The RAAF in the Syrian Campaign, 1941: Operation Exporter

One of the lesser known campaigns of World War II was the Allied invasion of Syria in 1941. The enemy in this campaign was not the Germans or the Italians, but French troops loyal to the Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain. Australians played a major role in this campaign and the RAAF ably demonstrated the versatility and flexibility of air power. The Syrian campaign also presents a useful case study for contrasting different doctrinal approaches to air warfare.

In May 1941, the increasingly collaborative Vichy regime had allowed German and Italian aircraft to use airfields in the French mandated territory of Syria to support an anti-British coup d’état in neighbouring Iraq that threatened Britain’s access to vital oil supplies. Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the Free French forces, urged Churchill to occupy Syria and confidently predicted that Vichy troops would put up only token resistance.

General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, had few troops to spare for another campaign. Only the Australian 7th Division, the 5th Indian Brigade and six Free French battalions were initially available for operations in Syria. Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief RAF Middle East Command, was equally hard-pressed to find aircraft for the campaign. Immediately on hand were the P-40 Tomahawks of No 3 Squadron, RAAF, at RAF Station Aqir in British Palestine. They joined two RAF Hurricane squadrons and two RAF Blenheim light bomber squadrons for the operation against Syria. The French had approximately 100 aircraft in Syria and during the course of the campaign the size and quality of the Vichy air force was substantially increased by reinforcements from French North Africa—including modern Dewoitine D.520 fighters and Glenn-Martin 167F (Maryland) light bombers.

The Allied invasion, Operation EXPORTER, commenced on 8 June 1941 and any hope that the Vichy French would not fight were quickly dispelled. The Vichy troops fought with considerable determination and skill. The Vichy air force, however, lacked adequate anti-aircraft defences for its airfields and its squadrons did not have the resources to match the high tempo of Allied air operations. On the very first day of the campaign, No 3 Squadron was in action attacking the principal Vichy air base at Rayak and escorting bombers during strikes on oil storage facilities in Beirut. No 3 Squadron engaged in a wide spectrum of air power missions during the campaign: from the conventional army co-operation roles of reconnaissance and close air support, through to counter-air operations (attacking enemy airfields and providing fighter escorts for Allied bombers and warships) and interdiction and counter-sea missions (striking enemy supply depots, road convoys, shipping and ports).

Towards the end of June, the Allies transferred additional squadrons to Syria and another RAAF squadron joined the fight. The ground crews from No 450 Squadron, RAAF—temporarily without their aircraft and aircrews—serviced the Hurricanes of No 260 Squadron, RAF for their operations over Syria.
Above all, the Allies benefitted from a robust doctrinal approach to the application of air power that was developing within RAF Middle East Command. All the Allied squadrons were under the unified command of Air Commodore Leslie Brown, Air Officer Commanding Palestine and Transjordan. This centralised control granted Brown the flexibility to concentrate his forces at a time and place of his choosing and the ability to prioritise counter-air operations. Throughout the campaign, Allied squadrons carried out sustained attacks on Vichy airfields that destroyed over 60 aircraft on the ground and forced the French to evacuate their main airfields in the south. Obtaining and maintaining control of the air then enabled Air Commodore Brown to use his limited air assets to directly support surface operations. In early July, the use of captured airfields brought the last major Vichy aerodrome at Aleppo in the far north within range of Allied fighters. The destruction of the French air force was quickly followed by the capitulation of all Vichy forces in Syria.

In contrast, the French parceled out their air power for close air support and counter-sea missions under the direct control of army and naval commanders. Determined and repeated attacks by Vichy fighters and bombers were an important factor in French ground forces halting the initial Allied offensive. But, by dividing their air power, the French lost the ability to concentrate their forces and aggressively contest control of the air. As a result, the Allied fighters inflicted heavy and unsustainable losses on the French air force. On 28 June, nine Tomahawks from No 3 Squadron encountered six Glenn-Martin 167Fs attacking Allied ground forces south of Palmyra and shot them all down without loss—a single action that cost the Vichy air force half of its most modern bomber type in Syria. A further 30 French aircraft were destroyed in the air, for the loss of just 11 Allied planes. No 3 Squadron lost only one aircraft during the whole campaign. This occurred over Homs on 11 July when a Dewoitine fighter shot down Flying Officer Frank Fischer, who managed to crash-land unhurt. The Vichy fighter was immediately destroyed by Flying Officer Bobby Gibbes, the first victory for this distinguished officer who went on to become the squadron’s Commanding Officer and one of Australia’s leading fighter aces.

On 10 July, the Vichy commanders sought an armistice. When the fighting ceased two days later, the Allies had sustained over 4,000 casualties, including 416 Australians killed and 1,136 wounded. The Vichy air force, despite flying over 3,000 sorties in the five-week campaign, had been defeated by a smaller, but better armed and much better led opponent. Air Marshal Tedder was to further develop and apply the air power lessons learned in Syria during the hard-fought campaigns in North Africa and the Mediterranean over the next two years and, subsequently, across the English Channel for the liberation of France itself.

• Australian airmen, soldiers, and sailors played a central role in the Syrian campaign.

• Control of the air is the prerequisite for the conduct of all operations to achieve campaign objectives.

• Aircraft are most vulnerable on the ground, and protection of air bases by air and ground forces is essential for air power operations.

‘Two factors of the highest importance which contributed to the British victory ... [were] the bombardments provided in the coastal sector by the Royal Navy, and our superiority in the air.’

Lieutenant-General John Lavarack Report on Operations in the Syrian Campaign June-July 1941