

‘Kangaroos’ and ‘Froggies’: Australian-French Relations and the Allied Invasion of Lebanon and Syria, 1941

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The conceptualisation of Australia’s relationship with France has long centred on unity between Australians and French during the First World War: a friendship borne in blood. From this war, Alexis Bergantz suggests, the concept of a ‘positive shared Franco-Australian history’ evolved.² Such is the focus on Australian military endeavours on the Western Front that Villers-Bretonneux, a small town situated east of Amiens, has become an ‘open-air memorial’ to Australian participation in the war, more recognisable to Australians than the French themselves.³ The characterisation of the French as long-held friends of Australia and its people is epitomised by the invocation of a phrase that has become irrevocably linked with the Australian commemoration of the First World War: ‘n’oublions jamais l’Australie’. Encapsulated in these few words is a shared history of loss and grief, defeat and success, and a friendship held close by many. Accordingly, in a 2012 ‘strategic partnership’ agreement

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² Alexis Bergantz, ‘The culture and politics of Frenchness in Australia (1890–1914): Reflections on a research project’, *French Australian Review* 62 (Winter 2017): 19.

³ Romain Fathi, *Our Corner of the Somme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

signed by Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Kevin Rudd and his French counterpart, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Alain Juppé, the Australian and French governments recognised 170 years of ‘unbroken friendship’.⁴ Yet the concept of an unbroken friendship is proven unfounded by even a brief consideration of the history of French-Australian relations.

Although strong ties between Australia and France may have been forged in the fires of battle during the First World War, a broader consideration of interactions between Australia and France uncovers a relationship marked by instances and, at times, lengthier periods of conflict and discontent. This dynamic was most recently demonstrated when this ‘strategic partnership’ was blown spectacularly out of the water after the Australian government scuttled its multi-billion-euro deal with France’s Naval Group, which had been contracted since 2016 to build twelve submarines for Australia.⁵ Its sudden cancellation, paired with the simultaneous announcement of a new alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, blindsided the French and caused a dramatic breakdown of relations that played out on the world stage and spawned a flurry of accusations of backstabbing and even ‘haute trahison’—high treason.⁶ For the first time since France established a formal diplomatic presence in Australia with the

⁴ This agreement aimed to formalise their nations’ connection, elevating it from a bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership that sought to strengthen cooperation in numerous areas. In doing so, Rudd and Juppé sought to enshrine their nations’ shared interests and commitment to working in coordination, if not cooperatively, in the South Pacific region. See Government of Australia and Government of France, ‘Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between France and Australia’, signed January 2012, https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/Strategic_Partnership_-_MAEE_-_English_16_01_12x.pdf.

⁵ Domitille Arrivet, ‘DCNS gagne le contrat du siècle en Australie’, *Le Figaro*, April 26, 2016, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/societes/2016/04/26/20005-20160426ARTFIG00358-dcns-gagne-le-contrat-du-siecle-en-australie.php>.

⁶ See, for instance, Michel Cabirol, ‘Sous-marins : la France poignardée par ses “alliés australiens” et américains’, *La Tribune* (online), September 15, 2021, <https://www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/industrie/aeronautique-defense/sous-marins-la-france-poignarde-par-ses-allies-australiens-et-americains-892437.html>.

opening of its Sydney consulate in 1842, the French Government recalled its Ambassador to Australia (along with its Ambassador to the United States).⁷

The submarine debacle undoubtedly sparked one of the most turbulent periods in Australian relations with France, but this was not the only time they had found themselves in troubled waters—nor was this the first time accusations of treason had been levelled. Indeed, the decades-long disagreement between the Australian and French governments regarding the latter’s nuclear testing in the South Pacific—a disagreement that led to the firebombing of the French embassy in Perth in the early hours of June 17, 1995—proves the hollowness of the term ‘unbroken friendship’.⁸ There have been other such ‘blips’ in the history of French-Australian relations. Here, I focus on one of the clearest ruptures in this relationship: Australian involvement in the British invasion of the Vichy French mandates of Syria and Lebanon between June 8 and July 14, 1941. The campaign in Syria and Lebanon, codenamed ‘Operation Exporter’, was the first time Australian soldiers, sailors, and airmen went into battle against the French. Nearly a century after the Australian-French relationship had been established in Sydney, Australia was at war with France.

This article considers the Australian-French relationship through the lens of this operation and the subsequent period in which Australian troops remained in Syria and Lebanon. Using archival sources, memoirs and oral histories produced in the decades after the war as part of the Australian at War Film Archive (AAWFA), I examine how Australian soldiers perceived their Vichy French enemy and Free French allies. In highlighting this lesser-known chapter of French-Australian relations, I seek to demonstrate the up-and-down nature of this relationship while foregrounding key themes that emerge from these records. Here, I explore how Australian soldiers perceived their Free French allies and Vichy French enemy. How did they

⁷ Roger Cohen and Michael D. Shear, ‘Furious over sub deal, France recalls Ambassadors to U.S. and Australia’, *New York Times* (online), September 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/europe/france-ambassador-recall-us-australia.html#:~:text=Jean%2DPierre%20Thebault%2C%20France’s%20ambassador,after%20being%20recalled%20to%20France> .

⁸ Colin Nettelbeck, ‘French-Australian relations: Towards an historical perspective’, *The French Australian Review* 57 (2015): 4 .

feel about the Vichy and Free French? Did they differentiate between the two, or were they viewed similarly? Did the passing of time play a role in the sentiments Australian soldiers shared, and did those sentiments change after the Vichy French had been defeated? In considering these questions, I aim to illuminate this period of conflict between Australia and France. In doing so, I challenge the common perception of the French-Australian relationship as an unbroken friendship.

