

division would be sufficient for the effective occupation of Syria and that it would be most unwise to attempt operations with a small, ill-equipped force, such as the Free French contingent.

On 21st May General Catroux, who had gone to Palestine to meet a French officer from Syria, cabled admitting that his information was entirely incorrect; that far from withdrawing into the Lebanon the French were moving troops south of Damascus and taking up positions to defend the routes to that city. He said that nothing but a large force could attempt the occupation of Syria. Meanwhile I had been receiving telegrams from General de Gaulle in West Africa, couched in imperative language, enquiring why the Free French troops were not already on the march to Damascus. This incident illustrates the difficulties there sometimes were in dealing with the Free French.

89. It was, however, apparent that I might have to take action in Syria in spite of my weakness. The dangers to the Suez Canal and our bases in Egypt if the enemy succeeded in establishing himself in Syria were obvious. Cyprus would be at his mercy, and a German occupation of Syria would practically complete the encirclement of Turkey and make it difficult for the Turks to continue to resist German demands.

I therefore decided that some risk to the defence of Egypt in the Western Desert must be accepted, and issued orders for the 7th Australian Division (less one brigade in Tobruk) to move to northern Palestine, and I sent to the northern frontier of Transjordan the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 4th Division which had just arrived from the Sudan. I instructed General Wilson, G.O.C. Palestine, to make preparations for a possible advance into Syria.

As usual, one of the principal difficulties was to find the necessary transport and signals for the force and the usual process of scraping from other units and formations had to be resorted to to produce any force at all.

90. On 25th May I reported to the War Office that I was preparing a plan for an advance into Syria with the 7th Australian Division less one brigade, the Free French troops, and certain units of the 1st Cavalry Division. This was a much smaller force than I considered necessary, also I disliked using the Free French since I knew that this would be likely to stiffen the resistance of the French in Syria, but I had no other troops I could make available. I was instructed by the Chiefs of Staff to advance into Syria as soon as the above force was reasonably prepared. I reported that 7th June was the earliest date by which the operation could start, actually it began on 8th June.

91. The general plan was to advance into Syria on a broad front. On the right the 5th Indian Brigade was to occupy Deraa and the line of the Yarmuk railway. The Free French force was then to pass through and advance on Damascus. On the left the 7th Australian Division was to advance in two columns, one by Merjayun, one by the coast road to Beirut. I realized that if the French resisted progress would be slow and that the force might not be strong enough to accomplish its object. The Vichy French were in

greatly superior numbers and had some 90 tanks, while no armoured vehicles could be spared from the Western Desert. The air support was bound to be comparatively weak, since the greater part of the air forces was required to support the attack which was being staged shortly afterwards in the Western Desert.

The Navy would support the advance with a squadron along the coast. Protection to this squadron from enemy air attack occupied the greater proportion of our fighter aircraft available.

92. The advance began early on 8th June and at first made fair progress. The French had obviously expected attack by a much larger force; but finding how weak we were, they soon took heart and their resistance stiffened. On the right the Free French had advanced to within about ten miles of Damascus by 12th June. On the left the Australian right column captured Merjayun, while on 9th June the left column after an extremely hard fight had crossed the river Litani on the coast. In this action a commando from Cyprus effected a landing on the coast and assisted in the Australian success, though at the cost of somewhat heavy casualties.

The French now began a series of counter-attacks. On the right they sent a column from Damascus which made a turning movement by the Jebel Druze and attacked our lines of communication between Deraa and Damascus. Further west another column attacked the 1st Royal Fusiliers at Kuneitra and captured the greater part of the battalion. Another column advanced on Merjayun and recaptured it, the Australian forces in this area having made a wide outflanking movement against the next French position and having thus left the main road open. On the coast also there was severe fighting. In all these counter-attacks the French used their medium tanks effectively. Although all these counter-attacks were driven back, their effect was to bring our advance almost to a standstill. I realized that I should have to send reinforcements. By the middle of June, by taking transport as it came off the ships and issuing it direct to units, I was able to make one brigade of the 6th Division and an artillery regiment mobile and placed them at General Wilson's disposal. Meanwhile a very fine effort by the 5th Indian Brigade under Brigadier Lloyd and by the Free French had resulted in the capture of Damascus by 21st June after some very bitter fighting, with heavy casualties on both sides.

93. Towards the end of June, I was able to make use of troops from Iraq to increase the pressure on Syria. Two brigades of General Quinan's force moved from Baghdad up the Euphrates by Abu Kemal and Deir Ez Zor towards Aleppo, while Habforce moved across the desert towards Palmyra and Homs. The Free French moved north from Damascus towards Homs, while the 6th Division, of which two brigades were now ready, moved north-west from Damascus towards Rayak. The 7th Australian Division which had advanced to Sidon prepared to assault the last remaining French position at Damour covering Beirut.

The 10th Indian Division (less one brigade) from Baghdad reached Deir Ez Zor without opposition other than air attack: Habforce