CHAPTER 16

THE SYRIAN PLAN

The task which Wavell had been required so unwillingly to undertake was to attack and overrun a region of tangled mountains and wide desert land garrisoned by an army considerably larger and in important respects better equipped than any the invaders could put against it—at least within the following few weeks. The Syrian mandate extended some 300 miles from north to south and from east to west, but militarily the vital region was the south-western corner bounded by the frontier on the south, and, on the north, by the railway from Beirut, the capital of the Lebanon and the site of the French General Headquarters, through Rayak, the principal airport, to Damascus, capital of Syria proper. In that area were two of the three main cities and nearly half the population. Its western half is a zone of rugged mountains and steep-sided upland valleys. One geographer has compared the relation of these mountains to Palestine as being similar, from a military point of view, to that which the mountains of Afghanistan bear to India; and the ancient fortress of Banias at the foot of towering Mount Hermon as being comparable with Peshawar near the entrance to the Khyber Pass. The mountains of Lebanon are not on the Afghan scale, but an invader from Palestine faces somewhat the same problems as an Indian invader of Afghanistan.

Three main routes, two served by more than one road, led from Palestine into Lebanon and south-western Syria. On the west a road wound along the narrow coastal ledge at the foot of the Lebanons or was tunnelled through the cliffs. A parallel road, later forking into two, travelled from Banias in Palestine along the upland valley between the Lebanon on the west and the still higher range of Hermon and the Anti-Lebanon on the east. Along this valley flows the Litani River until, near the frontier, it turns west and enters the sea between Tyre and Sidon. Farther east, pinched between the eastern range and the difficult lava-strewn Jebel Druse, a third road (and from Transjordan a fourth) led through the low desert and steppe land and joined at Damascus. Thus geography imposed on the commander of an army invading Syria from Palestine three possible lines of advance—(i) through a defile between sea and mountains, (ii) along a winding mountain road, or (iii) over an area of broad desert highways. The coastal route travelled through a region of olives, mulberries and bananas; the central roads through denuded mountain country with wheat and vines in the valleys and on terraced hillsides; the eastern through desert and wheat land with occasional oases, of which Damascus is one.

The Vichy French army was believed to include six regiments of regulars, including one of the Foreign Legion, one of mixed colonial and metropolitan troops, and four of African natives. There were also about 9,000

---

1 G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, (1894).
cavalry, some units being horsed and others equipped with tanks or armoured cars, ninety field and medium guns, and some 10,000 Levantine infantry of doubtful value. Thus, leaving out of account the Levantine troops, there was the equivalent of two strong infantry divisions and a half-division of tanks, armoured cars and cavalry—35,000 regulars in all, including some 8,000 Frenchmen. Under Dentz, General de Verdilhac was deputy commander-in-chief; the three principal area commanders were General Delhomme at Damascus, Colonel Beucler at Beirut, and Colonel Rottier at Aleppo. General Jennequin commanded the air force.

The main components of the invading force were to be the 7th Australian Division, hitherto untried in battle but strenuously trained since its formation in April and May 1940; the veteran 5th Indian Brigade, recently withdrawn from Abyssinia, and the Free French contingent, which was in process of being organised into six battalions, two batteries of 75's,

---

2 This brigade had arrived at Mersa Matruh from Abyssinia on 12 April, and moved to Palestine in the third week of May.
one tank company, and Colonel Collet’s cavalry detachment. The air force made available by Air Marshal Tedder to support the invasion consisted of two fighter squadrons and a half (including No. 3 R.A.A.F.), two bomber squadrons and one army cooperation squadron. These were commanded by Air Commodore L. O. Brown and possessed some 70 first-line aircraft; the French had nearly 100, including 60 fighters. While the military operation was being planned part of the British air force had continued almost daily to bomb Syrian airfields.

