CHAPTER 25

THE BATTLE OF DAMOUR

From midnight onwards on the night of the 5th-6th July the leading companies of 21st Brigade set off one by one towards their distant objectives across the Damour River. After they had disappeared down the side of the ravine into the darkness there was silence, until, at 12.35 a.m., the artillery—sixty guns—opened fire on the French positions beyond the river. Then the whole area seemed to spring into violent life. The watchers on the southern ridge could see the shells bursting along the opposite wall of the chasm and French signal flares sailing up. The rocky sides of the ravine multiplied the sound of the shelling. The watchers knew that it would probably be light before the first news would come back from the forward troops or their first signals be seen. The roughness of the country over which the flank attack was to be made prohibited all but the simplest forms of signalling gear, and all but the lightest of weapons.

Captain White's company of the 2/27th led the procession of four battalions which was to stumble and slide in single file down the goat-track, cross the Damour and clamber up to El Bourn. It had left El Haram at dusk and marched for three hours to El Batal, where the men rested until midnight. Twenty minutes later the men set off through El Labiye and down the steep track. The leading platoon was commanded by Lieutenant Sims, the same who had found the crossing four nights before. He and his men were on the road at the bottom of the ravine when their own artillery opened fire. The explosions reverberated so loudly that the men in the gorge could not hear themselves shout and shell fragments began falling down the precipitous sides. Sims led the way not up the track but along a wadi just to the west of it where his men would be sheltered from the French artillery and from mortars which could be heard firing in El Bourn. The wadi rose so steeply that, laden as they were with 60 to 70 pounds of gear and some labouring under anti-tank rifles, the men could climb only 100 yards in twenty minutes, and therefore Sims decided to move to the track, preferring the risk of French fire to the danger of injury from falling down the little precipices in the wadi. At the first glimmer of light the toiling climbers reached some concertina wire stretched across the track, about a quarter of a mile from El Bourn. Enemy troops somewhere ahead were firing but evidently not at them. They went on until they were 100 yards from the edge of the village. There the exuberant Sims formed the platoon up across the track, bayonets were fixed and the men clambered over some terraces and charged into the village. There was nobody there except some Syrians peering anxiously out of half-opened doors and a few alarmed French troops who were seen in the distance hurrying out of the place on the eastern side, having abandoned several mortars which they had been firing from a quarry there. Sims' men
Midnight, 6th July 1941.
took up positions in the village and across the approaches from the east, north and west. About three-quarters of an hour later the remainder of their company arrived and were welcomed by loud shouts from the advance-guard announcing that Australians and not "Frogs" occupied the village.

The next company to move down the track was led by Captain Rice, a high-spirited young regular. The column had been moving through El Batal when the barrage opened. Almost immediately shells began falling among them. The first killed Lieutenant Grant and two others and seriously wounded Rice. He tried to struggle to his feet and lead the company on but was too weak and, when shells continued to fall, he ordered the men to disperse and seek cover. This command reached some of the company as an order to withdraw and the platoons became separated. Sergeant Macpherson gained touch with Colonel Moten's headquarters, reported what had happened and was ordered to collect the men and push on. Meanwhile Lieutenant Thomas, the only remaining officer, was trying to reorganise the scattered sections when Captain A. J. Lee arrived leading his company, the next to move off. The shelling had now ceased. Lee told Thomas that his company would take over Rice's role and instructed him to follow as soon as he could and "have a go at the third objective" (which had been Lee's task). Lee led his men off into the darkness and about half an hour later Thomas set off with about twenty-five men, followed later by other small groups from this scattered company.

As this incident showed, the French artillery fire had been prompt and accurate. His gunners were concentrating on targets that had been carefully ranged. Among them, inevitably, were the artillery and infantry observation post on Hill 394. By 7 a.m. this area had been thoroughly pounded. "The wireless had been knocked out, water cans ruined and blankets and equipment torn to shreds." Later the artillery observers moved lower down the forward slope of the hill.

Meanwhile, when Rice's company failed to arrive at El Boum by 7 a.m., White decided to advance without waiting for it. He spread his company out along the east-west track beyond El Boum and moved off. There was no opposition at the eastern end of the track but at the western end, near Hill 250, the infantrymen encountered a strong French post—a group of sangars manned by Senegalese with French officers, and some Foreign Legionaries. Pressing forward Lieutenant R. G. Geddes and Corporal Martin were killed and others were wounded; the post was still resisting when Lee's company arrived. This company gave additional supporting fire—particularly with mortars which scored direct hits on the sangars—

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1 Maj D. G. Rice, SX4541, 2/27 Bn and Staff appts. Regular soldier; of Sandy Bay, Tas; b. Mosman, NSW, 3 Jan 1915.
4 Henry, The Story of the 2/4th Field Regiment, p. 162.
and after ten minutes a white flag was raised. The attackers began to advance but a French machine-gun opened fire and two Australians were wounded. The Australians fired again, and after five minutes the enemy stood up, one waving a white flag.\(^6\)

Lee then moved on to take the next objective (a line through Er Roumane). There his company was fired on by three machine-gun posts from lower ground ahead. He spread his platoons over a wide front, decided that the enemy “now being surrounded would move out at dusk” and, in anticipation, fired the success signal. Later he sent a platoon to hold the towering Hill 560 on his right.

At 1.30 Moten arrived at the river crossing on the way to establish a new headquarters at El Boum. From the river (where Stevens had posted his brigade major, Finlay,\(^7\) to keep him informed about events on that important flank) a telephone line had been laid to El Boum, and on it Moten spoke to Nicholls, whose company, having finished its task on the right flank (described below), had marched across country to El Boum where it had arrived at 8 a.m. Nicholls gave him an account of what had happened on the right and Moten ordered Nicholls (there being still no news of Rice’s company) to march on through Lee’s company and take the final objective. Nicholls’ company marched on, was delayed at the Er Roumane position until it was discovered (as Lee had anticipated) that the French had withdrawn, and then moved on, establishing themselves on the feature overlooking Daraya from the east (the 512 metre hill) at 10.35 p.m. Thus before midnight on the 6th the 2/27th was firmly holding the corridor through which the 17th Brigade was to advance to cut the road leading northward out of Damour.

The rearmost company (with the remnants of Rice’s company, now about fifty men) was holding a wider front than the orders had demanded. Each of the two forward companies was on the high features to the east of their axis but neither was yet occupying ground as far west towards Damour as the plan had proposed.

Though it had met little opposition, the march of the leading company on the right—Nicholls’—was an impressive demonstration of the stamina of the men and their skill in mountain country. They had reached the wooded area above the Damour tributary at 10 p.m. on 5th July, had marched down into the tributary, climbed up 800 feet on the other side, taken part in an action there, marched down again to the floor of the Damour gorge north of the Beit ed Dine road, made a hand-and-foot climb up the far side rising 1,000 feet to El Boum, and thence, after a few hours’ rest, had taken over another company’s role and moved across four wadis and four steep ridges to Daraya, whence one of the platoons had climbed a 1,500-foot eminence overlooking that village. In a bee-line they were a little more than three miles from their starting point; in terms

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\(^6\) Later a French machine-gunner said that after the white flag had gone up his team had been forced to fire by an officer who threatened to shoot them if they did not. Seventeen men were captured, eleven were found dead, and some escaped towards El Hamra.

\(^7\) Col C. H. Finlay, OBE, NX73. 6 Cav Regt 1939-41; BM 21 Bde 1941, 26 Bde 1942; CO 2/24 Bn 1942-43; CO Z Special Unit 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. Sydney, 6 Oct 1910.
of human effort they had done all that fit and confident men could do in twenty-four hours.

The three companies of the 2/16th which were to attack El Atiqa assembled on the south side of Hill 168 before midnight. Colonel MacDonald sent Major Potts forward to the river crossings. Captain Robinson's company was to cross the river to the right, Major Caro's to the left, and both were to advance against El Atiqa. Captain Hearman's company was to follow Caro's across the river, form up on the main road and attack westward through the plantations. As Caro's company was leaving the assembly area French shells fell round them and one platoon lost touch with the remainder of the company. When the supporting guns opened fire and the detonations began to reverberate in the rocky gorge the infantry moved down the slope towards the river. Well before dawn, the three companies (less the platoon mentioned above) were across the river and on their start-line—the Beit ed Dine road. Potts replaced the missing platoon in Caro's company by transferring one from Hearman's. At 4.40 a.m. the barrage lifted to a line higher up the El Atiqa ridge and became more intense; immediately the French, as though they too had been awaiting this signal, opened fire with artillery, mortars and machine-guns. The El Atiqa position blazed with the flashing of guns and bursting shells and the noise was stunning. For the watchers (and particularly MacDonald who had suffered some misgivings about this frontal attack on an area that was dangerously wide for his weak companies) this was the beginning of an anxious wait for perhaps an hour or more until news came back from across the river. After an hour and ten minutes the barrage ceased. Observers at Yerate saw flares and took them for their troops' success signal—in fact they were S.O.S. signals fired by the French.

The advancing troops had climbed only a short distance from the road when they ran into intense fire from well-sited posts, and the attack developed into a series of small fights in which platoon became separated.
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from company and section from platoon. On the right Robinson's company overran one post, then came under heavy and accurate fire from another. In the platoon on the right Lieutenant O'Loughlin\(^6\) and his sergeant, Dickson,\(^1\) were both killed and the advance was halted. Lieutenant Madigan\(^2\) led his platoon across to assist but it too was pinned down. Some men of O'Loughlin's platoon trickled down the slope, some joined Madigan, whose men, though unable to advance, resolutely held their ground all day exchanging fire with the enemy posts from whatever cover they could find, and became a collecting point for men who had lost their platoons and for French prisoners, of whom forty were assembled there during the day.\(^8\) Eventually Madigan took up a position in a cave which had been used by the French as a storeroom.