Although the pitfalls of oral histories are well-known—as Alastair Thomson acknowledges, memory is fallible, and recollections in oral histories are ‘never a perfect replay of experience’—oral histories, including those held within the AAWFA, remain an important source for historical analysis if these shortcomings are appropriately borne in mind.⁹ The interviews referenced in this article were conducted between 2000 and 2005, roughly sixty years after the campaign. Factual errors, particularly regarding dates and other specific details, can be expected after such a great deal of time. It is also possible that recollections have faded and been amended or expanded over the years as interviewees’ memories evolved. However, the validity of recollections in oral histories such as these may be confirmed by cross-referencing recollections with those of other people who were present at the time and also through an analysis of independent archival sources. Although such corroboratory analysis can be difficult to conduct when more subjective aspects of interviewees’ experiences are involved—for instance, interviewees’ thoughts on a particular person or group of people—this does not render these interviews unusable. Rather, as Elaine Batty argues, these interviews offer an opportunity to consider the recollections of those whose experiences are not necessarily reflected in the archival record while also providing insight into the memories that have stayed with the interviewees over these decades.¹⁰ Although we must recognise and consider the shortfalls of oral histories, this article uses these interviews to complement the written record. Where possible, recollections have been cross-referenced against other archival sources, and other interviews in the AAWFA, in an attempt to

⁹ Alastair Thomson, ‘Anzac Stories: Using personal testimony in war history’, *War & Society* 25, no. 2 (2006): 3.

¹⁰ Elaine Batty, ‘Reflections on the use of oral history techniques in social research’, *People, Place and Policy Online* 3, no. 2 (2009): 118–119.

ease such shortfalls. Still, the reader should remember the passage of time when considering the oral history sources discussed here.

Context: Australia’s war with France

When Australia, along with its fellow dominions and colonies of the British Empire, joined Britain in the war with Germany in 1939, it did so with France as its ally. However, France’s swift fall to the German invasion in mid-1940 drastically altered the status quo, forcing Britain and its empire to continue the fight against Germany without the assistance of France and its forces. It also raised the spectre of a hostile French fleet, which, if controlled by Germany, posed a significant threat to Britain and its empire. Although the French-German armistice, signed on June 22, demobilised the French forces and divided France into two zones—a northern and western zone occupied by German forces and a southern zone administered from Vichy by an authoritarian government led by Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain—the British Government feared Germany would in the future seize the French fleet and employ its ships in an invasion of Britain.¹¹

The fall of France also had a significant effect on the French. The decision to surrender and seek an armistice with Germany became a central point of contention between Vichy and Free France. In the final days of the battle for France, the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, had resigned, refusing to seek and sign an armistice. Reynaud’s successor, First World War veteran Pétain carried the respect of much of France, and the French Cabinet subsequently supported his pursuit of an armistice, believing that his resignation to defeat signalled the futility of continued resistance in the wake of the French military collapse.¹² When Pétain declared in a public broadcast that the ‘fighting must end’, his subsequent pursuit of an armistice

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of British concerns regarding the French navy following an armistice with Germany, see: George Melton, *From Versailles to Mers El-Kébir: The Promise of Anglo-French Naval Cooperation* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2015), chaps 11–12. For relevant clauses in the French-German armistice, see: ‘The 1940 Armistice clauses’, *Memorial de l’Armistice*, June 7, 2018, <https://armistice-museum.com/the-1940-armistice-clauses/>.

¹² Michael S. Neiberg, *When France Fell: The Vichy Crisis and the Fate of the Anglo-American Alliance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2021), 27–28.

saw him promptly denounced by General Charles de Gaulle as a traitor.¹³ In the following days, de Gaulle, who had fled to London following Reynaud's resignation, declared the Pétain government illegitimate and pursued the establishment of a government-in-exile.¹⁴ By July, the British Government had formally recognised de Gaulle as the leader of the French government-in-exile, known initially as Free France, or France libre.¹⁵

When the Vichy Government was installed, France's overseas colonies and armed forces officially came under its control, though de Gaulle attempted to rally these forces to his cause. Early calls to rally French troops in Britain to the Free French flag had met with lukewarm support—most rejected the call to arms and instead opted for repatriation to France—so de Gaulle quickly turned his attention to the French Empire as he sought to establish a Free French army, known as les Forces françaises libres or FFL (henceforth, the Free French forces).¹⁶ However, the initial rally of French overseas territories to Free France did not begin until late August, when French Equatorial Africa joined Free France.¹⁷ Still, Vichy France's grip on its interests in the Mediterranean, including Syria and Lebanon, remained firm.

Following the First World War, the Ottoman Empire (an ally of Germany during the war) was divided under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which created the nation of Turkey and allocated mandates for the remainder of the former Ottoman Empire's land to the Allies. Under this arrangement, the League of Nations assigned the mandates for Lebanon and Syria to France, while Britain received the mandate for Mesopotamia and Palestine. After the fall of France, the French forces in Syria and Lebanon—known as the Army of the Levant (or l'Armée du Levant)—remained aligned with Vichy France.¹⁸ As time passed and the geostrategic and military situation in the

¹³ Julian Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 125–128.

¹⁴ Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel 1890–1944* (New York: Norton, 1991), 208.

¹⁵ Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 243.

¹⁶ Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 226.

¹⁷ Eric T. Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 66.

¹⁸ N. E. Bou-Nacklie, 'The 1941 invasion of Syria and Lebanon: the role of the local paramilitary', *Middle Eastern Studies* 30, no. 3 (1994): 512.