To support the advance on the coastal plain and protect it against interference by the French naval force, which included two 3,000-ton destroyers and three submarines, Admiral Cunningham allotted, at the outset, two cruisers and four destroyers under Vice-Admiral King of the 15th Cruiser Squadron. A second naval force—the landing ship Glengyle, cruiser Coventry, and two destroyers—was to be available to land troops on the Syrian coast. Thus all the serviceable cruisers and six out of about 17 serviceable destroyers were allotted to the Syrian operation.

Since April the 7th Division had been improving and manning the Matruh fortress, where it had gained in experience and physical fitness, and had been under fairly frequent air bombardment. In the past six months it had been chopped and changed. Of its two brigades, the 21st had belonged to the division from its formation; the 25th had been formed in England in the critical months of 1940. One battalion of the 25th—the 2/32nd—had, on 3rd May, been sent to Tobruk to complete the 24th Brigade, whose third battalion, the 2/25th, had just arrived in Egypt, armed only with rifles. A week later, having received its automatic weapons, the 2/25th joined the 25th Brigade. General Lavarack’s divisional cavalry regiment was the 6th, the 7th being in Cyprus. He had all three of his artillery regiments. Thus, if he could borrow an infantry brigade, his division, already reinforced with units from two other divisions, would be at full strength.

While General Lavarack was in Cairo receiving his instructions, he saw General Blamey and discussed the further reinforcement of the depleted 7th Division by units of the 6th Division and Corps troops. Blamey, though now Wavell’s Deputy Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, was still commanding the A.I.F. and still in direct control of I Australian Corps, the staff of which was then collected at Deir Suneid in Palestine, resting after Greece and Crete.

Part of the 6th Division was then (late in May) in action in Crete, but part was resting and re-training in Palestine and was a pool from which the 7th Division’s shortage of infantry might be made up. At length it was decided that the 2/3rd and 2/5th Battalions would be placed under Lavarack’s command. Five of the nine battalions of the 6th were in Crete (though parties that had become detached from some of them were in

---

9 A Fleet Air Arm squadron on Cyprus and long-range bombers from the Delta area were also to assist.
THE SYRIAN PLAN

Palestine). Of the remaining four battalions—2/2nd, 2/3rd, 2/5th and 2/6th—enough officers and men had been left in Crete to form the 16th and 17th Composite Battalions; and the 2/2nd and 2/6th had lost heavily at Pinios and at the Corinth Canal respectively. The 2/3rd and 2/5th alone possessed a nucleus strong enough to make it reasonable to expect them to be ready for action within, say, a month.

When General Lavarack met General Wilson at his advanced report centre at Sarafand in Palestine on 22nd May Wilson told him that Wavell and he had agreed that the main effort of the invading force should be towards Beirut along the coast road, and only subsidiary drives should be made from Metulla. Elaborate measures were to be taken to conceal the British intention and the preliminary movements. The 7th Division would be named "Aust Exporter Division" and Australian troop movements in northern Palestine would be explained as merely the relief of the 6th Division's units there. Other measures were taken to conceal the new plan. Senior officers were instructed not to visit Jerusalem or Haifa; no leave was to be given; Australians who moved forward to within sight of the French were to wear caps or topees not Australian hats.

Two days later at another conference at Sarafand Wilson emphasised that there should be as great a show of force as possible. When he said again that the main line of advance would be along the coast road Lavarack expressed the opinion that the right column had the greatest hope of success; but Wilson said that Wavell and he had agreed to make the main effort on the left. However, at the next conference, on the 26th, when Lavarack again said that he thought the right column would make faster progress, Wilson agreed that this was "a likely development". At the conference on the 24th Wilson had said that he thought the invasion might begin on the night of the 31st, but two days later he said that date—a week ahead—would be too early. Lavarack's division was still at Matruh; even his advanced headquarters had not yet arrived in Palestine; details of the force available were still so obscure that precise planning was yet impossible.

From southern Greece embarked only seven officers and 180 men of the 2/2nd who thought they were all that was left of the battalion; but during May the arrival of groups of escapers from Greece, including Colonel Chilton, and the addition of 250 reinforcements brought the strength to 540, and in June the addition of the men from Crete swelled it to 640.