Meanwhile the remainder of the company, now less than half the number that had gone into the attack, had pushed on until they came under fire from the farther ridge of Mar Mikhail. All efforts to find a covered approach to these posts failed, and casualties reduced what remained of the company to the strength of a platoon.\(^4\) Fire was concentrated on these men from one French post after another until six had joined in. Believing that some of the fire was coming from the neighbouring company of his battalion Lieutenant Stapledon\(^5\) stood up to signal to them and was fatally wounded by a burst of enemy machine-gun fire. The survivors trickled back into the wadi at the foot of Mar Mikhail, while Madigan's party gave covering fire from the southern side. The ground between them and Madigan's position was swept by fire and eventually they moved left across the line of the centre company's planned advance. After picking up some scattered men of that company and some prisoners, Captain Robinson established the party in a house near the junction of the main road and the road to Beit ed Dine, where some men of both the other attacking companies had already collected, including one officer who was severely wounded.\(^8\)

Caro's company, to which some of these men belonged, had moved briskly to the top of the El Atiqa ridge, through a barbed wire obstacle there and moving to the right gained a foothold on the Mar Mikhail ridge. There they ran into heavy fire and Lieutenant Rose\(^7\) was fatally wounded. His platoon, convinced that their own shells were falling in the area,

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\(^{8}\) They included a French doctor with two stretcher-bearers who did admirable work collecting both French and Australian wounded under fire. One stretcher-bearer was killed attempting to rescue a wounded Australian.

\(^{9}\) Lt T. Oversby (of Leederville, WA), the second-in-command of the company, and the CSM, WO2 F. L. Martin (Cottesloe, WA), were killed here.

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\(^{2}\) Lt R. J. C. Reid.


moved back into the comparative shelter of the wadi. The two platoons on the left—Sergeant Salom's, which was leading, and Lieutenant Harper's—met heavy fire on the El Atiqa ridge itself. In a successful attack on a strong post both Harper and Salom were wounded, Harper fatally, but Caro established the survivors on the ridge.

Lieutenant Cutler was with Caro's company as artillery observation officer. In the advance Cutler became involved in the infantry fight, and captured eight Frenchmen from three machine-gun posts. The enemy in the first nest were persuaded to surrender by the sight of this six-feet-four-inches of elongated Aussie jumping right into their midst. Those in the second nest were talked into it by Cutler's limited French. A grenade dropped into the third plus the assistance of a Bren-gunner from the battalion, caused its occupants to make an instant decision on the subject.

The infantry's wireless would not work in such hilly country and Cutler offered to go back to the river to a pre-arranged rendezvous with Lieutenant Macmeikan, of his regiment, and carry a telephone line forward so that he could bring artillery fire down on the enemy posts. On the way, however, he was severely wounded in the leg. There was no artillery link with the forward companies of the 2/16th until Macmeikan established a post about 300 yards north of the demolished bridge on the morning of the 7th.

Hearman's company, which had followed Caro's across the river, also met heavy fire soon after it began moving up from the road at zero hour. Gallantly guided by Warrant-Officer Burbidge and Sergeant Gray, the right-hand platoon took one French post and was moving on when both Gray and Burbidge and then Lieutenant Reid were wounded and the attack faded. The remainder of the company, farther to the left, had been pinned down by enemy fire. It withdrew and reorganised among the trees just north of the river. Hearman, with the thirty of his company who remained, tried to move left then right, but in each direction ran into severe fire. Three signallers, Corporal Bremner and Privates Hickey and Bright, worked their way forward with a telephone line, reporting what they could see of the progress of the fight to MacDonald as they went.

8 Lt A. L. Salom, WX3567; 2/16 Bn. Farmer; of Brunswick Junction, WA; b. Perth, WA, 7 Jan 1906.
2 Cutler lay isolated and exposed for some hours until some of his prisoners carried him to the road. There, next morning, Lt Macmeikan found him and had him taken to Yereta. When the regimental medical officer, Capt A. M. Johnson (of North Sydney), was attending him, shell-die descended on the building, a shell burst in an open doorway and wounded several men. Johnson had Cutler placed on a truck which was driven, under sharp fire, to the main dressing station where Cutler's leg was amputated.
4 Capt R. J. C. Reid, WX3859; 2/16 Bn. Shipping clerk; of Perth, WA; b. West Perth, WA, 27 Apr 1917.
By 11 a.m. they reached Hearman who gave MacDonald an account of the morning's fighting. Its position clearly seen by the enemy, and under intermittent machine-gun fire and frequent mortar bombardments, Hearman's company held on until 4 p.m. when he was wounded by a splinter from one of the shells now being fired into the orchard area by the supporting British naval vessels. Before he left he ordered Captain Anderson, his second-in-command, to withdraw the remnants of the company to the south side of the river when darkness fell. Anderson did so.

At zero a small party from MacDonald's remaining company had been sent to the delta to clear the enemy out of it. They had reached wire entanglements on the north side when the enemy opened fire. When Sergeant Dungey, Corporal Charlesworth and Private Ross went forward to cut a way through the wire the first two were killed and Ross severely wounded; the rest withdrew. At 8 o'clock the remainder of the company went forward to give covering fire for the attack which (if all had gone well) Hearman's company was to have made on the orchard area. It was still believed that Hearman's company had reached its first objective and would soon be advancing west into the orchards. However, when the supporting company reached the river it met heavy fire and suffered casualties. Finally, the attack on the orchards having failed, it was sent back to Yerate. Before the company withdrew, Corporal Wieck and Private Douglas crossed the delta under fire and carried in the brave Ross.

During the day the telephone lines to Colonel MacDonald's headquarters had been broken again and again by shell-fire, and by the tracks of carriers moving on the road. It was not until Hearman spoke to him that he had been able to gain even an approximate picture of the situation at El Atia. It seemed to him then that the attack had failed but soon he learnt that the 2/27th on the right were advancing to their third objective. In mid-afternoon Brigadier Stevens ordered Colonel MacDonald to consolidate and give up no ground, and to protect his left flank along the El Atia spur at a distance of 400 yards from the road. After midnight, he ordered, patrols should be sent into the orchards to find and destroy the machine-gun posts there. One company was to be placed astride the coast road beyond Yerate to guard against counter-attack.

Thereupon, when Captain Anderson arrived at battalion headquarters with the remnants of his company, they were trucked back along the road to the river crossing and, in the darkness, climbed the El Atia ridge and took up a position there; in the late evening, Captain Mac-

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8 During the day the cruisers Ajax, Perth and Carlisle and six destroyers gave supporting fire.
11 Pte C. F. Ross, WX5792. 2/16 Bn. Farm labourer; of Bayswater, WA; b. Glasgow, Scotland, 19 Nov 1913. Died of wounds 8 Jul 1941.
12 Sgt E. F. R. Douglas, WX4307. 2/16 Bn. Orchard hand; of Collie Cardiff, WA; b. Meerut, India, 6 Dec 1905.
Kinnon's company with some twenty men who had trickled back in the disorganisation of the other companies, and with a section of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion, crossed the river and formed a defensive line north of the demolished bridge. Thus, during the night, what was left of the three attacking companies of the 2/16th Battalion were reorganised and dug in along the El Atiqa ridge with the reserve company holding the bridge-head behind them. They were more or less on the line that was held at dusk, from Robinson's position in the house on the main road, through Caro's thinly-held line on the ridge to the lonely outpost Madigan had established in the cave-storeroom on the right. The 2/16th had been set a very hard task—a frontal attack against a skilful enemy well dug in in a dominating position—but, at heavy cost, they established a bridge-head on the El Atiqa ridge across the Damour and pinned down the main French forces.

Meanwhile, at the eastern extremity of the attacking line an isolated fight had been going on all day on the 1,500-foot ridge up which the road wound towards Beit ed Dine, and along which it was feared that the French might launch a flank attack on the Australian force, and use tanks and armoured cars, which could travel along that road from Beirut.

At 10 p.m. on 5th July Nicholls' company of the 2/27th (whose later advance to Daraya has already been described) was in the wooded area between Ed Dalamiye and the Damour tributary. At 8 p.m. Russell's company of the 2/14th and Captain Rhoden's were at Kramdech, both companies being under Rhoden's command for the operation; they had moved forward toward the tributary, the infantry column being followed by a string of mules carrying the mortars and mortar bombs, and by signalers reeling out mile after mile of telephone wire.

Russell's company clambered north-east across the ridges in the darkness and at 3.15 was on the Beit ed Dine road where it travelled, a mere ledge, across the face of the 567-metre ridge. Here the men built a rough wall of stones to block the road and waited for dawn. At the first glimmer of light Lieutenant Treacy, with twelve men, was sent up the slope of Hill 567 to discover whether it was occupied. They came under fire from a strong French post, not on the summit at which Treacy was aiming but on the saddle between it and a twin knoll to the west; they withdrew leaving two men in the hands of the French. Russell thereupon organised an attack with his three platoons, Treacy's to climb to the western knoll while Lieutenant Bisset moved on to Hill 567 with two
platoons; the French defeated this attempt by rolling grenades down the slope. At 8.30 a.m. three armoured cars appeared from the direction of Beit ed Dine, and drove to within 200 yards of the road-block. Here a party of Russell’s men were stationed and, as the cars arrived, Corporal Daley stood up and threw a sticky bomb at the leading one. It failed to stick and exploded harmlessly on the road, but the cars hastily retreated about 2,000 yards along the road, halted, and began firing their 2-pounder guns. Encouraged by this support the enemy infantry sallied forth to drive the Australians off the road, but were beaten back with small arms and mortar fire, whereupon Russell’s men attacked again at 9.15 a.m., supported by mortar fire, and gained a foothold on the upper slopes of Hill 567. A third attack, at 12.30, drove the French off the peak.

The fight continued, the French counter-attacks becoming stronger as the enemy force, which, at the outset, had consisted of about a platoon of Senegalese with French officers and N.C.O’s, was strengthened by the addition of men who were being driven along the tops of the ridge by Rhoden’s company at the western end of the El Mourhira spur. This company with Nicholls’ company of the 2/27th had secured its objective before dawn and without opposition. The South Australians had then marched away to the north while Rhoden moved east along the spur to link with Russell, having built an obstacle on the road where it joins the secondary road between it and the Damour tributary.

Finally at 5.30 p.m. the French, now apparently about two platoons strong, made their best-organised attack on Russell’s company, using smoke to conceal their advance but shouting as they came. This attack reached to within 40 yards of Treacy’s platoon on the summit before it broke; one French officer and nineteen others were lying dead within sight of the defenders, but the well-dispersed Australians had no casualties. After another less determined effort by the enemy had failed, the two companies linked; the French withdrew, and did not again dispute possession of El Mourhira. As soon as daylight had come the value of these heights had been apparent; they commanded a view not only of two miles of the road from Beit ed Dine—the only road along which vehicles could possibly carry reinforcements to the French—but also of the country over which the main attack by the 2/27th was moving north.