Mediterranean evolved, these French mandates took on an increasingly important strategic position. In early July 1940, Britain caved to its concerns about the possibility that the French fleet would fall into German or Italian hands—Italy had declared war on Britain and France on June 10 as it became clear France would capitulate—and the British bombarded the Vichy French naval base at Mers-el-Kébir, on the French Algerian coast. The attack drove a significant wedge between the British and Vichy governments, leading the latter to sever formal diplomatic relations with Britain.¹⁹ Increasing collaboration between the latter and Germany only further stoked tensions between the two governments. However, it was not until mid-1941 that these tensions in the Mediterranean again boiled over as British forces, reeling from successive defeats across the region, moved to prevent the loss of the British position in the Middle East to a potential German invasion of Syria and Lebanon.

The British Government had been concerned about the potential threat of an invasion of Syria for some time, but the Paris Protocols, an agreement negotiated between Germany and Vichy France in May 1941, provided the impetus for a pre-emptive British invasion of Syria. The Protocols allowed the German Luftwaffe to use French bases in Syria and North Africa, and, importantly, it was an initiative driven not by Germany but by Vichy France through Admiral François Darlan, who pursued the agreement as Vichy’s Vice-Premier.²⁰ This was not an idle threat for the British, as German aircraft had previously used Syrian airfields as staging and refuelling points en route to Iraq in April when small numbers of Luftwaffe bombers and fighters supported a nationalist coup d’état that overthrew the pro-British government in Iraq.²¹ The Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, cautiously considered a potential German foothold in Syria and

¹⁹ Mona Parra, ‘Gustave Bertrand: The Cooperation of British Intelligence with an Officer in Vichy France’, *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* XXVII, no. 1 (2022): 7.

²⁰ Andrew Buchanan, *American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean During World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26.

²¹ Harold E. Raugh Jr., *Wavell in the Middle East, 1939–1941* (London: Brassey’s, 1993), 216; Cable from Stanley Bruce to Robert Menzies, May 14, 1941, Papers of John McCarthy, Folder 57, Box 12, MSS355, Academy Library, UNSW Canberra.

the surrounding area. If German forces could attack and capture Syria, neighbouring Lebanon, and British-held Palestine, the Allies faced a 'real menace' in the Middle East.²² Accordingly, Menzies raised the possibility of an attempt to 'occupy' Syria.²³

Although Menzies couched his argument in diplomatic language, an occupation of Syria (and Lebanon) required an invasion. However, British General Archibald Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Command, opposed the campaign. By May 1941, Wavell's forces were engaged with the enemy on no fewer than four fronts, separated by thousands of kilometres, in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Crete, and the Near East. Some of these forces were besieged in the Libyan port town of Tobruk, while others were tied up in East Africa, where they fought Italian elements in Eritrea and Ethiopia. More were spread across Egypt and the Near East in rear echelons and garrisons.²⁴ Wavell was keenly aware that further commitments could stretch his forces beyond capacity and potentially jeopardise the British position in the Middle East.²⁵ Without the benefit of hindsight, such an offensive appeared possible. In the months preceding the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria, the Allies had been summarily and rapidly defeated by German and Italian forces across the Mediterranean, and the German war machine appeared unstoppable. It was not inconceivable that the entire British position in the Middle East would be lost if the Germans pursued a 'pincer' attack against Wavell's forces in Egypt, mounted by an invasion force through Syria and German-Italian forces in North Africa.²⁶

²² Speech, Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Hansard, Australia, House of Representatives, May 28, 1941.

²³ Cable from Stanley Bruce to Robert Menzies, May 24, 1941, AWM123, 280, Australian War Memorial (AWM), Canberra; cable from Robert Menzies to Winston Churchill, May 1941, AWM123, 280, AWM.

²⁴ Meir Zamir, 'De Gaulle and the Question of Syria and Lebanon during the Second World War: Part I', *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 5 (2007): 681.

²⁵ Richard James, *Australia's War with France: The Campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1941* (Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing, 2017), 102.

²⁶ Stefanie Wichhart, *Britain, Egypt, and Iraq during World War II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 61.

Regardless, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and de Gaulle doggedly supported an invasion. De Gaulle particularly eyed a chance to bring further Vichy French territories into the Free French fold. With only one under-strength division at his disposal, de Gaulle hoped—indeed, expected—to establish another two divisions from the Army of the Levant after a victory in Syria.²⁷ Despite de Gaulle’s assertions that the Vichy French would quickly surrender to their Free French counterparts without a fight, British troops would be needed to launch a full-scale invasion of Syria and Lebanon.²⁸ Wavell’s protests did little to sway Churchill, who ordered the invasion to go ahead.²⁹ Thus, as the first week of June ended, the Allied invasion force was ready to invade. Australia’s war with France would begin at 2 am on June 8, 1941, when British, Australian, and Free French forces crossed the border into Syria and Lebanon.³⁰

Our enemy, the Vichy French?

Unsurprisingly, fighting alongside and against French soldiers made it difficult for Australian soldiers to conceptualise the French as either friend or foe. In the lead-up to the campaign, those involved apparently expected the invasion would be somewhat of a ‘cakewalk’.³¹ There would, it was said, be little resistance. French-speaking and Free French officers were attached to Australian units—one per battalion—with their purpose being to induce the Vichy French to surrender, using only megaphones and white flags.³² When one veteran of the campaign, Maurice ‘Fitz’ Fitzgerald, was interviewed for the AAWFA, he recalled being advised that the campaign would be a

²⁷ James, *Australia’s War with France*, 317.

²⁸ James, *Australia’s War with France*, 102.

²⁹ Zamir, ‘De Gaulle’, 681.

³⁰ The initial invasion of Syria and Lebanon included Australian, British, and Free French troops, supported by a reserve force that included Czechoslovakian troops. Once the invasion was underway, these troops would be supported by an attack from the east, led by British forces in Iraq, which included Indian troops.