At 12 May it was estimated that the men of the infantry battalions of 6 Div were divided between Crete and Palestine thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bn</th>
<th>Crete</th>
<th>Palestine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/1</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The division had gone to Greece 12,486 strong. It was estimated that on 12 May 6,178 were in Crete, 4,258 in Palestine, and 2,050 had been lost in Greece.

The re-forming of the 2/1st Battalion after the main body of the battalion had been lost in Crete may be taken as typical. Early in June the 2/1st comprised about 70 men in Palestine. The two other battalions of the 16th Brigade each contributed to it 100 experienced men, including a quota of non-commissioned officers (Colonel Chilton of the 2/2nd wisely allowed Major Edgar of the depleted 2/1st to choose his own N.C.O.'s from the 2/2nd.) Some original officers of the 2/1st were brought back from other appointments, and the battalion was brought up to strength with about eighteen officers and 500 men from the reinforcement battalion. Thus of the officers and men of the re-formed battalion about one-third had been in action. At first some of the men transferred from the other battalions wore miniature colour patches of their old units above their new patches, an indication of the deep-seated attachments that had developed.
Lavarack considered that the senior staffs were approaching the problem with undue optimism. An outline plan prepared by Wavell’s planners declared that “the success of the operation largely depends on lack of resistance, or at least acquiescence by the French”, and was based on a conviction that, when attacked, the French would withdraw “into the Lebanon, thereby leaving the rest of the country open to invasion”—an ambiguous statement since it was against the Lebanon that the main part of the invading force was being concentrated. The planners’ proposals included “a rapid move along the coastal road to Beirut by armoured cars and motorised infantry with the object of seizing all important control points and high officials in Beirut before dawn”.

On the 28th Wilson was still unable to tell the divisional commander exactly what units would be in his force; and only a few copies of an Intelligence handbook providing information about the Syrian roads, towns and people and the defending army were available. The only maps were on a scale of 1 to 200,000, whereas maps on a scale of 1 to 25,000 or 50,000 are desirable for warfare in tangled mountain country. Wilson informed Lavarack that no heavy tanks or heavy anti-aircraft artillery would be ready until the middle of June and asked when he would be able to attack without them. Lavarack said that he hoped at least a battery of light anti-aircraft guns would be available; he thought the attack should begin early, and that he would be ready by 3rd June. Wilson said that other units would not be ready until the 5th; and the attack could not begin before that date. Even more disturbing than this evidence that some of the preparations were moving slowly was the news that the French knew that an attack was imminent.

Commanders of the invading force were informed that French-speaking officers and Free French officers would be attached to their formations on a scale of one to a battalion, and that these would approach French posts with a white flag and a megaphone and call upon the occupants to surrender and join de Gaulle. The Australian commanders were not impressed by these proposals and most of them appear not to have taken them very seriously. Day by day the British agents on the frontier, mostly Jews, brought in information that the posts were being reinforced. British officials who had crossed the frontier on friendly visits had seen the French sitting guns and digging in round the Merdjayoun area; and a few days before the invasion was to open new French troops appeared at the frontier posts and all fraternisation ceased.7

In the early days of June, in an atmosphere of haste and some uncertainty, the plan took final shape. The French commander was moving troops towards the frontier. It was believed that he had five battalions and four squadrons of cavalry forward in the coastal sector, perhaps three battalions and some tanks in the centre, and two battalions with several

7 At a conference on 31st May Lavarack raised the question of the danger of attack on his right flank across the Jordan from the Kuneitra area and suggested that the area should be occupied in anticipation of such an attack. Because he did not consider the precautions taken to be adequate Lavarack picketed the Jisr Bent Jacob and the slopes of the hills east of the Jordan and north of Lake Hula.
cavalry and motorised squadrons in the desert zone. At a conference on 4th June the time of the attack was fixed—2 a.m. on the 8th. At earlier conferences the main outlines of the plan had already been made known to the formation commanders.8