As soon as Brigadier Stevens received news of the good progress of the 2/27th he decided to use the remainder of the 2/14th, which was his reserve, to move through the corridor the 2/27th formed and advance to the line of the Wadi Daqoun north of Daraya. He gave Lieut-Colonel Cannon orders to this effect at midday on 6th July and at 3 p.m. the battalion (less the two companies on El Mourhira) set off from the Wadi Qassouba by way of Er Rezaniye to El Boum where they began to arrive

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1 Russell’s company (which had lost only two men killed and two wounded in the day) remained on the El Mourhira feature until the Armistice, generally on short rations because all supplies had to be carried for many hours over rough country. All water had to be brought up from the river 1,500 feet below them. They managed, however, to buy bread from the few villagers in houses near the road.
half an hour after midnight. At 2.50 p.m. Colonel Chapman, Allen's G.S.O.1, asked Brigadier Savige whether his 17th Brigade could securely advance to El Boum by day, setting off that afternoon; but Stevens urged upon Savige, who consulted him, that it would be unwise to attempt the descent to the river in daylight in full view of the French artillery, and Chapman agreed.

Consequently, while the 2/14th was arriving at El Boum, the 2/3rd—the leading battalion of Savige's brigade—began filing down to the river, and the 2/5th was preparing to follow. Soon half the 2/14th, then the 2/3rd, and then the 2/5th would be strung out along the corridor. Savige decided to hold the 2/2nd Pioneers in the coastal area. The orders given to the leading battalions of the 17th Brigade were to form up on the track from the crossing to Hill 498, to move thence to a start-line on the Wadi Daqoun (assuming the 2/14th had secured it), and thence to advance to the objective, which was a line from the coast, through Deir Mar Jorjos to the high hills on the east, probably including Hill 569. To perform these orders would demand uncommon stamina and fortitude. As companies of the 21st Brigade had found, simply to reach Daraya in one more or less continuous march, much of it by night, was a considerable feat. For the 17th Brigade the march to the Wadi Daqoun beyond Daraya was to be simply the move to the start-line; after that their main task would begin.

The fact that the 2/3rd and 2/5th were to go so far into hills through which even mules might not be able to follow made it necessary to give the men a heavy load. Each carried forty-eight hours' rations, not less than fifty rounds of ammunition (some carried up to 300), two grenades, one sticky bomb, a blanket and a full water-bottle. Mules were to carry reserves of ammunition and one "No. 11" wireless set for each battalion; the brigade signal section was to run a telephone line to each battalion. No artillery observing officers were to accompany the infantry; it was left to the commanding officers to signal for artillery support either by wireless or by telephone, or, if these failed, by signal lamp to the observation post on Hill 394; this had soon become the best source of information—sometimes the only one—on the inland flank.

From El Labiye onwards the cliff leading down to the river crossing was so precipitous and a shower of rain had now made it so slippery that the men of the 2/3rd often found themselves sliding down on their backsides. A drizzle of rain added to the difficulty. Half way down, the track, which had been a target all the previous day, disappeared in shale caused by the shelling; and equipment lay around marking the trail of the 2/27th Battalion on the previous night. The mules were left at this point.

When the head of the 2/3rd Battalion arrived at the Beit ed Dine road soon after 3 a.m. on the 7th an officer of the 2/27th Battalion pointed out the line of signal wire leading to the battalion's headquarters at El Boum. Bishop, Savige's brigade major, accompanied the battalion to this

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*The two coys of the 2/14th had decided before they began to descend to the river that the country was too rugged for mules and had left their animals at Er Rezaniye.*
point but there he left it, first requesting Major Stevenson, commanding the 2/3rd, to move to the left of his battalion when he reached the forming-up place so as to be close to Lieut-Colonel King, commander of the 2/5th, who was to coordinate the advance of the two units.

The leading party of the 2/3rd lost track of the signal wire, which had been buried in loose earth dislodged by the shell-fire. After searching for it for fifteen minutes Stevenson led the men straight up the hill, near the summit of which they found the track again. It was now becoming light. The leading company reached El Boum at 5.30 a.m., but it was about 8.30 before the entire battalion had arrived and stragglers had been collected. Eight men were missing, as was the Intelligence officer who had been injured crossing the river. After breakfast and one hour's rest the battalion was ready to move at 8.45 a.m., but it was not until 9.50 that Stevenson was able to find King, and a conference was held.

King's battalion had the same difficulty as the 2/3rd in clambering down the narrow track to the river in single file. "This plus the fact that the Cypriots in charge of the 2/3rd Battalion’s mules stopped for no reason at all (says one account) caused many unnecessary halts . . . . In the dark, with mules dispersed through the column almost continuously tangling both themselves and the troops among the signal wires, it was an impossible trip." King ordered that all mules be put off the track.

Where the track to El Bourn reached the top of the first series of steep rises King found some stragglers (of the 2/3rd) asleep. From here King, who had sprained his ankle two days before and was in acute discomfort, went forward to El Boum to find Stevenson. His troops, now very weary, reached El Boum between 7.45 and 8.45 a.m. There King decided that the proposed forming-up place, which followed the line of the steeply-faced ridge overlooking the Wadi Zouade, was not suitable and fixed a new line running east-west through El Bourn where the 2/3rd Battalion formed on the right and the 2/5th on the left.

At 10 a.m., just after King's conference with Stevenson, a mule train arrived with one of the wireless sets and King was able to inform Savige of his progress. Blankets and other gear that could be dispensed with were placed in a dump and, at 10.30 a.m., the battalions began to advance due north each in diamond or arrowhead formation with 500 yards between companies, 200 yards between platoons and the men in single file. The 2/3rd Battalion on the right reached Daraya at 12.30 and there found Nicholls of the 2/27th who told Stevenson that he had patrols on Hill 560 (which rose high on their right rear) and that a company of the 2/14th had crossed the Daqoun and swung towards Damour. Machine-gun fire was coming from the ridges ahead.

To return to the right flank: the 2/3rd Battalion had lost touch with the 2/5th after leaving the forming-up position beyond El Boum. "The map (says its report) failed to reveal the true nature and the steepness of the wadis." It was late in the afternoon before the battalion was in position

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8 The 2/3rd had no W.T. but was communicating with the observation post on Hill 394 (where Bishop was now stationed) with a lamp.
on the “start-line” beyond the Wadi Daqoun; one company set off to occupy
the steep El Qarqafe feature on the right and the other three companies
were ordered to occupy the Kheurbet el Biar ridge (along the southern
slopes of which a company of the 2/14th Battalion had advanced down to
Damour earlier in the day). King arrived soon after this advance began
and said that, because of the number of points from which enemy machine-
gun fire was breaking out, he wished to postpone any attack until next
morning—the 8th—when he would ask for artillery support.

Soon Captain Hutchison’s company of the 2/3rd had climbed the pine-
clad Qarqafe razor-back, where French shells which were arriving
spasmodically lit the trees and the men had to fight a bush-fire. In the
centre Captain Murchison’s company occupied Hill 335 about 3 p.m. Later
Stevenson received from brigade headquarters a signal timed an hour
earlier warning him that a French battalion was on his right flank an
hour and a half away. He informed Lieutenant Clarke of the 2/3rd
Machine Gun Battalion who had a platoon in position on the south side
of the wadi. In due course, about 100 enemy troops appeared and began
to unload mules under the pines east of Hill 512. Clarke held his men’s
fire until the French were 600 yards away then fired “with devastating
effect” on the troops and on their mule train. The battalion’s 3-inch mortar
opened fire on the French and completed the job of dispersing them and
their mules.

At 5.45 p.m., Savige, anxious not to lose the effect of surprise by delay
which might enable the enemy to counter this move on the flank, ordered
King to begin his advance to Deir Mar Jorjos that evening. “Tired men
who had won through,” Savige said, “were better than dead men killed
in storming occupied positions.” King agreed and the weary men of the
2/5th moved off again, now with three companies forward and in line and
one company following, all moving in single file across the wadis but
resuming normal formation as soon as each wadi had been crossed. The
battalion crossed the steep Wadi Daqoun in fading light and in the dark-
ness the pace became slower and slower. At each halt men would fall
asleep, and it took much time to make sure they were all awake when
the march had to be resumed. After the 2/5th had passed through the
2/3rd, Stevenson decided that it would be unwise to continue his advance
in the dark, in case fire fights developed with the 2/5th Battalion, moving
northward along what would also be his line of advance.

In the meantime the two companies of the 2/14th which had passed
through Daraya at 8.30 a.m. that day ahead of the battalions of the 17th
Brigade had been advancing westwards, one company (Captain Noonan’s)
along the ridge north of the Wadi Daqoun, and the other (Captain
Arthur’s) along the ridge south of it. This was in obedience to Stevens’
plan that they should swing into Damour from the east and gain touch
with the 2/2nd Pioneers there. After Noonan’s company had moved 200

* Capt W. H. Arthur, VX43377; 2/14 Bn. Carrier; of Shepparton, Vic; b. Mooroorooana, Vic, 22
Feb 1910.
yards along the ridge one of the two leading platoons found two enemy soldiers who surrendered. The weary men marched on without opposition until they reached a point about 400 yards from the edge of the town. There they rested for two hours.