³¹ Interview, Leo Bellairs (Morrie), September 15, 2003, accession no. 849, Australians at War Film Archive (AAWFA), 34.

³² Mark Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy: Australian Soldiers and their Adversaries in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59.

‘walkover’: ‘the French, they love the Australians. We fought together at so and so.’³³ This ‘push-over complex’, as Major General John Lavarack—the commanding officer of the 7th Division and, eventually, the overall commander of the campaign in Syria and Lebanon—termed it, prevailed among the Australian soldiers as they crossed the border into Lebanon and Syria, only to be promptly ‘cured’ by French bullets and mortars.³⁴ This misguided belief hinged on the idea that the Vichy French forces would recognise the Australians, call on their shared history on the Western Front in the First World War, and subsequently down their arms.³⁵ The ‘cakewalk’ sentiment was so pervasive that Australian soldiers initially went into battle wearing their slouch hats, not their metal helmets—a decision that was quickly rectified as this concept of an open-armed welcome proved entirely unfounded. The Australians quickly donned their helmets, encountering fierce and determined resistance from Vichy French forces.

Recollections such as these demonstrate the pervasiveness of the concept that the French were old friends of Australia and its people. In 1952, Lavarack levelled responsibility for this misestimation on the British High Command, who had been led astray by de Gaulle’s repeated downplaying of the Vichy French will to fight.³⁶ The Vichy French were now well aware that de Gaulle had been spreading the idea that they had failed to fight for France by suing for an armistice. According to one Australian, Arthur Allen, who spoke to the Vichy French General Paul-Hippolyte Arlabosse in the days following the campaign in Syria, Arlabosse emphasised that the Vichy French forces wanted to prove they could fight.³⁷

Putting aside such misestimations of the Vichy French resolve to fight, some men involved in the campaign later spoke of their conceptualisations of the French. One member of the 2/14th Infantry Battalion, Philip Rhoden, suggested that he and others had no qualms in fighting against the French

³³ Interview, Maurice Fitzgerald, July 22, 2004, accession no. 2113, AAWFA, 21.

³⁴ Letter, J. Lavarack to G. Long, September 26, 1952, AWM67, 3/209, AWM, 3.

³⁵ Interview, Eric Williams (Pel), November 19, 2003, accession no. 1117, AAWFA, 34.

³⁶ Letter, J. Lavarack to G. Long, September 26, 1952, AWM67, 3/209, AWM, 3.

³⁷ Notes, Gavin Long, interview with Major General A. S. Allen, December 27, 1944, AWM67, 2/67, 23–24.

at the time of the invasion. '[It] didn't bother us that we were fighting the French,' Rhoden explained, 'because they weren't the real French as we saw it.'³⁸ Griffith Spragg, who joined the 2/3rd Infantry Battalion after its time in Syria, likewise suggested that although he would not have been 'terribly happy' had he been involved in the invasion, Operation Exporter was a necessary step. Although he thought it a 'tragic' situation, fighting against the French, he conceded that 'it had to be done'.³⁹ However, some Australian soldiers regretted the circumstances of this war with France. One veteran later called on the established narrative of the French-Australian friendship during the First World War: 'we shouldn't have been fighting them in any case; they were on our side [in the last war]'.⁴⁰

Rhoden's claim that the Vichy French were not the 'real' French reflects a sense of betrayal that often features within veterans' recollections of the campaign in Syria. Various Australian accounts link the status of the Vichy French as an enemy to the French capitulation a year earlier. In his unpublished memoir, written in 1989, Corporal Anthony MacInante suggested to readers that 'all Frenchmen were not "Freedom Fighters" and heroes of the "Resistance"'. They were, in his mind, willing collaborators with the enemy—the Germans.⁴¹ MacInante scornfully stressed that the ferocity of the resistance Australians encountered in Syria and Lebanon had been 'sadly lacking' when defending France against the German invasion.⁴² This sense of betrayal cut through other accounts, too: Lieutenant Lindsay Mason, 2/14th Infantry Battalion, stressed that when an ally switched sides and started to fight against their former allies, 'you don't like them very much'.⁴³ In the Australian Official History of the campaign, another Australian, Captain Murchison, is similarly recorded as stating that Vichy's collaboration with 'the Huns' was the crux of the issue.⁴⁴ This view was

³⁸ Interview, Philip Rhoden, June 5, 2000, accession no. 2549, AAWFA, 9.

³⁹ Interview, Griffith Spragg, May 15, 2003, accession no. 131, AAWFA, 11.

⁴⁰ Interview, John Murphy (Ray), February 4, 2004, accession no. 1457, AAWFA, 42.

⁴¹ Anthony A. MacInante, *My Life*, vol. II, (self-published) 1989, PR01743, AWM, 168.

⁴² MacInante, *My Life*, 164.

⁴³ Interview, Lindsay Mason, March 16, 2004, accession no. 1197, AAWFA, 21.

