

HISTORICAL FEATURE

The Australian Campaign in Lebanon of World War II

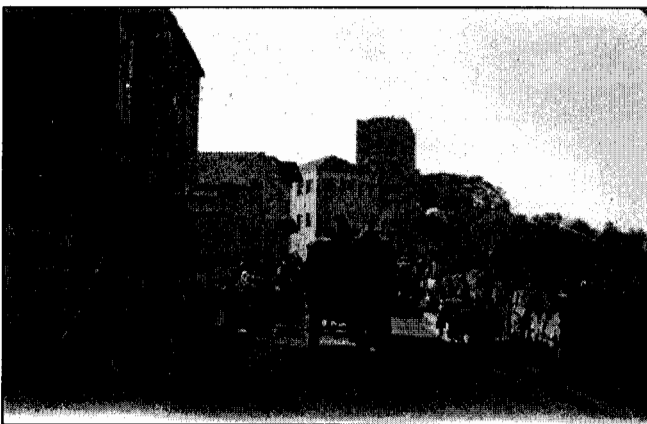
Lebanon was a French protectorate when France fell to the Germans in 1940 during the Second World War. As a result, its administration came under the control of a pro-German Vichy French regime.

The Allies, fearful of German access to the oilfields of Iraq and a pincer movement to cut off the Suez Canal by linking up with Rommel's *Afrika Corps* in North Africa, decided to invade Syria to prevent this happening. Between 7 June and 11 July 1941, Australian troops, principally from the 7th Division, fought as part of an Allied force in Syria and Lebanon against the Vichy French.

As the Australian War Memorial explains it, the plan developed by British General Henry Maitland Wilson, commanding the expedition, involved a three-pronged advance. The 21st Australian Brigade would advance north, from Palestine, along the Lebanese coast, with Beirut as its objective. The 25th Australian Brigade would head for Rayak, the site of a large airfield, along an inland route. Farther to the east, the 5th Indian Brigade and a Free French force would march on Damascus. Once these three objectives were attained, phase two of the operation - an advance on Tripoli, Homs, and Palmyra much further to the north - would commence. The Allied land forces were to be supported both by gunfire from naval vessels offshore and several air force squadrons, including the RAAF's No. 3 Squadron.

Tragically the first Australian casualty of the campaign was Nicholas Koorey, an Australian soldier from the 2/6th Field Regiment of Lebanese descent. Bombardier Nicholas George Koorey (NX25117) was aged 26 when he died on the 20th June 1941 as a result of injuries received in combat. Born at Ballina N.S.W., he was described as being a Mercer and Hatter of Stanmore NSW. His parents were George and Mary Koorey of 68 Cardigan Street Stanmore.

Australian casualties during the fighting in Syria and Lebanon numbered 416 killed and 1,136 wounded. Approximately 1,000 Vichy French troops were killed throughout the theatre.



An Australian Army Unit drives through a northern village c. 1942.

It was during this campaign, in the battle for the town of Merdjayoun, that the former New South Wales Governor, Sir Roden Cutler, who was a Lieutenant in the 2/25th Infantry Battalion, won his Victoria Cross for bravery in battle.

The allied soldiers were up against a well-armed, well-prepared and numerically superior force of French and French colonial soldiers who had the advantage of the precipitous landscape to defend. Despite some expectation to the contrary they mounted a stiff defence to the Allied advance.

The allied force was made up of whatever units could be spared from the fighting in North Africa (perhaps this is the reason so many of the Australian units

were field regiments – i.e. artillery units) and lacked sufficient air cover or armoured units. Nonetheless they mounted a strong effort against the enemy and after six weeks of fierce fighting, the French sued for peace.

Australians occupied the country from 15th July 1941. In the hinterland of Tripoli, some regiments were headquartered at the Mar Antonious Monastery (St Anthony the Great) at Djedadi, four miles east of Zgharta.

The Australian Government leased the vegetable garden of the Mar Antonious Monastery and set up camp on the 125 acres of flat land. The regiment stationed here was the 2/6th Field Artillery Regiment. The 2/6th Field Regiment was replaced by the 2/12th Field Regiment, which in turn was sent urgently to North Africa on 25th June 1942 to counter the German threat at El Alamein.