Arthur's company on the ridge south of the wadi had been ordered by Cannon to advance along the Daraya ridge to Hill 225 from which, the map showed, a view could be obtained far to the south and north and over Damour town on the west. He sent one of his platoons (nineteen strong) along the northern slope of the ridge, another (twenty strong) along the ridge and held his third platoon (one corporal and three privates) as a reserve. When they were 400 yards from the hill machine-gun fire broke out from French troops who were holding it. The men on the ridge went to ground, but Arthur ordered his platoon on the right to move to higher ground and give covering fire. At the same time he sent his "reserve" to the left where they too were pinned down by fire from four machine-guns posted round the hill. Arthur sent a message back to Daraya asking for mortars and received instead two Vickers guns of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion. These arrived late in the afternoon, the gunners quickly found the range and so disorganised the French and Senegalese defenders that the infantrymen were able to press forward. At the same time the French found themselves being attacked by other Australians coming from the direction of Hill 104 at the south-western extremity of the ridge. These belonged to a strong patrol led by Lieutenants Katekar and Mulligan of the 2/27th which Nicholls had sent in that direction. Finding it held by French troops whose machine-gun fire pinned his men down on the bare ridge, Katekar sent back a runner, Private Burzacott, who pointed out the enemy's positions to Captain Samson who was forward observing for the 2/4th Field Regiment. Samson brought down accurate artillery fire until the watchers could see French soldiers running, clearly silhouetted against the drifting smoke. Katekar's patrol then moved along the ridge towards Hill 225, where at dusk the French defence, now pressed from three sides, began to disintegrate.

Meanwhile, in Arthur's area Sergeant Thomson and seven men, stalking forward on the right in the dim light, surprised two Frenchmen and sixteen Senegalese who surrendered. A little later, when it was dark, in a skirmish on Hill 225 itself, Thomson and Private Kramme were hit with bullets at short range. About the same time Katekar's patrol moving up towards Hill 225 from Hill 104 also came under fire in the darkness and Mulligan and one other were killed. But by midnight the whole feature had been cleared of the enemy, 18 of whom had been killed, and 28, mostly Senegalese, taken prisoner. Six machine-guns, 10,000 rounds

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* Lt A. W. Thomson, VX15794; 2/14 Bn. Clerk; of Kew, Vic; b. Ivanhoe, Vic, 6 May 1918.
* Pte J. H. Kramme, VX16372; 2/14 Bn. Farm labourer; of Mossiface, Vic; b. Melbourne, 29 Jul 1918.
of ammunition, 300 grenades and other equipment were found abandoned
by the French, whose strength at the outset was estimated at 150.

It was indeed a triumph (Arthur reported) and everyone though worn and hungry
was very happy and bucked up.

Noonan's company which we left on the northern side of the Wadi
Daqoun only 400 yards from the outskirts of Damour itself could hear
intense fire being exchanged on the other side of the wadi to the south-east,
yet they had met no enemies; evidently the way into the town was open.
Lieutenant McGavin, one of Noonan's platoon commanders, urged him
to advance into the town, arguing that at least there would be good water
there, perhaps food, for they were on short rations. Eventually Noonan
decided to hold his headquarters and one platoon where they were and
send two platoons into the town. As the infantry advanced cautiously
along the streets shots were exchanged with a party of Frenchmen, where-
upon the Australians occupied some sturdy stone buildings. Soon a French
N.C.O. led a party of ten white troops searching along the street. The
Australians waited until these were so close to them that they could not
miss, then fired, killing or wounding every man.

About 4 p.m. parties of Senegalese, pressed from the east by Arthur's
company and the south by Katekar's men, began to trickle straight into
Noonan's company. First came a handful of Senegalese who surrendered
when fired on. Twenty minutes later more Senegalese, commanded by a
French officer, began to crowd down the hillside opposite Noonan's men.
There were more than 100 of them closely bunched together. Sergeant
Mott waited until they were only 300 yards away and then fired a burst
over their heads and shouted “Surrender!” at the top of his voice. The
Senegalese ran for cover but the hillside was bare and the Australians
were in secure positions that had been dug by the French. There was
some more firing, the French officer was hit, and ninety-two Senegalese,
some of whom had been wounded on Hill 225, surrendered. Later in the
afternoon more parties of Senegalese appeared but, apparently warned by
the sound of firing from Damour, veered to the east. Hungry, thirsty and
weary, Noonan's men packed their prisoners (who outnumbered them)
into a house on the edge of Damour, established themselves in other
houses, all empty of both people and food, and, somewhat anxiously,
waited for the battle to catch them up. All night they could hear vehicles
driving into the town from the north. The French knew they were there
and their own gunners did not, with the result that the neighbourhood
was shelled intermittently by both sides.

* Capt M. L. Mott, VX15274; 2/14 Bn. Sub-manager of newspaper; of Albury, NSW; b. Albury,
9 Jun 1915.
was bridged this day and vehicles began to cross at 2.30 p.m. During the afternoon three tanks and two companies of the 2/2nd Pioneers moved into the plantation area.

During daylight on the 7th the eastern side of the 2/27th’s corridor was not attacked, and it was apparent that the French had stationed no troops on or near the eastern heights overlooking the route from El Boum to Daraya. The protection of the route against attack from the east was the task of a line of three large standing patrols each of which occupied one of the hills that rose steeply from the ridge in which the southern group of parallel wadis that ran down towards the Damour plantations had their source: the remnants of one company of the 2/27th were placed on Hill 498, another company whose headquarters were near Er Roumane had a platoon on the slopes of Hill 560, the next main feature to the north, Nicholls, at Daraya, had placed a patrol on Hill 512. Hill 560, a pine-clad eminence with a flat top from which the sides fell almost sheer for 100 feet, dominated the area. A good track linked to the road from Kafr Matta and Abey led from the east to its foot, then forked round it, sending one branch to Er Roumane and the other, deviously, to El Boum.

At 1.45 p.m. on the 7th July Moten sent his Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Dean, to Hill 560 to see whether, from that eminence, he could plot the position of enemy guns that were shelling the battalion’s area from somewhere to the north-east. Late that night Dean sent back news that the enemy was digging in on the eastern slopes of Hill 560. This was a serious matter, because thence the French could observe the whole of the corridor; indeed they could place much of it under long-range fire from machine-guns. Immediately Moten ordered Captain A. J. Lee at Er Roumane, in whose area Hill 560 lay, to drive the enemy off the hill.

One platoon of Lee’s company would attack from the west while another platoon which Moten put under Lee’s command would attack from the south. Lee’s force reached the slopes of Hill 560 about midnight but encountered heavy fire from mortars and machine-guns. Lee then organised a second attack using three platoons, and also a depleted platoon under Sergeant Cowan, which had been sent out from El Boum to locate the patrol on Hill 498, had come into Lee’s area and was co-opted to join in the fight. Still in the darkness this force attacked up the slopes of Hill 560, arrived within 180 yards of the French positions and there held on, expecting that the French, so closely pressed, would surrender when daylight came. They were not surprised when a French officer came forward and began to parley. However,

it was a ruse (wrote a diarist) enabling the enemy to crawl to a ledge overlooking our men and launch a dastardly attack with grenades, the officer disappearing behind a rock.

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News came back that not only were the attacking troops—a collection of platoons and patrols from three companies—held on the slopes of 560 but that Lee's headquarters west of Er Roumane were under attack by fifty or sixty French troops with mortars who were advancing from the east round the north of the hill, and that he was hard pressed and suffering casualties.

Moten, learning of the strength of the French position, sent forward the few who remained of Lieutenant Thomas' company. This small reinforcement—one of the platoons contained only six men—was held all day by French fire south-west of Er Roumane on the way to Hill 560 having run into the French attack on company headquarters. Lieutenant Sims was next sent forward with a platoon to join in the fight. The French near Er Roumane kept up their pressure for six hours, Lee keeping them at bay with the help of a section of Vickers machine-guns and some mortars of the 2/5th Battalion whose teams, fortunately for him, were labouring along well behind the advance of their own unit.

Thus, at midday, nearly all Moten's troops were committed. Of the three rifle companies which were south from Daraya all but two sections were in the fight either on the upper slopes of 560 or on the lower slopes between Point 278 and Er Roumane. In mid-afternoon Captain White took the remaining two sections forward with orders to take command of the whole action. Later the force attacking Lee's headquarters area, now 150 to 200 strong, was seen moving back out of range to the north-east. Although this thrust had pressed Lee hard the attackers had been in a very uncomfortable situation in that they were overlooked by part of Nicholls' company along the Daraya ridge about 500 yards to the north and were under fire all day from that direction.

French prisoners were taken, and these said that the counter-attack was being made by three companies of the 1/6th Foreign Legion and a company 200 strong of the 29th Algerians. The Algerians had arrived from France by way of Germany, Yugoslavia and Greece five days before.

As soon as it was dark yet another attack was made on Hill 560. White decided to withdraw his men to the terraced southern slopes and seek artillery support. Learning of this from a runner Moten went forward with an artillery officer. He arrived at the company positions at 5 a.m. on the 8th and, suspecting that the French might have withdrawn after such a mauling, ordered that patrols be sent forward. The hill was unoccupied, and many French dead were lying there. The victors too had lost heavily and each company had now little more than the strength of a platoon. White's company, for example, was only forty-five strong when the fight was over.

At dawn on the 8th the 2/3rd Battalion was on the Kheurbet el Biar ridge; soon after it was light, French artillery and mortar fire began falling along it. Enemy gun positions could be seen through the gap in the hills cut by the Wadi Daquon, but the 2/3rd had no means of bringing its own

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*Lt Thomas was killed here.
artillery fire to bear on them. At 6 a.m. Captain Parbury reported that he could see Australians at Deir Mar Jorjos on the northern sky-line. The battalion immediately moved forward to occupy the heights on the east which were its objective. When they had reached El Batadiye, Stevenson ordered Parbury to send a patrol to Hill 569, a commanding feature about 2,000 yards to the right.