⁴⁴ Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1953), 435.

only reinforced when, following the Allied victory, some 85% of Vichy French soldiers chose the first option when offered a choice between repatriation to France and joining the Free French forces.⁴⁵

The preference for repatriation would have been particularly troubling for de Gaulle, not least because he planned to use the Army of the Levant to bolster the Free French forces significantly, but also because this outcome echoed the decisions of the thousands of French soldiers who opted to return to France from Britain in June 1940—an early failure for Free France.⁴⁶ The Vichy-French soldiers in Syria and Lebanon viewed themselves as permanent soldiers fighting for France. Despite de Gaulle's vehement arguments to the contrary, Pétain's government at Vichy was France's legal and legitimate government until German forces occupied all of France in November 1942. Vichy had been recognised internationally by the United States, Britain, Australia, and Canada.⁴⁷ In the days following the fall of France, one French admiral opined that the establishment of a Free French government-in-exile arguably amounted to a 'rebellion', given a legitimate government existed in France and could not be considered either irregular or deposed.⁴⁸ In this context, Vichy soldiers were not traitors for following the orders given by Pétain, the legitimate leader of the government at Vichy. The thread of treason within the British, Vichy and Free French relations was, however, quite complex: de Gaulle thought Pétain had betrayed France by seeking an armistice, Vichy thought Britain had betrayed France by attacking the French navy at Mers el-Kébir, and de Gaulle was accused of treason for fleeing France as it fell, seeking to wrest control of the French empire, and denouncing the Vichy Government.⁴⁹ Regardless of their

⁴⁵ Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 68.

⁴⁶ By the end of July, three-quarters of French servicemen in Britain had opted to return to France. See: Max Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose, The World at War 1939–45* (Harper Press: London, 2011), 80.

⁴⁷ Neiberg, *When France Fell*, 6; Parra, 'Gustave Bertrand', 7; Lyn Gorman, 'Australia and Vichy: The Impact of Divided France', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 42, no. 2 (2008): 137; Olivier Courteaux, *Canada Between Vichy and Free France, 1940–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

⁴⁸ Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose*, 126.

⁴⁹ Zamir, 'De Gaulle', 678.

reasoning, the Vichy French were determined to prove that they could fight, contrary to Free French and British opinion.⁵⁰

Australians appear to have been surprised to find that their enemy put up a good fight. Acknowledging the relatively small Allied force committed to the operation in Syria and Lebanon, Lavarack advised the Australian Government that Australian forces, alongside their Allied counterparts, had done remarkably well in the face of a ‘skilful, brave, and stubborn enemy’.⁵¹ Yet Australian soldiers, who prided themselves on their apparent willingness to ‘face the bayonet’ in close quarters combat, derided the Vichy French for their apparent aversion to the same.⁵² For some Australians, this sentiment was tied to the idea that the Vichy French had shown a propensity to surrender. With a simple statement, Robert Johns, 2/27th Infantry Battalion, summed up this attitude well when asked about the speed with which Vichy French troops surrendered a position. Such a speedy surrender was expected of the enemy: ‘after all, they were French’.⁵³ Whether Johns’ sentiment, expressed in an interview in 2003, was affected by more recent criticisms of the French—France was under considerable scrutiny in the media regarding its position on the Iraq war at the time the interview was conducted—is difficult to say. However, the general sentiment that some of the Vichy French were quick to withdraw is likewise expressed in other sources. For instance, in a letter written in 1998, an Australian veteran recalled that once they made it past the Vichy French artillery and mortars, their enemy generally balked at combat when they met ‘eyeball to eyeball’. At this point, they allegedly either withdrew from their positions or surrendered.⁵⁴

In contrast, others recognised the skill with which the Vichy French defenders constructed and defended their fortifications, exploiting the natural benefits the tough terrain offered a defender. On viewing Vichy French defensive positions in 1941, one Australian noted that it

⁵⁰ Notes, Gavin Long, interview with Major General A.S. Allen, December 27, 1944, AWM67, 2/67, 23–24.

⁵¹ Quoted in James, *Australia’s War with France*, 329.

⁵² Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 66.

⁵³ Interview, Robert Johns (Bob), November 26, 2003, accession no. 1195, AAWFA, 21.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 66.

was a wonder 6th Australian Division troops had succeeded in driving the ‘Froggies’ out of their pillboxes.⁵⁵ Another later suggested that the French Foreign Legionnaires were ‘damn’ good fighters.⁵⁶ Yet accounts of the campaign often sought to maintain a careful balancing act when discussing the Vichy French resistance. They could not make the French seem superior to the Australians, whose reputation as ‘natural-born’ fighters was at stake.⁵⁷ As Mark Johnston has argued, the Vichy French were presented as being ‘not as good as Australians’.⁵⁸ Accordingly, praise for the strength of Vichy French defences was counterbalanced by a sense that, had the situation been reversed and the Australians held these positions, the Vichy French could not have hoped to capture them—an assumption that appears unfounded when we consider that Australian forces captured, lost, and then recaptured individual positions on various occasions in the face of successful Vichy counterattacks.⁵⁹ This belief in their superiority was, however, likely only solidified by Australians’ shared success in defending the Libyan port city of Tobruk, in which Australian, British, and Indian troops (and later British, Czechoslovakian, and Polish troops) held out against German-Italian attempts to capture the port for some five months.⁶⁰

There were also racial undertones to Australian conceptualisations of the military ability of the Vichy French soldiers. Many were part of French colonial units from Algeria, Senegal, Morocco, and Tunisia, which remained under Vichy French control after June 1940. To these units could be added Les Troupes Spéciales du Levant, which comprised locally recruited troops

⁵⁵ Quoted in Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 66.

⁵⁶ Interview, John Murphy, 20.

⁵⁷ The idea of the Australian digger as a natural-born and superior soldier is a long-held myth that had been propagated and kept alive through the Anzac legend. This myth has been discussed and debunked by various scholars. See for example: James Brown, ‘Fifty Shades of Grey: Officer Culture in the Australian Army’, *Australian Army Journal* 10, no. 3 (2013): 244–254.

⁵⁸ Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 67.

⁵⁹ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, 367.

