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1941

Peter J. Dean

University of Notre Dame Australia, peter.dean@anu.edu.au

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Man of might: Brigadier Berryman and the battles of Merdjayoun and Jezzine, Syria, 1941

In June 1941 Brigadier Frank Berryman's fearless and sometimes unorthodox leadership was instrumental in the Allied capture of Syria.

By Dr Peter J Dean

As the afternoon of the 14 June 1941 drew to a close Major John Wilton, 7th Division, Australian Imperial Force (AIF), sat beneath a beautiful fig tree in the town of Jezzine, Syria, and consumed "the most delicious figs [he'd] ever eaten". Apart from a few other scant occasions, this was the first opportunity to relax since beginning of the Allied invasion of Vichy French Syria. Wilton looked over to his commanding officer and mentor Brigadier Frank Berryman, whom he greatly respected. Here was a man, thought Wilton, whose fearless and sometimes unorthodox leadership had been instrumental in the recent allied successes. Over the past week alone Berryman had planned a number of major attacks, conducted reconnaissances beyond the front line, accompanied the infantry in their assaults on two major strategic towns, captured prisoners, and had almost ambushed "friendly" tanks with nothing more than a revolver.

Berryman had arrived at the 7th Division as its senior brigadier fresh from the Libyan campaign. Under the command of Major-General John Lavarack, the 7th Division formed the backbone of the Allied invasion of Vichy French Syria and Lebanon. The British, labouring under the false assumption that the Vichy French would only put up limited resistance, allocated few aircraft, no tanks, and limited infantry for the offensive. The Vichy French meanwhile had air superiority, more infantry, and two-thirds of an armoured division on hand. They were also were operating in terrain that was universally regarded as suited to defensive operations. The failure of the British to provide air and

tank support meant that Berryman's artillery would be the sole major fire support available to the 7th Division for most of the campaign.

The invasion commenced on the morning of 8 June 1941. The central thrust, under Brigadier Alfred Baxter-Cox's 25th Brigade, AIF, soon ground to a halt and Lavarack ordered Berryman forward to assist Baxter-Cox to coordinate his advance. Upon arriving at the front, Berryman was appalled to find Baxter-Cox pushing his infantry into the attack without making use of his attached artillery regiment. Lavarack, arriving on the scene the next morning, removed the 2/6th Field Regiment from Baxter-Cox's command and ordered Berryman's headquarters forward with orders to coordinate the advance.

Now in the leading role on the 25th Brigade front, Berryman organised for his regiments to shell Fort Khiam on 9 June, as well as assisting the 2/33rd Battalion's assault on the village. In the afternoon Berryman organised a force of Bren-gun carriers to test the strength of the defenders at Khirbe, while the following day he conducted a reconnaissance for a deliberate assault against the town of Merdjayoun two days hence.

These moves were not undertaken without considerable personal risk. Berryman, together with his reconnaissance force consisting of Wilton and Lieutenant Colonel Selwyn Porter, 2/31st Battalion, had advanced over 700 metres beyond the infantry's forward defensive line in order to prepare the attack on Merdjayoun. Berryman's plan consisted of a flank attack on the high ground of Ibeles Saki, to the east, by the 2/25th Battalion and an assault along the main road to Merdjayoun by the 2/31st Battalion. Starting at 0230 hours on 11 June 1941 the attack made good progress, supported by the heaviest artillery bombardment of the campaign so far. Keen to maintain his presence with the troops, Berryman pushed forward, entering Khirbe with the infantry and personally capturing 12 prisoners.

Despite the obvious risks, Berryman continued to press forward during the attack, accompanying Porter and his troops as they entered Merdjayoun at 1300 hours. Porter noted, "As we approached the civic centre, the flag of Lebanon broke at a mast head and we were invited to partake in champagne." Berryman accepted the town's surrender and immediately moved his artillery headquarters into the town.

The French continued to fire on the town and Berryman's answer to this persistence proved quite unorthodox. Lieutenant Colonel John O'Brien, 2/5th Field Regiment, had reported that the rough country beyond Merdjayoun made it difficult for his observation posts to locate the enemy artillery. Berryman's staff, however, could see the enemy gun flashes from the second story of the headquarters' building. Berryman, Wilton, and O'Brien went upstairs and immediately started to engage the French guns from an upstairs window by sending orders back to the 2/5th Field Regiment's guns by telephone. They then proceeded out onto the balcony to observe the fall of shot. This action must be the only time during the war that an Australian divisional artillery headquarters also acted as a forward observation post for one of its own artillery regiments.