Lieutenant Murdoch’s platoon, to which Parbury gave this task, had climbed only half way up that hill when it was pinned to the ground by machine-gun fire, whereupon Stevenson ordered Parbury to capture the hill and if possible some guns firing somewhere east of it. Parbury’s men were not only weary but thirsty, because they had not found any water to refill their bottles, and the mules carrying cans of water had not been able to cross the steep Daqoun; they thought the battle was won and did not relish the prospect of a long climb and an attack at the end of it. He led the men towards Hill 569 along a wooded ridge leading from the wadi. Without having met opposition he occupied the southernmost of two knolls forming the summit, and thence, about 500 yards to the east, saw five field guns on the outskirts of the village of Baeouarta. These were the guns that had been harassing the battalions along the corridor from the outset. Parbury ordered one platoon to cover the guns and the northern knoll, and another under Warrant-Officer MacDougal to capture it (it was bare, whereas the southern was wooded). MacDougal and his men advanced along the saddle and had climbed almost to the top of the 400-foot slope when heavy machine-gun fire came from round the guns. With bullets striking the hill round them, the attackers rushed the knoll, while the supporting platoons fired on the gun positions, which were accessible from Hill 569 only along a narrow track on a steep-sided ridge. It was then 2 p.m., and until dark a fire-fight continued between Parbury’s company (which Murdoch then joined) and the enemy round the battery. The men had little water left. Late in the afternoon of the 9th Parbury’s company attacked and, without loss, took the five guns and occupied the village.4

The 2/5th Battalion had reached the wadi south of Deir Mar Jorjos after midnight on the 7th-8th. The forward companies were engaged by machine-guns and rifles but soon silenced them. One company as it moved across the wadi met some opposition, but overcame it, capturing three prisoners and overrunning four 75’s and eight medium machine-guns. At 3 a.m. on the 8th Deir Mar Jorjos was occupied and Captain Rowell’s5 company moved out to secure the high ground forward of En Naame. A fighting patrol which entered the village captured a French colonel of the Foreign Legion and his staff. This company remained among the trees and buildings at En Naame, two others were at and round Deir Mar Jorjos, and the fourth rifle company and headquarters company were

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4 An outstanding leader in this company was Pte Hector Mackay (of Curran, NSW), acting as a section leader, an old soldier reputed to be over 60, and an expert rifleman.

Lieutenant A. R. Cutler being carried towards Yerate by French prisoners. The medical officer of the 2/5th Field Regiment, Captain A. M. Johnson, is on the right. French shells are straddling the road to the rear.
Shell fire covering the advance toward the wireless mast at Khalde.

(Australian War Memorial)
south of it. By this time the infantry signallers had run out of wire, but by about 8 a.m. Captain Samson, of the 2/4th Field Regiment, had managed to bring his line through—it was now 15 miles long—and with it King was able to speak to Savige and report his position.

Soon after dawn on the 8th the French provided evidence of having recovered from the first shock that followed the arrival of Australian troops so deep behind their positions. Mortar bombs began falling among Rowell's company, from mortars sited on the ridge north of Deir Mar Jorjos. At 12.30 p.m. the headquarters company was brought forward to replace Rowell's, which was sent down the steep slopes to the main road to establish a road-block near the point where the track from En Naame meets the Beirut road. Seventy-five yards from the road, however, Rowell saw enemy troops in position under a bridge. He decided that one platoon should storm the bridge while the other two platoons gave covering fire.

I had orders from the company commander to shoot my way through (reported the commander of the leading platoon, Lieutenant Leask). I picked out a corporal (Matthew) and two Tommy-gunners for the job and later, on the corporal's suggestion, added a Bren gun. In order to make as little movement as possible I did not view the enemy position but sent the corporal forward to look round the corner through a periscope. The corporal put forward a plan of attack which I adopted, and then he, two Tommy-gunners, a Bren gunner and myself stormed the position which was 75 yards along the wadi from the corner. The corporal threw a grenade while advancing, and as we neared the bridge and the dust had cleared, the last of the enemy could be seen disappearing to the rear.

From the observation post on Deir Mar Jorjos, however, Colonel King could see the enemy gathering for a counter-attack and ordered the artillery to put down a concentration. "The enemy broke and fled," wrote the battalion's diarist. "It is thought that this action led to the collapse of Damour."

In fact the town of Damour was now being pressed hard from three directions. The 2/5th had closed the road leading out of it to the north, the 2/14th was in the north-eastern outskirts, and the 2/2nd Pioneers were moving up from the south. It was difficult to coordinate these groups and there was a particular danger that artillery fire brought down in support of one of them might fall on another. Early in the afternoon, Brigadier Stevens informed Brigadier Savige that his troops would be withdrawn from the gardens south of the town while both town and gardens were bombarded. At 1.55 p.m. Savige passed this information on to Colonel King. Savige gathered from reports received from the 2/5th that part of that battalion was in the north-east corner of the town (actually the men who were there belonged to the 2/14th), and at 3.25 asked that the northern end of Damour be not bombarded. At 5 p.m. Colonel Chapman visited Brigadier Savige's headquarters with orders from General Allen

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4 Capt J. C. Leask, VX7043. 2/5 Bn 1940-42; Directorate of Engr Eapt (Small Craft Sec) 1943-45. Shipping clerk; of St. Kilda, Vic; b. Melbourne, 12 Feb 1918.
that when Damour fell the 21st Brigade would become responsible for the area south of the Wadi Daqoun, and the 17th responsible for the area north of it; the proposed role of the 17th would be to gain contact along the coast road, starting from 24 to 48 hours after the fall of Damour, while the 21st advanced east through Abey.

At 7.30 p.m. enemy movement from the north-east of the 2/5th Battalion was reported; Rowell’s company was withdrawn from the road-block, and the battalion occupied an arc from En Naame on the left, through Deir Mar Jorjos to Hill 230, south-east of it.

Nightfall, 8th July

During this day Noonan’s company and Arthur’s of the 2/14th Battalion had remained in or near the eastern outskirts of Damour, the one north the other south of the Wadi Daqoun. In the morning battalion headquarters was still not in touch with Noonan. Warrant-Officer Tipton* led a patrol across the Wadi Daqoun to find him but failed, though he located both the 2/3rd and 2/5th Battalions, and found the body of

Lance-Corporal White\(^9\) of Noonan's company, who had been sent back the previous day to locate his rear platoon and had not returned. Later in the morning, however, a runner from Arthur's company south of the Wadi Daqoun reached Noonan with the news that Arthur was in contact with battalion headquarters. At midday Arthur himself arrived, with a ration party, and, after a day during which there was spasmodic firing, instructions arrived at Noonan's headquarters that Arthur should move his company westward and Noonan should move to the south. This order was cancelled an hour later, to Noonan's great relief because, as he wrote afterwards, "the enemy was still between us and the troops to the south and I feared we would come into conflict with our own troops".

During the 8th the 2/16th improved its positions on the Mar Mikhail and El Atiqa ridges. That morning Lieutenant Boyd's\(^1\) troop of the 6th Cavalry forded the Damour River and joined the three tanks of his regiment and the two companies of the 2/2nd Pioneers which had crossed the river the previous day. The Pioneers had pressed on and were now about a mile north of the river. Corporal Shannon,\(^2\) on this day as on the 7th, had led fighting patrols forward with great gallantry. The attackers could now make no further progress through the banana groves, however, because of heavy mortar and machine-gun fire from a line of strong-posts along a gully cutting through the plantations here. The tanks could not advance because the road was covered by French 75's. During the morning Captain Mills, commanding the cavalry squadron, intercepted a message from the brigade commander to Colonel Monaghan of the Pioneers asking him why he was not making progress, and Monaghan's reply that he was so far forward that he was ahead of the cavalry. Thereupon Mills indignantly sent three tanks forward. The two tank troops of this squadron of 6th Cavalry were commanded by twin brothers—Duncan\(^3\) and Gordon\(^4\) Glasgow—who resembled each other closely. Monaghan ordered the troop which came forward to investigate the road into Damour, believing wrongly that he was employing the same troop commander as had made a reconnaissance the day before, had been fired on by a 75-mm gun in a stone building on the right of the road at the southern edge of the town, and was therefore well aware of the position of the gun. Unwarned of the probable presence of this gun, however, Sergeant Gordon Glasgow nosed his tank round a bend in the road and was suddenly fired on by the 75 only 300 yards away. The first shot blew off a track. The second tank of the troop which was following came up to help

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\(^{1}\) Captain D. G. Boyd, NX12295. 6 Cav Regt; 2/9 Cdo Sqn. Articled law clerk; of Peak Hill, NSW; b. Belfast, N. Ireland, 3 Aug 1911.

\(^{2}\) Corporal T. A. Shannon, MM, VX42260; 2/2 Pnr Bn. Farmer; of Tallangatta, Vic; b. Melbourne, 8 Jun 1900. Drowned at sea while prisoner of war 24 Jun 1944.

\(^{3}\) Captain Duncan Glasgow, QX364. 6 Cav Regt and staff appts. Clerk; of Brisbane; b. Blackall, Qld. 8 Jul 1918.

\(^{4}\) Captain Gordon Glasgow, QX363. 6 Cav Regt and 2/1 Arm'd Bde. Shipping clerk; of Ascot, Qld; b. Blackall, Qld, 8 Jul 1918.
Glasgow whose gunner continued firing till his tank was hit again and set alight. Glasgow and his crew thereupon abandoned the tank and escaped while the gunner of the second vehicle gave covering fire. Lieutenant Macmeikan of the 2/5th Field Regiment saw the flash of the gun, and engaged and silenced it with artillery fire.

About 2 p.m., because little progress was being made, Stevens (as mentioned above) decided to withdraw Monaghan's Pioneers and the tanks and carriers and bombard the area. The French, however, shrewdly advanced as the Pioneers withdrew and most of the shells went over their heads; the ground lost was not regained that day, but a section of 4.5-inch howitzers was sent across the river to support the Pioneers. Captain Nason's company of the Pioneers attacked about 1 a.m. on the 9th, retook the ground that had been lost and, in the face of some rifle and machine-gun fire, advanced "well into the town". At 4 a.m. a troop of the 6th Cavalry went right through Damour. The town had fallen.

It soon became apparent that the French had made a large-scale withdrawal and, during the night, had abandoned every position for which they had been fighting so resolutely since the battle began. In and round Damour "stacks of un laid mines were beside the road". By 7 a.m. the 2/2nd Pioneer and 2/16th Battalions had made contact with Noonan's men on the north-east outskirts of Damour, and the 6th Cavalry with some of the Pioneers had advanced north to Karacol and had patrolled to the ridge beyond it.

In the 2/5th Battalion's area two companies now occupied the road-block and awaited orders from Colonel King who had gone along the Beirut road to see the positions taken up by the 2/2nd Pioneers forward of his companies.

During the night Brigadier Savige's staff learnt from a native that Abey and the line of high features on the east had been abandoned by the enemy and informed General Allen of this.