⁶⁰ For a general account of the siege of Tobruk, see: Robert Lyman, *The Longest Siege: Tobruk: The Battle that Saved North Africa* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2009).

from Syria and Lebanon. When the Australian War Memorial published *Active Service*, an illustrated book that sought to tell the stories of Australian involvement in the war and raise money to complete the memorial building, the first issue recounted the Syrian campaign. The book acknowledged the 'professional honour and tradition' of the Vichy French soldiers.⁶¹ Although *Active Service* reported on the professionalism of the Vichy French soldiers the Australians encountered, it made one qualification: that comment applied only to officers and 'white men'.⁶² This statement did not apply to the black colonial troops that comprised a significant portion of the Vichy French defence in Lebanon and Syria. Speaking of Senegalese troops, Alwyn Shelton, 2/5th Battalion, noted that although he 'supposed' they were 'all right', they 'weren't in the same street as the Foreign Legionnaires'.⁶³ Senegalese troops, in particular, were seen to be fighting for money, fighting only when they had to do so.⁶⁴

The Free French

But what of the Free French, alongside whom Australian soldiers fought during the campaign? How did the Australians view them? Australian appreciations of the Free French skill in battle were equally lacklustre. Like the Vichy French, who were considered relatively poor fighters despite their dogged determination to resist the invasion, the Free French were also seen to lack military skill, having put up a 'half-hearted' fight compared to the Australians.⁶⁵ Moreover, the Free French were considered ungrateful for the sacrifices made by the Australians, who sustained the largest proportion of the British and Commonwealth casualties during the campaign. Although the Free French losses, when considered as a percentage of their committed force, were notably higher than the Australian losses (26% versus 8.6%), the majority of Free French losses comprised prisoners of war (1,100 of 1,300 casualties). Of the 1,600

⁶¹ Quoted in Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 64.

⁶² Quoted in Johnston, *Fighting the Enemy*, 64.

⁶³ Interview, Alwyn Shilton (Bluey), May 28, 2003, accession no. 243, AAWFA, 33.

⁶⁴ Interview, Robert Iskov, May 6, 2004, accession no. 1999, AAWFA, 22.

⁶⁵ John Bellair, *From Snow to Jungle: A History of the 2/3rd Australian Machine Gun Battalion* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 68.

Australian casualties, 416 were killed, and 1,136 were wounded.⁶⁶ Some Australians, such as Corporal MacInante, displayed hostility toward the Free French, complaining that the Australians, their efforts, and their losses were forgotten once the battle was over. ‘The Free French treated us as though we never existed’, he recalled. It was ‘a thankless job for a thankless people’.⁶⁷ The campaign in Syria and Lebanon has been largely overshadowed by other events at the time, including the concurrent German invasion of the Soviet Union and the siege at Tobruk. Several decades after the events of mid-1941, the author of the 2/16th Infantry Battalion history posited that perhaps the ‘muted’ response to the campaign stemmed from the difficult context of the invasion, which saw Britain and France once again at war. ‘Fighting a recent ally was conceivably repugnant to some’, he noted.⁶⁸

Whether this was the case is debatable, but it is clear that at least some Australians felt unrecognised in later years, and written records from the time of the campaign further demonstrate Australian issues with the Free French. When the 6th Division completed a reconnaissance of Syria at the end of September 1941, three months after the invasion commenced, its subsequent report was scathing in its assessment of the Free French. The report’s author, French-born Australian Sergeant Nazareth Karagheusian, considered those who had been rescued from Norway and Dunkirk to be the cream of the Free French forces, having gone on to fight across North Africa. By contrast, those who had joined the Free French cause since that point had, Karagheusian contended, served only to ‘water down’ the quality of those forces. His report did little to hide his poor appreciation of these

⁶⁶ Of the roughly 4,652 casualties sustained by British and Commonwealth forces in the campaign in Syria and Lebanon, 1,552 were Australians. In comparison, the Free French suffered around 1,300 casualties, having committed approximately 5,000 troops. Therefore, Australians sustained an 8.6 per cent casualty rate given its 18,000-strong commitment to the campaign, while the Free French battle casualty rate sat at 4 per cent once prisoners of war are excluded. For more on casualties sustained, see Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, 525–526.

⁶⁷ MacInante, *My Life*, 173.

⁶⁸ Malcolm Uren, *A Thousand Men at War: A History of the 2/16th Australian Infantry Battalion, AIF* (Melbourne: Trojan Press, 2009), 98.

latter recruits, whom he labelled ‘soldiers of fortune’, a common appraisal of recent enlistees into the Free French Army.⁶⁹

The racialisation of Vichy French soldiers was similarly echoed in the characterisation of the Free French forces alongside whom the Australians fought in Syria and Lebanon. Although the bravery of some French Equatorial African troops was noted, they were, according to Karagheusian’s report, ‘inferior’ to the broader Senegalese troops. North African French troops were further broken down: ‘the Moroccan is the warrior, the Algerian is the man, the Tunisian is the woman’.⁷⁰ What exactly Karagheusian meant by this statement is unclear; he did not elaborate on the characterisation of French Tunisian soldiers as women. However, Karagheusian thought little of these troops and their military ability, especially *Les Chasseurs Libanais* and other local levies, whom he described as being of ‘low’ fighting quality and possessing an ‘indolent’ nature, fighting only for food, which was in short supply.⁷¹

The post-invasion period

The period following the Allied victory in Syria and Lebanon was undoubtedly and understandably strange for the Australian troops that remained in Syria and Lebanon after a ceasefire was called. The subsequent armistice, known as the Armistice of Saint Jean d’Acre (or the Convention of Acre), was surely symbolically significant for the Free French and equally unpleasant for the Vichy French; it was signed on July 14, 1941, the French national day. At an individual level, Australian troops quickly became acquainted with the reality that the same men who had, only days or weeks earlier,

⁶⁹ Report, N. Karagheusian, ‘Random notes on Syria’ [henceforth *Reconnaissance Report*], September 25, 1941, AWM54, 531/1/6, AWM, 7. Karagheusian was born in Paris, where he was raised under an English governess and became fluent in both French and English. After the war, he went on to teach French at the University of Melbourne. For more on Karagheusian, see his obituary: A. R. Chisholm, ‘Karagheusian N.’, 2/6 Cavalry Commando Regiment Association, accessed July 24, 2022, https://www.26cavcommando.org.au/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1047.