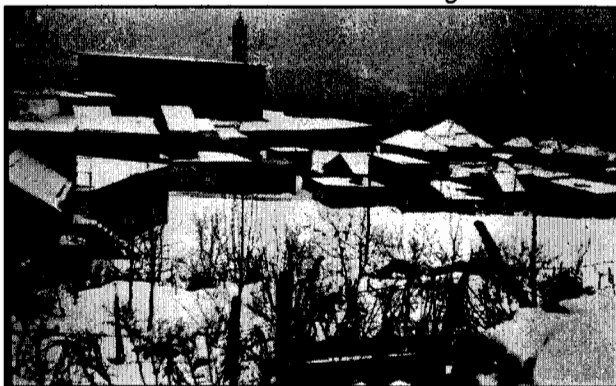
Ray Widdows (who was a Sergeant in the 2/12 Field Regiment), now of Randwick, remembers the rumour going around his unit that they were going *home*:

"We had a roll call at six o'clock and we left at three o'clock in the morning and there wasn't anybody missing."

It was a silly idea, he says, in retrospect. Why would the unit be leaving for home at 3am? The locals, the villagers, however had better intelligence. *No, you are going to boom, boom!* In other words, off to battle again, this time to El Alamein. The vagaries of war meant that most of the Australians like Ray Widdows did not return to Lebanon again.

The winter of 1941 to 1942, especially over the Christmas period was bitterly cold, much colder than usual and the coldest winter on record. Snow covered the ground for long periods around the Australian base near Mar Antonious. The cold weather made conditions difficult for everyone especially the Lebanese villages. It was so cold that when children, who had migrated to Australia in the immediate post-War period, talked of events, they saw their lives in terms event in relationship to the big-Snows of 1942. *"I was born before the big snows"*

Villagers from Djedadi, Bann, Kefar Yachit and Becharre come in contact with Australian soldiers. The Australians found the Lebanese villagers they dealt with to be hospitable but extremely poor. There was famine at the time and food was very scarce and this added to the discomfort caused by wartime disruptions to the economy. Since soldiers are usually in need of the basic comforts of life, the Australian soldiers and Lebanese villagers were able to build mutually beneficial relations. The Lebanese, for instance, found various types of employment with the Australians. This might mean making camouflage nets for cash payments, helping to dig anti-tank ditches, working with Australian engineers on railway construction, or maybe doing work, such as laundry, in exchange for foodstuffs. Some worked for the Australian Army as labourers and cleaners. The onions and cans of bully beef the Australians were able to provide were a welcome respite from the hunger of that bitterly cold winter of 1941/1942. Visits to village homes and the family hospitality received reminded the Australians of their own homes which they had left behind years before.



Mar Antonious Monastery surrounded by winter snows

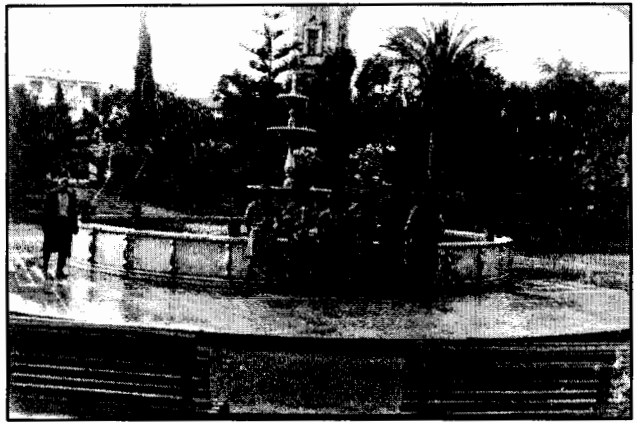
Ray Widdows recalls that he and his friends would call on a local family from time to time. The Australians brought whatever foodstuffs they could lay their hands on, and the Lebanese cooled bottles of beer in their wells in preparation for the meal. The villagers gained a good meal, the Australians beer, which they were missing, and both were able to exchange news and enjoy a convivial evening of a meal and conversation.

Australian Light Horsemen had been in the general area during the First World War. A couple of them known as the Spinney Brothers had elected to stay behind after the First World War and set up a factory producing sausages. The *meat* in the sausages was made out of soybean. The Second World War Australians found the Spinney sausages a welcome change from the monotony of army food. Lacking the fatty sausage mince, they were reputedly good for one's health and bore the slogan *"Keep Skinny with Spinney Sausages"*.