Early on the 9th Brigadier Berryman, who had now returned from command of the Merdjayoun sector to his post as commander of the 7th Division's Artillery, and Colonel O'Brien of the 2/5th Field Regiment drove through Damour to three and a half miles north of it reaching a point where two tanks of the 6th Cavalry under Lieutenant Ryrie had been halted by a road-block. Berryman ordered the Pioneers and the left company of the 2/5th to occupy a position astride the road, and then telephoned to the headquarters of the division to say that he had instructed the 2/5th Battalion to push on. Chapman pointed out that the 17th Brigade was not to advance to the second objective until the general ordered it. He would arrange for the Pioneers to come under the command of 17th Brigade, since they had advanced beyond Savige's own battalions. Guns of the 2/5th Regiment had now dashed northward through the town. The leading guns were deployed about Karacol under sharp fire from French guns, and engaged the forward French troops over open sights. Later they shelled the southern outskirts of Beirut at extreme range.
“Things were now getting a bit mixed,” wrote Savige later. In accordance with the arrangement outlined on the 8th, Savige was instructed to take over the area north of Damour and “straighten the matter out”\(^5\). The two forward troops of the 6th Cavalry, a battery of the 2/5th Field Regiment, a troop of the 2/2nd Anti-Tank Regiment and other detachments were put under Savige’s command, and he was instructed to relieve the 2/2nd Pioneers and put them in an area where they could obtain some rest.

Later in the afternoon, in obedience to the order to Stevens’ brigade to take Abey and Kafr Matta while Savige’s moved towards Beirut, a fighting patrol of the 2/27th Battalion under Sergeant Martin\(^6\) moved into the Daqoun area and into Abey and found that the French had just abandoned both places. The 2/14th Battalion, now concentrating at Daraya, was ordered to occupy Abey, Kafr Matta and the dominating Hill 903 which lay between them, and then to move on to the road junction and “block all the roads to the north and south”.

Savige went through Damour, found King, and, about 4.30 p.m., ordered him to relieve the Pioneers and use the cavalry to maintain contact with the enemy; he then returned to divisional headquarters to have his role clarified. Meanwhile, King established his headquarters on the road, and one of his companies relieved the Pioneers astride the road farther north. It was found that troops in this position could not protect the artillery and King ordered a night advance to a line from about Khalde on the left south-east across the hills for about two miles.

This forward move was completed by 4.20 a.m. on the 10th. The 2/5th was merely the skeleton of a battalion, none of the three forward companies exceeding forty-four men. There was only enough signal wire to lay a line to the centre company with a branch line to the company on the left.

Savige called on King that morning and instructed him to occupy the ridge overlooking Khalde from the east and patrol forward towards the next French road-block, about three-quarters of a mile south of a conspicuous wireless mast. The forward troops now had the support of the whole 2/5th Regiment and a troop of 6-inch howitzers of the 7th British Medium Regiment. King made a plan whereby some of these guns would concentrate on the wireless mast round which French guns were grouped, while others would put down a barrage 500 yards in front of the leading troops until zero hour and then would lift in 100-yard bounds every two minutes until all the guns were concentrating on Khalde. The French artillery fired heavily on the Australian positions during the day.

The attack began at 3.30 p.m. By 3.48 the leading company, despite mortar fire from the ridge on the right, had advanced 500 yards. The enemy’s artillery fire became more intense, but at 4.15 all companies of the battalion were advancing, and a few minutes later the leaders

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reached the French road-block and came under machine-gun fire from a blockhouse there. The road-block was made of "dragons' teeth" with stones piled on top, and a few yards behind it was another similar block. On the ridge to the right a platoon was held by mortar and machine-gun fire for two hours and a half. Tanks and carriers of the 6th Cavalry moved forward at this stage, and by 6.30 had cleared the road for 400 yards forward of the road-block.

Next morning (11th July) enemy fire dwindled and eventually ceased. At 1 p.m. King went forward to the road-block and ordered that a patrol from the company there probe forward for about 1,000 yards. The patrol returned and reported that it had not met any enemy. King then sent patrols forward from each company. All of these encountered the enemy; it was apparent that the patrol which had previously reported not meeting any enemy had been allowed to pass forward and back through his posts, which remained concealed and withheld their fire. About this time a squadron of enemy tanks paraded in full view on the sand dunes just beyond the wireless mast. King reported to Savige that he was in contact with the enemy's main defences; he was ordered to stay in position for the night and told that a coordinated attack would be planned for the next morning.

Savige had ordered the 2/3rd Battalion, in the hills on his right, to occupy dominating ridges round Aramoun and north of it. Early on the 11th this battalion had moved forward. Already they were so far into the hills that it was either difficult or impossible to carry rations to the forward positions; Captain Murchison's company, for example, had no army rations for three days but lived by shooting and cooking goats and acquiring horse meat from the villagers. Hutchison's, Murchison's and Parbury's companies made the advance to the wooded heights in the area of Aramoun, commanding the road from Abey. Murchison's company reached its objective beyond Deir Mar Jorjos without incident. Parbury occupied Aramoun and the heights to the west without opposition,
but could hear heavy firing in Hutchison's area on his left. Hutchison's company—now only about thirty strong—came under sharp fire when due west of Aramoun. They withdrew and set up a mortar which duelled with French machine-guns on the opposite hill.

Meanwhile, farther inland the 2/14th Battalion, on the morning of the 10th, had begun moving towards Abey (already found unoccupied by a patrol of the 2/27th) and Kafr Matta. One company moved from Daraya to Daqoun, established a road-block there, and marched on to Abey. Passing through Daqoun it found four 155-mm guns and 200 rounds of ammunition. After dark Lieutenant Nye led a patrol to Ain Ksour and reported it unoccupied. In the early hours of the next morning the battalion occupied Ain Ksour.

While the battle was being fought at Damour there had been steady progress and some severe fighting by the 25th Brigade on the Jezzine flank. On the 6th the 2/31st followed the enemy as he withdrew north along the road to Beit ed Dine and early on the 7th were north of Niha and on the heights north of Bater; and a patrol of the Cheshire Yeomanry had passed through Mrousti and taken some prisoners there. A Swiss prisoner of the Foreign Legion said that the main French force had withdrawn from Bater because the Australian artillery had made it too difficult to bring supplies into the town. On the 6th Brigadier Plant ordered Colonel Withy's battalion group on his left to clear the enemy from the Beiqoun-Mazraat ech Chouf area. Withy gave Captain Marson's company of the 2/25th Battalion the task of advancing from Rharife and occupying the heights overlooking Mazraat ech Chouf.

Marson's plan was to place one platoon to cover his road-block north of Rharife while the other two, with artillery support directed by Lieutenant Johnson, of the 2/6th Field Regiment, who was to establish an observation post on Hill 1054, moved along the ridges from Rharife to Mazraat. One of these (Lieutenant Macaulay's) was to move along a track to Hill 1054; the other (Lieutenant Farquhar's) was to move along a gully farther south and then turn south-east and occupy an eminence south of 1054. At 3 p.m. on the 8th, when Farquhar and Macaulay were about half way to their objectives, the enemy opened fire from a hill to the north. Johnson crawled forward into the open and brought down very accurate fire on the French positions, but in spite of it, African troops began to attack Farquhar's platoon. They were checked, however, but the right section of Farquhar's platoon became confused and began to trickle back. Marson sent Macaulay's platoon forward to steady the position. Macaulay led his men on, but they came under fire from the south.

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7 Lt F. A. Stanton's platoon consisted of himself and eight men. "As a matter of interest, five of the nine were over thirty. We had had a gruelling week, and everyone was completely done in."
It was now 7 p.m.; Macaulay had lost two men killed and two wounded, and the company was under fire from both flanks. At dark Marson went forward and withdrew Macaulay's platoon. Thus the French held the high ground at Mazraat ech Chouf whence they had good observation of the Rharife area, and directed artillery fire on the area generally and on the Mtoulle-Rharife road in particular.

Farther east the company of the 2/31st Battalion on Hill 1069 north of Bater was heavily attacked twice on the 8th July, and each time the attack was repulsed. The first came in the morning. The French caught the Australians unawares and the first they knew of the attack was a shower of grenades; grenades were thrown back. Five French were killed and the attack faded, but not before Lieutenant Crook and Private Breakspear were killed and several men wounded, leaving the company only about twenty strong. The survivors appealed for help ("Did you see the picnic we were having? Can you give us any support?" they signalled to the company on the higher ground behind them), and about 4.30 Lieutenant Evans platoon of eighteen men came from that company on Hill 1203. The French next tried to circle round their left flank, but were driven off.

That day (the 8th) Captain Millroy's company of the 2/25th Battalion was ordered to make the battalion's second attempt to drive the French from their position on Hill 1054. After an artillery barrage which opened at 3.30 a.m. Millroy led his company forward at 4 a.m. Nothing happened until the attackers were approaching the objective. Then the French opened fire from 50 yards away with machine-guns. One platoon went to ground below a 5-foot wall, and then withdrew—it was still dark. Millroy was wounded here and Lieutenant Butler took command. When daylight came it showed some sections of both platoons to be out in the open in full view of the enemy on Hill 1054. These sections were unable to move, and the company just held its ground, returning the fire of the enemy troops who were in well-prepared positions among the rocks, whence they were using accurate machine-gun fire on fixed lines.

Soon after light Butler found Marson and they decided to attack in the afternoon, after the men had eaten and after an artillery program had been arranged. Butler's company, with two platoons forward, would attack from a position on the ridge about half a mile from the objective.

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8 Maj A. J. Millroy, QX6418; 2/25 Bn. Company director; of Rockhampton, Qld; b. Rockhampton, 8 Jul 1904.
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with Marson's depleted company on the right. Meanwhile Lieutenant Tilney's platoon of the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion had advanced towards 1054 from the right until it was 250 yards from a group of enemy machine-gun posts. A long fight ensued in the course of which Tilney, Corporal Mucklow and two Bren gunners silenced three machine-gun posts. Meanwhile a second platoon of Pioneers had moved forward along the edge of the gorge on Tilney's right. Tilney informed Butler by runner that he had taken the posts that had been ahead of him and it was arranged that the Pioneers should attack on the flank of the 2/25th. At 2.40 the artillery opened fire. After a fifty-minute bombardment the line of attackers moved forward with fixed bayonets and advanced 150 yards before the French opened a heavy but erratic fire with machine-guns and rifles. Some of the fire was from the right, so Marson ordered one of his platoons to swing in that direction to deal with it while the remainder, about seventy men, charged, firing from the hip and shoulder.