For most senior officers coordinating a major assault, entering the objective with the leading troops, and then fulfilling the role of a forward artillery observer would have been more than enough for one action. Berryman, however, showing his characteristic abundance of energy, did not rest on his laurels. He spent the next couple of days coordinating the town's defence, touring his batteries, and checking on his men. He then set off to join the 25th Brigade's advance on the town of Jezzine.

By morning on 14 June the advance guard of the 25th Brigade, consisting of the 2/31st Battalion supported by a troop from the 2/6th Field Regiment and a battery of the 2/2nd Anti-tank Regiment, had reached Kafr Houn. Soon

after Lavarack arrived at 25th Brigade headquarters he ordered Berryman "to get Jezzine that night".

Patrols reported that Green Hill, the dominant high ground that held the key to Jezzine, was strongly held by the enemy. Berryman pushed forward to coordinate an attack with Porter, who had refused to be evacuated despite having been shot in the thigh by a French sniper at midday. As Porter's men closed in on Green Hill, Berryman arranged for a troop of 25-pounder guns to close to within around 900 metres of the feature to support the assault. Despite the difficult terrain the attack proceeded at 1800hrs and was a complete success.

With Porter incapacitated due to his wound, Berryman moved forward. Arriving on Green Hill to find the 2/31st Battalion consolidating its position, Berryman "looked down and saw the town of Jezzine ... [and] a big column of French troops moving to the north-east". Grasping the importance of their position he ordered the artillery forward observer to shell the French column but the telephone line to the guns was down. In response Berryman turned to the nearest company commander, asserting "well, you can see that they're pulling out - go down and occupy the town." The company set off down the precipitous cliff face "swinging down the terraces with the help of vines and the branches of trees".

Unwilling to be left behind Berryman forged on with the platoon, initially waiting on the road as the men approached the town. As the light started to fade, the increasingly anxious Berryman announced he was tired of waiting and again set off to lead the advance. He halted inside the town as the troops moved among the streets to clear them of the enemy. By now the sun had faded and Berryman heard the unmistakable rumble of approaching tanks. He knew that no Allied tanks had accompanied the force to Jezzine and,

assuming that they were French tanks that had moved down from Damour to resist the Australian advance he took action. Wilton later recalled:

There were some rather broken down farmhouses on the side of the road, so Berryman said "We'll hide ourselves in here behind the wall ... I think there are only two tanks". We looked back and there were just these dark objects coming along the road ... with the turrets open and the tank commander standing up and looking out ... We crouched there with our pistols cocked. The tanks rumbled along and just before the first tank passed me we heard a good Australian voice ... It was a troop of tanks from the 9th Australian Division Cavalry, which by this time had got to the road junction which led from Damour to Jezzine, and they'd been sent out to make contact with our little party. But they didn't tell us, and those chaps were only about ten seconds away from being shot.

Relieved at their good fortune Berryman and Wilton rode the light tanks into Jezzine, where they found the leading infantry platoon drinking wine with the town's mayor. Berryman's daring advance had forestalled the French plan to occupy the town in strength the following day.

It was here that Berryman and Wilton were able to relax under the beautiful fig tree. It had been an amazing week for the two officers. But the reprieve would be only temporary, as the capture of Jezzine was not the end of the campaign but rather marked the beginning of the most crucial phase of the invasion. Before long Berryman was rushing back to Merdjayoun to take command of an ad-hoc brigade in an attempt to stem the tide of a Vichy French counter-attack that threatened the entire invasion. The tough first week of fighting and the counter-attack proved to the British High Command that Syria was no push over. Berryman fearless and unorthodox leadership was to continue to play a major a role in the campaign as he, the 7th Australian Division, and the newly operational 1st Australian Corps battled through another month of hard fighting before victory was secured.

About the author

Dr Peter J. Dean is a lecturer in history at the University of Notre Dame Australia (Sydney) and is currently writing a biography of Lt-General Berryman .