground, contributed to the campaign's overshadowing. Though there were numerous heroic Australian actions during the campaign, they became subsumed by the confusion of events in Lebanon and Syria and by the wider context of the war. Although considered a significant campaign by the British, it remained an irritating sideshow to the areas of primary focus, particularly North Africa, where Australians could find a simpler and more clear-cut demonstration of heroism in the form of Tobruk. With the opening of Operation Barbarossa on 22 June, the war exploded into a new crucial theatre, and attention was understandably pulled even further away from Lebanon and Syria. Plagued by command difficulties in the face of an unusual former ally-turned-enemy, the campaign did not receive the recognition many participants felt that it deserved, and it largely remains a relatively obscure five-week period of the Second World War.

⁶² Lavarack diary, 16 July 1941.