When they were 100 yards from the enemy he started to run. This was the end. Our boys started cooee-ing and cheering as they ran after them and a considerable amount of effort was needed by officers to prevent them from overrunning down the north-eastern end of the hill. It was a remarkable sight. . . . Unfortunately the F.O.O. had no wire and was unable to follow us through, otherwise we could have taken a heavy toll as the enemy evacuated Mazraat ech Chouf with vehicles, on foot, with pack teams that had been hastily saddled. It was a scene of confusion but out of effective L.M.G. range.

Thus Mazraat ech Chouf and the heights overlooking it were taken.

Before the firing ceased in Syria there was one more fierce fight in the central sector. Lieutenant Stable's company of the 2/31st Battalion, now only about sixty strong, was ordered to take the high ground overlooking Amatour and Badarane. A troop of the 6th Cavalry and the carrier platoon of the battalion were sent forward to help the infantry, but a broken bridge at Haret Jendal prevented them from taking part.

The country over which the attack was to be made was as difficult as any the battalion had met. A steep-sided wadi 800 feet deep separated the attackers from the objective, which rose another 600 feet on the far side of the wadi in a series of terraces four or five feet high. Merely to climb the hill was no small feat. The company's platoons were led by three outstanding soldiers—Lieutenant Hurrell and Sergeants Davis and Sheppard.

It was a bright night with a half moon. Guided by a native, the company set out from Niha, more than three miles from the objective as the crow flies and more than twice as far as the mule plods. It began its march at 9 p.m. on the 9th and climbed down gorges and up precipices

8 Sgt C. W. Mucklow, VX18985; 2/2 Par Bn. Truck and tractor driver; of Nathalia, Vic; b. Leamington, Eng, 12 Jul 1907. Died while prisoner of war 29 Jan 1944.


followed for a while by four mules carrying ammunition and rations. These
animals and their drivers were left behind, however, in the first two hours.

The steep gullies were all so alike that, in the dark, it was hard to
maintain direction. At 2.30 a.m., when the attackers were about 400 yards
from Badarane, heavy fire broke out from four or five machine-guns
which seemed in the darkness to be about 250 yards ahead. The fire was
on fixed lines and the attackers could see that it was going over their
heads and landing behind them.

Stable edged his men to the left of the Badarane heights, which were
covered with olive trees 20 to 30 feet apart, and then, with Davis’ and
Hurrell’s platoons leading and Sheppard’s following, he sent in an attack.
The weary men clambered uphill over terraces two to three feet high,
firing as they went. The only delay was on the right, where the advance
was held by intense fire until a quiet, cool West Australian, Private
Gordon, crept forward with rifle and bayonet to within a few yards of
a stubborn French post, then charged, and bayonetted the four men
who manned it.

On the left the gallant Davis—outstanding among young leaders in
this battalion—was killed, and others with him. Of the forty-three men
who went into the remote attack thirteen were killed or wounded before
it was over, but forty to fifty dead Senegalese were counted on the
ground, and a larger number of wounded men were taken prisoner—there
were probably 200 of the enemy in prepared positions on the Badarane
heights when the attack was launched. It was 5 a.m. before the fight was
over and the Australians had established themselves at Badarane in the
posts they had won. The Bren gunners and riflemen had fired heavily and
there were only about fifty rounds of ammunition for each man.

At 5 a.m. Stable sent a wireless message to Major Pollard at battalion
headquarters to say that he was on the objective but had little ammunition
or food. Two hours passed before a reply came back ordering Stable
to destroy any enemy equipment that could not be carried and withdraw
to battalion headquarters. While they were wrecking the French machine-
guns and gear, the men found many water-bottles and one-gallon kegs
filled with brandy—not uncommon in positions occupied by Senegalese
troops. These were destroyed, and with them a large wireless set that had
been used by a French artillery observation officer. While this work was
going on one of Sheppard’s corporals came to him and said: “There are
Frogs moving round on the left.” Sheppard looked and agreed. He esti-
minated that there were at least twenty, and probably more behind them.

Hurrell’s platoon retired while the remainder of the company covered
it, waiting until the French were within 100 yards before they opened fire.
The French took cover and after a brief exchange of fire the Australian

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6 Sgt J. H. Gordon, WX2437; 2/31 Bn. Farmer; of Gingin, WA; b. Rockingham, WA, 7 Mar 1909. (Gordon was awarded the Victoria Cross for this action.)

rearguard began to withdraw. The men were desperately tired. Between the time that his corporal had reported that the French were advancing and the opening of the last fight, Sheppard himself had fallen asleep three times. The little company filtered back the way it had come. As they had no stretchers, they carried their wounded in pullovers threaded over rifles with bayonets fixed. The pullovers sagged so much that it was like carrying a man in a bag. Under fire from French rifles and Hotchkiss guns, the thirty men clambered down the terraces and along a wadi to the Jezzine-Beit ed Dine road. It was the last fight in this sector and one of the fiercest.

It will be recalled that on the 30th the 23rd British Brigade had taken over at Merdjayoun and all British troops from that sector eastwards came under the command of General Evetts, who also exerted control of the Free French. On the night of the 9th-10th the French forces north of Merdjayoun began a general withdrawal. Next day, when the 23rd Brigade advanced on the 11th towards the Bekaa (the long narrow valley, stretching 70 miles southward of Homs) no enemy was found; progress was slow because the French had left many demolitions and booby traps along the route.

Evetts planned an attack on Jebel Mazar, to be made on the 10th July by his 16th Brigade, now complete, and the French Marine Battalion. The attack which opened at 2 a.m. made some progress in the hours of darkness and was continued the following night. However, by the 11th the summit was still held by the enemy and the positions of the British troops on the crests of the ridge were precarious. Evetts was contemplating ordering a withdrawal when he received reports of an armistice and ordered his men to hold on. It happened that the French commander had decided to withdraw, and by midnight the 16th Brigade was on top of Jebel Mazar.

1 As from 10 July Lavarack placed 23 Bde directly under his own command so as to free Evetts of responsibility for the Merdjayoun sector during the preparation and the battle for the capture of Jebel Mazar.
To exploit the assault on Jebel Mazar, Evetts had formed a pursuit force led by Lieut-Colonel Bastin of the 9th Australian Cavalry and including that regiment (less one squadron), the 2/Queen's, and detachments of artillery, machine-gunners and others, and four Free French tanks. When the advance of the Free French marines on the right was held up, Evetts detached Major Newton's squadron of the 9th Cavalry, the tanks and other detachments, to help them take Jebel Habil. They moved at midday on the 10th, arrived at Dimas at 1 p.m. and came under sharp fire from artillery and small arms, particularly from the summit of Jebel Mazar (which they had believed to be held by their own infantry). There was no sign of the Free French at Dimas, but Newton's column, in the gorge, came under fire from high ground east, west and north. Nevertheless the tanks and carriers moved up and down the road engaging enemy posts until dusk. They lost eight men killed and twelve wounded, every one of their thirty-three vehicles being hit.

Farther east, the 4th Cavalry Brigade (of Habforce) on the 6th and 7th had sent armoured-car patrols westward. The whole brigade set off westward towards the Homs-Damascus road on the 11th, moving in three columns. It met and overcame some resistance and reached the road south of Homs, establishing contact with the Free French brigade there. On the 12th Brigadier Tiarks and his staff were attacked by armoured cars while visiting the forward troops and the staff captain and two other officers were captured.

It seems that when the battle of Damour opened the equivalent of seven French battalions, including two of the Foreign Legion, faced the 7th Australian Division at Damour and Jezzine; and a force of similar size, including one battalion of the Foreign Legion, faced the 6th British Division at Merdjayoun and Jebel Mazar. There were two in the Jebel Druse. All these battalions were greatly depleted (as were most of those on the other side), and some reduced by the detachment of companies. When the fight ended the strength of the Vichy battalions seems to have ranged between 250 and 450.

Two French units—the 7th Chasseurs and II/29th Algerian—were withdrawn from the eastern sector during the course of the Damour battle, leaving three battalions and a cavalry regiment astride the Damascus-Beirut road. The diarist of the South Syrian force said that the first renewed attack against Jebel Mazar was driven back with a loss to the British of 194 prisoners, as a result of "the vigorous resistance of troops who knew the ground thoroughly, the coolness of unit commanders who maintained resistance even when surrounded and the heavy, well-timed support of artillery". A second British attack "had barely begun when it came to a standstill". A renewed attack on the 11th was "held in check", but the French losses were so heavy, specially in the I/17th Senegalese astride the Beirut road, that at 6.30 p.m. General de Verdilhac ordered a withdrawal that night to a line along the Jebel Sheikh Mansour, Yanta, Mdouka. The I/17th and the 1/24th Colonial were again attacked while withdrawing. The V/1st Moroccan and the 1st Moroccan Spahis "broke off without difficulty". No account has been obtained of the French operations at Damour.

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4 Brig J. G. E. Tiarks; Comd 4 Cav Bde 1941-42. Regular soldier; b. 28 Dec 1896.
All day on 11th July rumours circulated among some forward units that an armistice was likely. At 7 p.m. the staff of the 7th Division were warned that an order to cease fire might be expected, and at 8.15 a definite announcement came that fighting would stop one minute after midnight. It was difficult to get the news forward to the outlying companies. The orders were flashed to the forward companies of 2/3rd Battalion, for example, by Lucas lamp from Hill 569 and reached them after 10 p.m.—it would have taken four hours for runners to reach these companies. Evidently the French had equal difficulty in informing their forward troops of the decision, because their artillery fire continued at intervals along the inland sector till 3 a.m. in some places, and a company of the 2/14th Australian Battalion which was covering the road south of Ainab was fired on by machine-guns at 8.30 next morning, but took no action. Half an hour before these machine-guns opened fire the French envoys, led by General de Verdilhac, had passed through the 2/5th Battalion’s lines to General Allen’s headquarters.