Wilson wrote afterwards: "The main objective was Beirut; the shortest approach was along the coast but the road could be easily blocked. I decided, therefore, to advance three-headed on a wide front."9 The first phase of the attack was to be the capture of Damascus, Rayak and Beirut—the two capital cities and the main air base on the road linking them; the second phase an advance to Palmyra, Homs and Tripoli. On the left would be one reinforced brigade of the 7th Australian Division; in the centre another reinforced brigade of that division; on the right the 5th Indian Brigade Group and the Free French contingent. The Australian column on the left was to advance along the coast road to Beirut, the column in the centre through Metulla and Merdjayoun to Rayak; the Indian brigade was to advance into the Hauran, the high wheat lands east of Lake Tiberias and the upper Jordan, and with one column occupy Deraa, Sheikh Meskine, and Ezraa, with a detachment Fiq and El Aal, and with a left column Kuneitra. Thus it would form a bridgehead through which General Legentilhomme's French brigade would advance through Kiswe to Damascus, while Colonel Collet's cavalry (300 strong) rode north through Fiq to Kuneitra. To the consternation of the enthusiastic Glubb Pasha the invasion was planned without a role being given to his little Arab Legion in Transjordan—about equal in strength to a British cavalry regiment.

8 On the day of the invasion the force nominally included:

7 Aust Div (Maj-Gen J. D. Lavarack)
21 Bde (2/14, 2/16, 2/27 Bns)
75 Bde (2/25, 2/31, 2/33 Bns)
Divisional troops, 6 Div Cav
Divisional troops, 9 Div Cav
Divisional troops, 2/4 Fd Regt
Divisional troops, 2/6 Fd Regt
2/2 A-Tk Regt
2/3 Bn
2/5 Bn
2/3 MG Bn
2/2 Pioneer Bn

Additional troops under command:
The Greys and the Staffs Yeomanry (forming one composite mechanised regt)
One sqn, The Royals (armoured)
57 LAA Regt

5 Indian Bde Group (Brig W. L. Lloyd)
5 Indian Bde (1/Royal Fusiliers, 3/1 Punjab, 4/6 Rajput Rif)
1 Fd Regt
One bty RAA
Two tps LAA

Free French Division (Gen Legentilhomme)
Bde d'Orient (1 B.M. Bn, 2 B.M. Bn, Foreign Legion)
One bty arty (4 75-mm guns)
One tank coy (nine tanks)
One anti-tank coy
Coy Marine Fusiliers
Circassian Cavalry (300 strong)

Engineer, signal and service units have been omitted. In addition to its own two field companies of engineers (2/5 and 2/6) the 2/9 Fd Coy was attached to 7 Div. Although 2/3, 2/5 Inf, and 2/3 Machine Gun Bns and 9 Div Cav were included in the order of battle, they were still incompletely equipped. The two infantry battalions were not to receive an adequate allocation of vehicles until 17 June.

Three battalions of Senegalese and a second battery were to be added to the Free French Division eventually enabling a second brigade to be formed.

8 Lord Wilson, Eight Years Overseas, p. 113.
Lavarack gave his division three successive objectives: the first was a line from Merdjayoun along the road to Sidon; the second a line joining Rasheiya, Machhara, Jezzine and Sidon; the third the Rayak-Beirut road. At that final stage the 21st Brigade would be in Beirut and the 25th occupying the Rayak aerodrome. The first task of the 25th would be to move forward on foot and occupy the Merdjayoun area whence mobile columns would advance along the two roads leading thence to the Rayak area. The two battalions borrowed from 6th Division were to take over the prisoners and police captured territory. An independent force was to operate from Iraq against eastern Syria.