⁷⁰ Karagheusian, ‘*Reconnaissance Report*’, 8.

⁷¹ Karagheusian, ‘*Reconnaissance Report*’, 8.

been at the other end of their guns, were now eating and drinking at the same cafes as them following the armistice. In an interview in 2003, Herbert Robey, 2/6th Field Regiment, recalled how the fluid and ambiguous nature of the ‘enemy’ hit home when he realised that the Frenchmen sitting in the cubicle adjacent to him at a café in Damascus had been ‘the very fellows that had been along the ridge from us’ during battle. Most striking for Robey was that these Frenchmen were ‘ordinary people like us’, a realisation that made him consider the futility of the war.⁷²

Owing to what Richard James terms a ‘mutual respect’ between Lavarack and his Vichy counterparts, and in keeping with the Armistice, Lavarack, who had been promoted to lieutenant general on June 18 and handed command of 1st Australian Corps, ordered ‘all possible courtesy and consideration’ be shown to Vichy forces.⁷³ Accordingly, as part of an agreement with General de Verdilhac, the former Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Vichy French forces in Syria, an Australian military band rendered military honours to Vichy troops as they moved to the docks to board their ships bound for France.⁷⁴ The provision of military honours to the departing Vichy French troops left de Gaulle fuming.⁷⁵

Understandably, the post-armistice period caused some consternation for Lavarack. He thought the Free French ‘jealous’ of the respect the Vichy French accorded the Australians, the victors in the combat, while they treated with contempt the Free French forces who had defied the legitimate government in Vichy. Lavarack rightly identified this disjuncture between the Allied forces as a ‘weak spot’ in the Allied front, warning that the Vichy French could exploit such a weakness to ‘drive a wedge’ between the British and Free French. With this in mind, he cautiously approached the Vichy French cooperation, noting that they had no true ‘love’ for the Australians and British. Accordingly, Lavarack directed all formation and unit commanders to be aware of and inform their subordinate commanders of this potential threat while maintaining

⁷² Interview, Herbert Robey, August 13, 2003, accession no. 585, AAWFA, 18.

⁷³ Quoted in James, *Australia’s War with France*, 320.

⁷⁴ James, *Australia’s War with France*, 316.

⁷⁵ James, *Australia’s War with France*, 316–317.

friendly cooperation with the Free French and 'correct and courteous relations' with the Vichy authorities as required.⁷⁶

In this situation, it became crucial to ensure British and Australian forces maintained amicable relations with both Free and Vichy French forces, as the Free French and British co-managed Syria and Lebanon in the months following the July 14 armistice. The British had long feared an Arab uprising, especially as many important Arab leaders reportedly held pro-German sympathies. In one report, the Archbishop of Tyre, Sidon, and dependencies stressed that many within Syria saw the Free French replacing the Vichy French as merely replacing 'one species of French with another similar species'.⁷⁷ All French and British interactions and actions were watched carefully to compare the two nations; it was important that nothing was done that might fuel a popular rebellion.⁷⁸ Ultimately, Lavarack warned that the discrimination in the attitude of the Vichy French to the Australians and Free French could destabilise the alliance. 'The attempt to cause ill-feeling and suspicion between ourselves and our Allies, the Free French,' he wrote, 'may be one of the most effective [...] [and] insidious methods [by] which this might be effected [sic]'.⁷⁹ Indeed, Lavarack was not alone in his concerns. Karagheusian's report noted that a general lack of Free French officers had forced the British and Australians to retain Vichy French officers in political posts, despite their varying degrees of 'sincerity' in joining the Free French. Some, Karagheusian wrote, were a 'menace', 'deliberately put[ting] spokes in our wheels'.⁸⁰

Yet it was not only the machinations of the Vichy French that concerned Lavarack. The Free French were also a thorn in Lavarack's side. Lavarack had become aware that Free French forces had 'secret' agreements

⁷⁶ Report, Lieutenant General John Lavarack, 'Vichy French attitude towards ourselves and the Free French: Confidential directive to formation and unit commanders', July 30, 1941, AWM54, 531/4/4, AWM.

⁷⁷ Report, J. W. A. O'Brien, 'Report by Lt-Col. J. W. A. O'Brien of discussions with Archbishop of Tyre, Sidon and dependencies', no date but from content and context, likely early August 1941, AWM54, 531/4/4, AWM.

⁷⁸ Lavarack, 'Vichy French attitude'.

⁷⁹ Lavarack, 'Vichy French attitude'.