General Dentz had reached the conclusion more than a fortnight earlier that his forces should capitulate. Indeed, on 22nd June, he told Rudolph Rahn, the German agent, that his army would collapse in two or three days, but the successful defence of Palmyra and news that four new battalions were arriving from France raised his spirits. On the 26th, however, he sent two staff officers to Vichy to point out again that further resistance would be futile. By this time Dentz had transferred his headquarters to Aleppo, where Rahn joined him. At Vichy on the 28th Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan agreed that resistance in Syria should cease; but Dentz did not learn of this decision until ten days later. On the 29th, as mentioned above, British bombs half-destroyed his residence at Beirut, the British staff not knowing that Dentz had vacated it. Some of his officers urged him to order that the home of the High Commissioner in Jerusalem be bombed, but (Dentz said later) he was not willing to authorise the bombing of the Holy City.

At this stage the Australian commander had begun to take part in the negotiations for an armistice. Lavarack on 30th June obtained Wilson’s approval to the sending of the following message to Dentz through the United States Consular Service:

The Commander of the Australian Forces in Syria, General Lavarack, feeling that to both Frenchmen and Australians the idea of comrades of the last war fighting against one another is repellent and distasteful and a useless waste of good men, suggests that he send an envoy by air to Rayak or to some other mutually convenient airport to meet the representative of General Dentz and to deliver to him a message from General Lavarack which may lead to a solution of the unpleasant conditions which today exist and thus avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

When he learnt that Dentz’s residence in Beirut had been bombed the day before, Lavarack considered that this action had stultified his message,

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6 It appears that only detachments of these units reached Syria, and the remainder were still in Salonika when the fighting ended.
and that some confusion was being caused between a request which Wilson had made to Dentz to declare Beirut an open city and the indications from Vichy that an armistice was being sought. The fall of Palmyra on the 3rd, opening the route to Aleppo, impressed Dentz again with the futility of further fighting, and on the 8th, as soon as he learnt of his Government’s decision, he visited the United States Consul at Beirut, Mr Cornelius van Engert. Next day van Engert placed before Dentz the conditions under which the British commander would agree to a cease-fire. Dentz informed the consul that he would accept, and wished to cease hostilities at midnight on the 11th, but with the reservation that he would treat only with the British High Command and not the Free French. The news of this offer sped to the British and Dominion Governments, and in Australia was unwisely made public. General Lavarack was incensed and, on the 11th, addressed the following letter to General Blamey:

On 9 Jul 41 at 0915 hrs L.T. the B.B.C. in a news bulletin announced that Sir Frederick Stewart, Minister for External Affairs in Australia, had stated in Sydney that General Dentz had asked for an armistice to discuss the cessation of hostilities. It would now appear that this announcement, if not premature, was at least injudicious, since the tenor of Mr Churchill’s somewhat guarded announcement later in the day made it appear that his hand had been forced by Stewart’s statement. With this added publicity every man in the Force now operating in Syria was in possession of the information, in some form or another, by the morning of 10 Jul 41.

2. The reaction of the troops to the news in relation to their fighting capacity can, at the best, be only speculative. But it is not unreasonable to assume that with the knowledge of the possibility of an early armistice the troops would be disinclined to produce that small amount of extra effort which so often means the difference between success and failure. No man is likely to risk his life unnecessarily if he feels the campaign is virtually over.

On the enemy side the same motives probably do not apply. Conscript armies are not expected to think for themselves, while those of Dictator countries only receive information from a State-controlled Press and radio service. In the case of the Vichy troops now opposing us in Syria the men merely follow their individual officers, and presumably have no knowledge of any such application by General Dentz.

3. A study of the operations on 10 Jul 41 is interesting when taken in relation to the above assumption. The enemy on all fronts put up a most spirited resistance and was fighting back. Our progress on the other hand was slow. If it is accepted that both sides were equally tired and battle worn, the inference is that the rather disappointing progress this day was due more to lack of push on the part of our troops than to any high resolve on the part of the enemy.

4. This deduction is not intended as a reflection on the units of the AIF engaged in this campaign who have fought splendidly in most trying and difficult conditions. But it is put forward to emphasise the danger which a similar premature announcement might have in the future if our opponents were the Germans.

5. It cannot be too strongly urged that all armistice negotiations should be kept secret until the latest possible moment, and it is submitted that the matter should be taken up with the Prime Minister with a view to the prevention of any such similar indiscretion in the future by a member of his Cabinet.

Early on the 11th Lavarack also sent a signal to Wilson urging that he should “make a concrete proposal for Dentz to dispatch envoy at time and place to be definitely stated to negotiate purely military armistice”. Later that morning he spoke to Wilson on the telephone and informed him
that on the coastal sector the enemy was "still resisting and trying to
counter-attack everywhere", and that the 6th British Division might have
to evacuate Jebel Mazar. Wilson said that he proposed to tell Dentz that
unless Beirut was declared an open town by the next night it might
become necessary to bomb and shell it. Lavarack replied that there was
no certainty that his artillery would be close enough to shell it, but he
would do his best.

Wilson wirelessed to Dentz that the British Commanders-in-Chief could
accept no reservations concerning plenipotentiaries, and unless Dentz's
plenipotentiaries presented themselves with a flag of truce at the British
outpost on the Beirut-Haifa road at or before 9 a.m. local time on the
12th hostilities would be resumed at that hour. Two hours later Dentz
replied by wireless:

Please listen at 1800 hrs local time . . . when I shall address in plain language the
General Officer Commanding-in-Chief the Middle East through Vice-Admiral
Godfroy as intermediary . . . I shall also reply to the memorandum of His
B.M's Government concerning the cessation of hostilities.

At the appointed hour Dentz wirelessed that he was prepared to engage in
discussions on the basis of a memorandum handed to him that day by
the United States Consul on behalf of the British Government, and pro-
posed to suspend hostilities at 12.1 a.m., local time, on the 12th July. He
asked where he might send an envoy plenipotentiary, it being understood
that "the French Government does not authorise him to treat with the
representatives of any allied power whatsoever but only with the representa-
tives of the British High Command".

The political and military leaders in Cairo "took into account the opinion
of the American Consul at Beirut that Dentz was entirely insincere and
might be playing for time in the hope of a last-minute rescue by the
Germans", rejected this condition and summoned Dentz to send his
plenipotentiaries to the British outpost on the Damour-Beirut road at or
before 9 a.m. on the 12th, or hostilities would be resumed. At 7.55 p.m.
Lavarack was informed that all troops were to cease fire at one minute
after midnight.

Next morning the French envoys arrived at the Australian outpost on
the Beirut road and were taken to Acre where they were met by Generals
Wilson, Lavarack and Catroux and representatives of the navy and air
force.

Taking it on the whole the discussions went smoothly (wrote Wilson later) though
at one moment I did threaten to start the war again, while at times Generals
Catroux and de Verdilhac were engaged in heated argument . . . . When it came
to initialising the drafts the Press were allowed in and brought with them all the
equipment for taking pictures of the proceedings. In doing so, an Australian photo-
graher who was somewhat over-refreshed got himself tied up in a flex of one of
the lamps and in his struggles to get free succeeded in fusing not only the lights
in the barracks but also those within a three-mile radius. The final scene was

7 Godfroy commanded the French squadron immobilised in Alexandria.
8 C. J. E. Auchinleck, Despatch on Operations in the Middle East, 5 July 1941-31 October 1941.
enacted by the light of hurricane lamps and that of a motor-cycle wheeled into the room. The climax of the day came when it was found that a souvenir hunter had taken the gold-leaved kepi of General Catroux.9

Afterwards General Catroux wrote a genial account of the incident of the kepi:

An amusing mishap occurred after my arrival at the St Jean d’Acre barracks where our meeting was to be held. The camp was occupied by Australians who, as is well known, besides being fine fighters have an instinctive belief in freedom of action. They are keen on bringing back souvenirs to their distant native land from their travels or military campaigns. I was imprudent enough to leave in my motor car my “oak leaf kepi”, the gold embroidery on which fascinated some son of Australia. It was a fine “souvenir” to carry off. Perhaps it was still more valuable; it might even be the kepi belonging to General Dentz, and that would add to the value of the trophy. The Australian could not resist the temptation and my headgear was missing when I returned to my car. Need I say that the camp commandant was all the more upset because he well knew that he would not get my kepi back. I reassured him by dissuading him from attempting a search, and said to him that I had commanded fellows very like his Australians—I meant the Foreign Legionaries—and knew by experience that what was taken by them was taken for good. The incident delighted Wilson, and made Lavarack smile. Lavarack was commander of the Australians and well knew what his soldiers were likely to get up to. When the incident became known to the Vichy delegation the whisper went round that I was a deserving victim of the bad company I kept.1

The agreement provided for the occupation of the country by Allied forces, the grant of full honours of war to the French forces, who would retain their individual arms but stack all other weapons under Allied control. At 1.30 a.m. on the 13th de Verdilhac returned through the Australian lines.

At midday on the 15th the units of I Australian Corps moved forward to occupy key points in Syria and Lebanon.

The column which led the way along the coast road—the 2/5th Battalion with detachments of cavalry and artillery—was bound for Latakia and was instructed to by-pass Beirut, into which a ceremonial entry was to be made next morning. The 2/16th Battalion and a squadron of the 6th Australian Cavalry entered the town that day and were welcomed with cheers by an excited crowd of Syrians, who evidently regarded the arrival of the newcomers as heralding their political independence. Meanwhile the main column of the 7th Division had sped northward to Tripoli and Latakia. At 10.30 a.m. on the 16th July the Allied leaders, including Generals Wilson, Catroux, Lavarack, Allen and Evetts made a ceremonial entry into Beirut escorted by 24 Bren carriers and a troop of field guns.

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1 Catroux, Dans la bataille de Méditerranée (1949), p. 150. In fact only four Australians were present and it is most improbable that any of them took General Catroux’s kepi.
9 Wilson, p. 119.
General de Verdilhac arriving for the signing of the Armistice, Acre, 12th July 1941.

General Wilson signing the armistice agreement. General Lavarack is on his right.
Brig. J. E. S. Stevens and Maj-Gen A. S. Allen, Acre, 12th July 1941.

The entry into Beirut, 15th July 1941.
Australian ski troops training in the Lebanon.
The 2/33rd Battalion leaving the transit camp at Suez to embark with other units of the 25th Brigade Group on U.S.S. *Mount Vernon*. This was the first transport to land units from the Middle East in Australia.

Men of the 2/5th Field Regiment on board the *Nieuw Amsterdam*, which carried the 18th Brigade Group from Suez to Bombay in February 1942.