On 5th June Lavarack was given definite instructions (of which the Corps staff already had warning) that when the first stage of the advance had been completed, that is, when the line Damascus-Rayak-Beirut had been reached, he would take command of I Australian Corps and control the whole operation, Brigadier Allen of the 16th Brigade succeeding him in command of the 7th Division. At that time General Blarney, being Deputy Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, had his headquarters in Cairo, and the senior officer at I Corps headquarters at Deir Suneid was Brigadier Rowell. Before 5th June, Rowell, fearing lest, as in Greece, the Corps would be called upon to take command in the field not at the outset but in the midst of operations, pointed out to General Wilson’s senior staff officer that the Australian Corps should be given command from the beginning, contending that command could not be exerted efficiently from a headquarters in Jerusalem, but the proposal was not accepted.

It appears that Wilson and his staff considered that the Corps’ shortage of vehicles and signal equipment as a result of losses in Greece was a strong reason why it should not take command of the field force at the outset. Nevertheless, the Corps staff was moved forward to Nazareth—partly in vehicles lent by the Palestine Police—on the eve of the campaign and was complete, except for a corps commander. From the beginning it sent out its liaison officers and heads of services, particularly among the 7th Division, so as to be ready to take over when the time came.

The decision that I Australian Corps should again go into the field had made it necessary for Blarney to appoint a successor to himself in one of the three appointments he now occupied. He was Deputy Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East; Commander of the A.I.F., which was part of the force in the Middle East; and, since no successor had been appointed, de facto Commander of I Australian Corps, which was part of the A.I.F. In the second week of May he had written to the Minister for the Army, Mr Spender:

I understand from Press wires that you desire me to continue GOC AIF. It does not appear that the two appointments are incompatible. They are in fact complementary to a considerable degree. It will not however be possible for me to continue in command of the Australian Corps as such.

At the same time he informed the Prime Minister that he intended to recommend that General Lavarack be appointed to command an Aus-
tralian Corps (7th and 9th Divisions) and General Freyberg an Anzac Corps (6th and New Zealand Divisions). It was appropriate that General Lavarack should thus be promoted to a senior command. In order to obtain an active command in the field he had accepted appointment to the 7th Division with the rank of major-general although he was a lieutenant-general in the Australian Staff Corps and for four years had been Chief of the General Staff in Australia. This loss of rank placed him under British generals who had hitherto been junior to him—an experience that he shared with most Dominion generals who served under British and American commanders. He had been disappointed at being transferred from command of the force in the Western Desert in April and replaced by a relatively junior British officer, General Beresford-Peirse (who, however, had had useful desert experience as commander of the 4th Indian Division). The staff of his division, which contained rather more regular officers than General Mackay’s 6th Division did, was led by Colonel John Austin Chapman, who, when war broke out, had been on loan to the British Army as an instructor at the Staff College at Camberley; his artillery commander was Brigadier Berryman who had been Mackay’s senior staff officer in the Western Desert. Berryman was a confident and highly-qualified staff officer who had served in the artillery in France in 1916-1918 and in general staff appointments between the wars. At this stage he was the most widely experienced of Lavarack’s three Australian brigadiers.

The axes of the division’s advance were so widely separated that the brigade commanders would inevitably bear a heavier responsibility and control larger bodies of attached troops than in an attack on a narrower front. The senior of them was J. E. S. Stevens, a militia officer who had served in the Signal Corps, both in France in the previous war and at home in the militia, until 1935, when he was appointed to command an infantry battalion. His first appointment in the Second A.I.F. had been to command the signallers of the 6th Division. Short and slight in stature, waspishly aggressive and persistent in action, Stevens was picked out of the 6th Division by Lavarack in 1940 and given the task of forming and commanding the 21st Brigade in the 7th. At the time of his appointment he was by several years the youngest brigade commander in the force; in 1918 he had been a subaltern of 22 whereas his fellow brigadiers of 1940 had then been infantry or staff officers of higher rank and wider experience.