⁸⁰ Karagheusian, 'Reconnaissance Report', 7.

governing the situation, to which he was not privy, and he lamented that ‘proper’ cooperation between 1st Australian Corps and the Free French forces was ‘impossible’ if the latter did not openly share information with the Australians.⁸¹ Accordingly, Lavarack advised General Thomas Blamey (who was at this stage deputy commander-in-chief in the Middle East) that while 1st Australian Corps’ relations with the Vichy French were ‘correct but cordial’, the same could not be said for relations with the Free French, who, unlike their Vichy counterparts, had proven unwilling to keep to the terms of the Armistice.⁸² Free French actions, Lavarack feared, would only further destabilise the already deteriorating security situation in Syria and Lebanon.⁸³

Where the Free French appeared to overlook the Australian contribution, the Vichy French were seen to respect that they had been defeated fair and square. Lavarack reported that although the latter refused to have anything to do with the Free French, they were willing to cooperate with Australian and British forces following the armistice. There was a very strong resentment against the Free French on the part of the Vichy troops; indeed, the invasion was, from the French perspective, a fratricidal war in which Frenchmen fought against fellow Frenchmen. Where Australians were afforded commensurate respect as victors, the Free French were, Lavarack observed, treated as ‘deserters and traitors who have shed the blood of other Frenchmen’.⁸⁴ But if one thing was certain, it was that ‘bad blood’ ran between the Vichy and Free French.⁸⁵ Major General Arthur ‘Tubby’ Allen, who commanded the 7th Australian Division during the invasion, recalled Vichy French General Paul-Hippolyte Arlabosse telling him after the armistice that his forces were not pro-German; they simply ‘despised’ the Free French, whom they were determined to fight.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Lieutenant General John Lavarack, ‘Relations with FFF’, August 14, 1941, AWM54, 531/1/13, AWM.

⁸² Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, 517.

⁸³ Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, 517–518.

⁸⁴ Lavarack, ‘Vichy French attitude’.

⁸⁵ Karagheusian, ‘Reconnaissance Report’, 9.

⁸⁶ Notes, Gavin Long, interview with Major General A. S. Allen, December 27, 1944, AWM67, 2/67, 23–24.

Similarly, for some Australians, particularly those who had lost friends in the campaign, there was no path to redemption for the Vichy French. Colin Kerr, whose friend was killed at the battle of Jezzine, emphasised that the Vichy French were ‘bastards’ to him and his fellow soldiers. ‘Henceforth, that’s what the enemy were to be, nothing more than that’, Kerr recalled in 1945.⁸⁷ However, despite Kerr’s strong stance on the Vichy French, Australian perceptions of and interactions with the French were not always negative, nor were their reactions always forced. Race meets were held in support of the French Red Cross and attended by all parties, and they drank together at bars. Some took these opportunities to practice their French language skills.⁸⁸ As Ian Macdonald put it: ‘They were good fun blokes, too. They were patriots and adventurers.’⁸⁹ Others, such as Robey, suggested that some of the ‘bitterness’ for the Vichy French dissipated after the armistice.⁹⁰ ‘By and large, the Froggies were all right. The Free French boys were all right’, though, perhaps, ‘a bit standoffish’, Donald Mead echoed.⁹¹ Recollections such as these speak to the fluidity of who was considered an ‘enemy’, suggesting that, at least for some, perceptions of the enemy can change once the heat of battle passes.

Conclusion

The Allied invasion of Syria and Lebanon in 1941 offers an insight into one of the more turbulent periods in the history of Australian-French relations. The recent submarine fracas and the subsequent steps toward repairing the French-Australian relationship following a change of government in Australia have demonstrated that the relationship has both ups and downs, sparked by each nation’s pursuit of national interests. The Australian Labor Government has moved to repair relations between Australia and France after being elected to government in the 2022 federal election. Once again, when Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited Paris in July 2022

⁸⁷ Colin Kerr, *Tanks in the East: The Story of an Australian Cavalry Regiment* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1945), 23.

⁸⁸ Interview, Richard Hughes (Gordon), May 8, 2003, accession no. 49, AAWFA, 43.

⁸⁹ Interview, Ian Macdonald, May 22, 2003, accession no. 173, AAWFA, 14.

⁹⁰ Interview, Herbert Robey, 30.

⁹¹ Interview, Donald Mead, March 25, 2005, accession no. 1667, AAWFA, 20.

to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron, references to Australia and France's shared war history were made.⁹² However, as this article demonstrates, the fallout from the Australian Government's cancellation of its submarine contract with France is not the only rupture in the timeline of Australian-French relations, and Australia and France's shared war history has not always been one of Allies fighting alongside each other.

While the submarine saga largely played out at the diplomatic level, Operation Exporter offers insight into the sometimes complex nature of this relationship and how it is experienced at individual and military levels. During the operation and in the months following the Vichy French defeat, Australian troops negotiated the complexity of their relationship with the French, who were simultaneously ally and enemy. This dynamic caused a complex web of sentiments that were likely influenced by the personal experiences of individual soldiers. Kerr, for instance, demonstrates that the loss suffered when a friend was killed in battle tainted any good feeling toward the enemy that existed for other Australians after the battle was over. Likewise, racial conceptualisations were a potential contributing factor in how Australians and the French (both Free and Vichy) viewed French colonial soldiers, who were often considered to be of poorer quality than their white French counterparts.

Generally, Australian troops viewed the Vichy French as traitors. However, it was also difficult for some Australian soldiers to separate the Vichy and Free French from each other and understand the complexities of the Free French–Vichy French relationship. Still, once the heat of battle dissipated and the armistice was signed Australians, for the most part, appeared to get along relatively well with both the Free and Vichy French as they came to recognise that their enemy was not so different from themselves. Still, it is clear from Lavarack's reporting that tensions remained at the command level between the Free French and Australians. Whether the subsequent overshadowing of this period in Australian-French relations is, as Uren suggests, due solely—or even primarily—to the difficulty of acknowledging that Australia, Britain, and France were at war, is debatable.

⁹² 'Anthony Albanese and Emmanuel Macron Meet after Submarine Drama for "New Start" between Australia and France', ABC News, July 2, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-01/australia-and-france-reset-alliance-as-albanese-and-macron-meet/101202548>.

However, the general lack of awareness of this period and the ready return to protests of an undying friendship between France and Australia suggest this narrative is the preferred conceptualisation of the relationship.

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