

THE SYRIA-LEBANON CAMPAIGN.

JUNE-JULY 1941.

(How we went to War with France)

The Syria-Lebanon Campaign was also known as ***Operation Exporter*** and was the Allied Invasion of French controlled Syria and Lebanon in 1941 during the WW2.

There is now evidence that Allied Censors acted to suppress reporting of this campaign and the fierce fighting that took place. Allied Commanders believed that any knowledge of fighting between the French and the Allied Forces would not be well received in the USA.

The Allied campaign was to prevent the German Army from using the French bases in Syria and Lebanon as springboards for attacks on Egypt and the oil wells in Iraq.

In May 1941 the French leader, Admiral Darlan, signed an agreement with Hitler on behalf of Vichy France and it allowed German aircraft to use the air bases in these Countries to refuel and the railways were to be used to carry arms and troops. This was a threat to the strategic oil wells in Iraq.

The French forces in the area were commanded by General Henri Dentz and were known as the ***Army of the Levant***.

Dentz had seven Infantry Battalions of French Troops; one of these was the 6th Infantry Regiment of the French Foreign Legion. There were two Artillery Groups and eleven Battalions of Infantry, Horse and Motorized Cavalry.

The French Air Force was strong at the start of the campaign but due to the lack of Anti Aircraft weapons, most of it was destroyed on the

ground. On the 26 June the French Air Bases were attacked by 3 Squadron RAAF *Tomahawks* led by *Clive Caldwell* and *Bobby Gibbes*. They destroyed many aircraft on the ground. There were many dogfights in the air and Caldwell would shoot down four French planes and Gibbes would shoot down ten.

The RAAF were supported by a *RAF Hurricane* Squadron with *Roald Dahl* as a pilot.

Vichy French pilot, *Pierre le Gloan*, would shoot down seven Allied planes.

Hitler offered to send Air Support but this was refused by General Dentz.

The Allied Force was led by General Maitland- Wilson and comprised the *AIF 7th Division*, minus the *18TH Brigade* which was at Tobruk.

There were two Brigades of the *French Foreign Legion*.

(We now had the unique position where we see Units of the *French Foreign Legion* fighting each other.)

There was the *5th Indian Brigade* of engineers and support services. They supported the Indian Army *10th Infantry Division* and the *17th Indian Infantry Brigade*.

The *AIF Division* was commanded by Major General Arthur (Tubby) Allen and they were given the task of advancing from Palestine along the Coastal road from Haifa to Beirut. The *AIF 21st Brigade* was to confront the main French Force and capture Beirut and the airport at Rayak. They were to be supported by a *British/Jewish Commando Force*, known as the *Palmach* from Cyprus.

There was a *Camel Corps* of the Arab Legion led by Colonel Glubb (Glubb Pasha.)

The *Indian Force* under Major General Bill Slim was to advance into Iraq, capture the railways and sever the French communications. They would also secure the oil pipe lines in Transjordan.

Transjordan is, today, Jordan and was then a British Mandate and was part of Palestine.

The Campaign commenced on the 8th. June and on the 10 July, as the *AIF* was about to enter Beirut, General Dentz sought an Armistice. This was known as *The Armistice of St. Joan d'Acre* and was signed at *Acre* on the 10th. July and all fighting ceased.

There had been six major battles fought and the French Force had 1,500 killed, 4,250 wounded. There were 37,736 POWS of which 5,688 joined the Free French Army and the rest were repatriated to France.

Australian casualties were 416 killed and 1,136 wounded.

British and Indian casualties were 210 killed and 405 wounded

Free French casualties were 150 killed and 300 wounded.

General de Gaulle flew in to congratulate the victors.

Free French General Georges Catroux was placed in charge of Syria and Lebanon and on the 26 November 1941 granted them independence in the name of the Free French Government.

There were three *Victoria Crosses* awarded in the Campaign.

Arthur Rodan Cutler AIF. (Later Sir Rodan Cutler, Governor of NSW.

James Gordon. AIF 7TH. Division 2/31 Battalion.

Geoffrey Keyes. British Commando Unit. Awarded posthumously.

Moshe Dayan was awarded the MC for bravery. He lost an eye and would become the Israel General in a later battle against the Egyptians.

-(John Imrie 16/11/2020)