Brigadier Baxter-Cox’s 25th Brigade had already had two commanders when he was appointed to it in March 1941—Stevens had then

---

1 Details of this proposed reorganisation are given in Chapter 28.
3 The principal appointments to the Staff of the 7 Div in June 1941 were: GOC Maj-Gen J. D. Lavarack; GS01 Col J. A. Chapman; GS02 Maj R. G. Pollard; Snr LO Maj C. H. Grace; AA & QMG Col V. C. Secombe; DA&AG Maj N. W. Simpson; DA&QMG Maj L. G. Canet; ADMS Col F. K. Norris; Legal Staff Offr Maj F. B. Gamble;ADOS Lt-Col C. R. Speckman; DAPM Capt N. W. Faulkner; CRA Brig F. H. Berryman; CRE Lt-Col R. J. H. Risson; CO Sigs Lt-Col B. T. R. Chadd; CO ASC Lt-Col F. S. McGrath.
4 Brig A. R. Baxter-Cox, CBE, WX1573. (1st AIF: Lt 4 Bn.) CO 2/16 Bn 1940-41; Comd 25 Bde 1941; Mil Sec LHQ 1943-46. Architect; of Perth, WA; b. Cue, WA, 7 Sep 1898.
been training his brigade for nine months. In 1918 Cox had been a 2nd-lieutenant in France. He was an architect by profession and had served with the engineers and later the infantry between the wars. In 1940 he was transferred from the command of a militia brigade in Western Australia to form the 2/16th Battalion.

The third brigade commander in the force taking part in the initial assault, W. L. Lloyd, whose 5th Indian Brigade was operating independently on the right, was a tested Indian Army officer with recent experience, in the Western Desert and Abyssinia, of hard fighting in country of the kind that now faced his battalions.

Brigadier Stevens' problem in the coastal sector was greatly complicated by the likelihood that the defenders would demolish the roads and bridges ahead of him, and particularly the road a few miles north of Ras en Naqoura where it ran along a steep cliff face, and the bridge over the Litani which flowed into the sea 17 miles from the frontier. It was decided to send in a small party of infantry and engineers ahead of the main force to prevent the demolition of the coastal road beyond Iskandaroun on the steep Naqoura headland, and to land a British commando battalion under Colonel Pedder, on the far side of the Litani at dawn on the day of the invasion to save the bridge over that river.

From the sea at Ras en Naqoura eastwards to the eastern limit of Stevens' 25-mile sector the frontier followed a line of lofty, rugged hills into which the only entrance for motor vehicles was the coast road. There were, however, two lateral roads one south and one north of the frontier, and, at El Malikiya more than 20 miles from the coast, they approached to within 1,000 yards of one another. If this gap could be bridged it would be possible to reach Tyre, which lay north of the possible demolition at Iskandaroun, along a road that wound through the hills through Bennt Jbail and Tibnine.

Along the heights between the upper Jordan Valley and the coast the French had a line of widely-spaced blockhouses—at Aitaroun, Bennt Jbail, Ain Ebel, Yamoun, Remeiche, Aita Chaab, Ramiet, Jereine, Alma Chaab and Labouna. Stevens decided that he would seize these posts, and as quickly as possible cut a road from El Malikiya to the French frontier road so as to make a second gateway into the coastal zone.

He divided his force into two main columns. The strongest of these under Lieut-Colonel MacDonald of the 2/16th, which Stevens then considered the best of his battalions, and including that battalion, two troops of armoured cars, the carrier troops of "A" Squadron of the 6th Divisional Cavalry, and about half his artillery and engineers, was to move on Tyre along the difficult inland road through Bennt Jbail and Tibnine. Farther west the 2/14th Battalion was to seize the frontier posts; and this done,

---


6 Col A. B. MacDonald, SX4539. CO 2/16 Bn 1941; various training appts incl DDMT LHQ 1945. Regular soldier; of Walcha, NSW; b. Walcha, 13 Apr 1898.
a column led by Lieut-Colonel Moten\(^7\) of the 2/27th and including the light tank troops of the cavalry squadron and a share of artillery and engineers, was to advance along the coast road if it could, but, if that road was so damaged as to be impassable, Stevens might order it to follow MacDonald's column through Tibnine, thus by-passing the demolitions on the coast. A subsidiary column would be formed by the Cheshire Yeomanry, a horsed cavalry regiment allotted to Stevens, which he ordered to move through the hills by way of Tibnine and Srifa to Kafr Sir on the Litani, where it would be in a position to outflank the enemy positions near the mouth of that river should the advance be held up there. The coastal column was to be supported by the guns of the naval squadron.