There were a number of Australians soldiers who had family still in Lebanon. Ray Widdows remembers one of his colleagues who still had family in Becharre. When his unit was stationed near the village, he would go and visit his relatives and was later able to introduce his relatives to his friends in the unit.

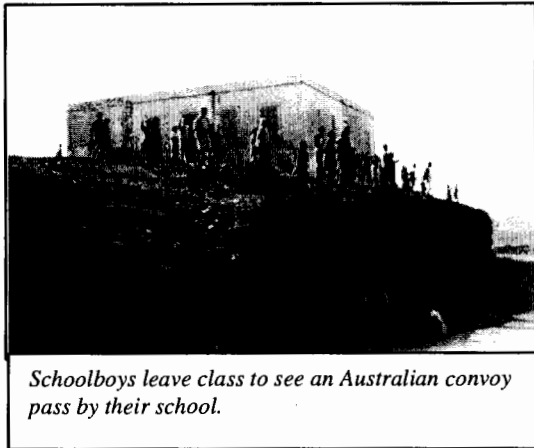
The scenery is magnificent and Australian soldiers like Reg Hawkins (who was Gunner with the 2/6th Field Regiment) and his comrades who had access to a camera took the opportunity to take photographic snaps of the scenery and of themselves in front of landmarks. Tripoli was a large town and seemed like a big interesting city in comparison to the villages suffering under famine and war. Wartime restrictions meant that there was not much to do other than sightsee yet some Australians found visiting Tripoli a rare treat. The *Al Mashieh* Park in the centre of the city, with its formal layout and fountain, was a favourite place to visit and have your

photograph taken. Interestingly some of the early Lebanese settlers in Sydney said that they enjoyed promenading in Redfern Park because it reminded them of Tripoli!



A lot of the troops had never seen snow and so some Australians took themselves off to the ski fields to experience the novelty of a white landscape and to learn to ski. The Australian Army also formed a unit called the 9th Division Ski Battalion dedicated to learning how to wage warfare on skis in case the need for cold weather fighting arose if the Germans had decided to make a move south.

Some of the villages made friends with the Australians and some were alerted to the opportunities that might await them if they migrated to Australia when the war finished. For some of the villagers who were hungry and were able to find employment or gifts of food from the Australians, it seemed that Australia must also be a hospitable place that would welcome them.



George Kaleel who came from the village of Kfaralda and settled in Tripoli before the war, remembers working for the Australian Army for four years in Tripoli and made many friends amongst the Australians. He remembers this time with affection and acquired the nickname of "Tiger". He had an interest in sport and sports administration and liked the Australian interest in sporting activities. His Australian friends persuaded him to take up the opportunities offered by migrating to Australia with his family.

A small number of Lebanese women also met future husbands among the Australian contingent. Ray Widdows recalls one of the officers from his regiment met a *French* woman (he assumes she was Lebanese who spoke French) whom he married and they later settled in Victoria.

The Australian presence in Lebanon, however, renewed interest among many Lebanese about migrating to Australia. Some were able to renew contacts after the war with relatives who had previously migrated to Australia in the preceding 60 years or so. Some of the post-war immigrants settled in the traditional inner-city areas of Sydney and Melbourne but many were also drawn to the then semi-rural areas on the fringes of the major cities. Hornsby in Sydney's north offered semi-rural living, the best of both worlds. When some of the post-war settlers joined their relatives, for instance, in and around the then Sydney fringe suburb of Thornleigh, they found friends in Reg Hawkins and his family. Neither seemed as strange or as novel to each other as might have been without their wartime experiences!

References

- The Australian War Memorial's Website (www.awm.gov.au) gives an overview of the *Syrian* campaign.
- *Djedeide*: Australian War Memorial spelling
- Kaleel, Fred. *Oral History Transcript*. [Unpublished]
- McCullough, Colleen. *Roden Cutler, V.C.: the biography*. Sydney: Random House, 1998.
- Widdows, Ray. *Oral History Transcript* [unpublished]
- Hawkins, Ralph. Information about the recollections of Reg Hawkins, the conditions experienced by Australians in Lebanon and the Lebanese settlers in Thornleigh come from a number of unpublished manuscripts he is preparing for publication.
- The Australian War Memorial's Nominal Roll of World War One veterans shows a Corporal Reginald Walter Spinney of the 6th Light Horse who left Australia on the 2nd February 1915, but does not show a returned to Australia date.