In the 25th Brigade's area the main approach to the frontier was along the road travelling due north to Metulla between the Hula marshes on the east and the Lebanons on the west and, from Rosh Pinna northwards, visible from Syrian territory. Thus Cox's first problem was to move his force forward into the Metulla salient and take the frontier posts overlooking his line of advance from east and west. With this object he decided to assemble his attacking troops on the lateral road to Dafna. Thence they would capture the posts on the high ground overlooking them and occupy a line through Chebaa, Hasbaya, Merdjayoun to Nabiye et Tahta. This done, the group would divide into two columns each containing a battalion and a proportion of the mechanised cavalry, artillery and other troops. One

---

\(^7\) Brig M. J. Moten, CBE, DSO, SX2889. CO 2/27 Bn 1940-41; Comd 17 Bde 1941-45. Bank officer; of Woodville, SA; b. Hawker, SA, 3 Jul 1899.
column would advance along what was named Route "A", through Hasbaya, the other on Route "B" along the eastern edge of the Litani gorge to Qaraoun, where the road crossed the river and continued to Zahle. It was known that the road was heavily mined and strongly defended in the defile at Youhumour; consequently the plan provided that the armoured detachments on the left hand column should in fact move as far as the Kafr Mechki lateral track with the right hand column and there swing west and come in on the main road behind the enemy force defending the defile. This would complete the second phase of the operation. The right-hand column would then advance along the good road to Zahle, cut the Damascus road and attack the Rayak airfield.

The ground over which the initial attack in this sector was to be made offered little cover except for occasional copses and boulders, but for the first few hours the attackers would be covered by darkness, and their leaders had been assured that once the shell of the defence had been cracked resistance would end. The first objective of the 2/33rd Battalion (Lieut-Colonel Monaghan⁸) on the right, with a battery of field artillery and detachments of anti-tank artillery and engineers under command, would be a line from Chebaa to Khiam; of the left column, Lieut-Colonel Porter's 2/31st Battalion, with similar artillery support, a line from Merdjayoun to Nabatiye et Tahta. On the left a squadron of the Cheshire would protect the left flank by moving along the road from Blida to Adeisse and establish touch with the 21st Brigade. There was to be no preliminary artillery fire; the initial attack was to rely for success on surprise and darkness.

The first task of the eastern column was to secure the Hejaz railway east of the Jordan. At the same time a defensive flank was to be established by the 5th Indian Brigade from Deraa to Sheikh Meskine and Ezraa to protect the advance by the Free French to Damascus.

The supporting air squadrons were to bomb enemy airfields and oil supplies, attack his forward troops, and protect their own troops against air attack.

The opposing armies were approximately equal in numbers. In skill, physical fitness and weapons (except that the French possessed a strong force of good tanks—a very potent asset) there was, on the face of it, little to choose between them. By dividing his force into three columns each of approximately equal strength General Wilson reduced the likelihood of achieving a marked success in any one sector. If the defenders proved half-hearted, simultaneous attacks in all sectors might the more quickly overcome their will to fight; but if the defenders proved resolute such dispersal of force would decrease the attackers' chances of achieving a swift victory.

---

⁸ Lieut-Colonel Porter (2/31st Battalion) and his company commanders went a little distance into French territory before the invasion opened and sketched some of the country ahead. Porter was flown over the area and made some useful observations before the aircraft was chased home by French fighters.

⁹ Brig R. F. Monaghan, DSO, QX6152. CO 2/2 A-Tk Regt 1940-42; (Admin Comd 2/33 Bn, 2/2 Par Bn in 1941); Comd 29 Inf Bde 1942-45. Regular soldier; of Brisbane; b. Goulburn, NSW, 28 Nov 1898.