

Chapter Five

Litani River

9–10 June 1941

Having covered four daring raids from the air, it is time to turn attention to the Commandos, which had been formed during 1940 after the Fall of France. Because Britain had no special forces at the time, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had proposed the formation of a new organization, made up of volunteers, to carry out offensive action against the enemy. Churchill gave the organization the name Commandos, taken from his days as a war reporter in the Boer War when he had witnessed for himself the significant losses inflicted on the British Army by the Boer's irregular forces, known as 'commandos'. Although the vision had initially been for the British Commandos to carry out offensive action against the enemy's extended and quite vulnerable coastline in north-west Europe, it is to the Middle East, and a campaign that is rarely given any historical recognition, that we go first to look at an early and very daring commando raid, and it would be the first time that commandos would attack a heavily defended position.

The Allied invasion of Vichy French-controlled Syria and Lebanon, called Operation Exporter, commenced in June 1941. The fact that little was known of the campaign during the war can be put down to there being little, if any, coverage given to the campaign back home. Politicians believed that any public knowledge of Allies fighting against French forces would probably have a negative effect in those countries involved. Even after the war, the campaign has remained largely unknown, but the action involving the men of 11 (Scottish) Commando at the Litani River was as fierce as anything the commandos had encountered at that stage of the war.

For several months the leader of the Free French, General Charles de Gaulle, had been pressing for an invasion of Vichy French Syria, but British forces were stretched across the Mediterranean and North Africa. Then, in May 1941, an agreement was signed between Vichy France and Germany, allowing the Nazis access to military facilities in Syria.

The outcome was the launching of an Allied offensive to prevent the Germans from

using Syria and the Lebanon as havens to launch an attack on Egypt. Hostilities commenced on 8 June and, in support of Exporter, 11 Commando was tasked with capturing the Qasmiye Bridge that crossed the Litani River, about 50 miles south of Beirut, in what was then Syria, but is now southern Lebanon. The river flows east–west at that point and crossed the planned Allied line of advance northwards towards Beirut. Capturing the bridge would ease the Australian 7th Division's advance along the coastal road from Haifa to Beirut, and it would be the first of a series of major actions lasting more than a month.

Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Dick Pedder, 11 Commando had been drawn largely from Scottish regiments and sent to the Mediterranean in early 1941 as C Battalion of Layforce, a rather ad hoc formation made up of a number of commando units under the overall command of Colonel Robert Laycock. The intention was that Layforce would carry out a campaign of harassment against the enemy in the Mediterranean, but things had not turned out quite as planned, and by the time they arrived in theatre the strategic situation had much changed. A planned raid on the Greek island of Rhodes had to be cancelled, a supposedly daring raid on the Italian-held town of Bardia turned out to be unopposed, and the decision to send commandos to Crete to fight a rearguard action during the evacuation of the island, a role that commandos had not been specifically formed to do, had resulted in heavy losses. None of these early operations had involved Pedder's men. They had instead been given the task of carrying out garrison duties on Cyprus, a role that had left the men of 11 Commando still looking for an opportunity to make their mark – an opportunity that finally came during Exporter.

The plan was for the commandos to carry out an amphibious assault at dawn, landing from the sea at the mouth of the Litani to coincide with the Australian 21st Infantry Brigade's attack on the river. The enemy was known to be holding the ground along the line of the Litani River, with a second bridge, situated at Kafr Badda, crossing another river flowing parallel to the Litani about 2 miles to the north. The whole area was known to be heavily defended. In-between the two rivers, and to the east of the coastal road connecting Sidon and Tyre that crossed the two bridges, there were a number of enemy installations, including two main gun batteries and a barracks. Once ashore the commandos were to outflank the enemy and to attack them from the rear. They would then secure both the Qasmiye and Kafr Badda bridges before the enemy had time to destroy them, which would allow the Australian infantry to cross both rivers and advance towards Beirut. As the amphibious assault was planned for 8 June, the commandos left Cyprus four days prior to that, and two days later boarded their landing ship, HMS *Glengyle*. They then set sail from Port Said with a naval escort.

Pedder had a raiding force of more than 20 officers and 450 men, but he had been given little information regarding where the landing was to take place. A motor gunboat

was launched so that the naval beach master and a local guide could carry out a quick reconnaissance of the coastline along the intended landing beaches. They came back reporting a large swell and heavy surf along the coast, particularly in the final few hundred yards of the beaches, which made the likelihood of the flat-bottomed landing craft being able to go ashore without capsizing quite slim. With the commandos laden with their heavy equipment, this would most likely result in several casualties. Furthermore, the forecast was not good, as it was looking unlikely there would be any change to the sea conditions for the next forty-eight hours.

Nonetheless, the decision was made to attempt a landing at dawn the following morning as planned, and during the early hours of 8 June the *Glengyle* arrived at the dropping-off point about 4 miles off the mouth of the Litani River. The eleven landing craft were lowered and the commandos packed inside with all their equipment and ammunition. The swell was quite severe and there was still a major concern about the conditions. Opinions differed, particularly between Pedder, who argued that the risk was worth taking in order to retain the element of surprise, and the beach master who had carried out the reconnaissance of the coastline. The final decision belonged to the skipper of the *Glengyle*, Captain Christopher Petrie, who, at that early part of the operation, still retained overall responsibility for whether the assault was launched or not. Reluctantly, Petrie made the decision to abort the mission.

With the commandos back on board and the landing craft raised, the *Glengyle* headed back to Port Said, arriving back during the afternoon. The commandos now waited anxiously while Pedder was summoned to a quick meeting on board another ship to find out what was to happen next. He soon arrived back on the *Glengyle* to tell his men the operation was back on and they were to set sail at once. It had been just over an hour since the *Glengyle* had arrived back in port and, to the disbelief of those on board, she was once again heading out to sea.

The *Glengyle* reached the dropping-off point during the early hours of 9 June. Fortunately, the swell had subsided enough to make the lowering of the landing craft easier than before. By now the Australian attack was well underway. Unfortunately, however, the earlier decision to abort the mission had been made in full view of the enemy. The motor gunboat carrying out the reconnaissance along the coastline had been spotted and it had become obvious to the enemy what was going on, so by the time the Australian infantry had advanced the defenders had simply blown the Qasmiye Bridge.

The second bridge at Kafr Badda, however, was still intact and so Pedder had to modify his plan. He split his force into three parties: X, Y and Z. The original plan had been to land the parties on both sides of the mouth of the Litani and to seize the Qasmiye Bridge, but because the bridge was no longer the main objective, all three parties would now land to the north of the estuary on separate beaches between the two rivers.

X Party comprised of 2, 3 and 9 Troops, and was to land closest to the Litani to carry out the main assault on the north bank of the river. The men were to be led by Major Geoffrey Keyes, Pedder's second-in-command and the oldest son of Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, the Director of Combined Operations. Keyes had just celebrated his twenty-fourth birthday and had already been in action in Norway prior to serving in the Middle East. His task now was to destroy an enemy position at Aiteniye and to then seize the enemy fortification on the north bank of the river from its rear. His party were then to hold the area to allow the Australians time to build a pontoon bridge across the river.

Pedder, meanwhile, was to lead Y Party, consisting of 1, 7 and 8 Troops. His party would land just to the north of Keyes's group and provide support during the main assault by taking a gun battery and capturing the enemy barracks just over a mile inland, after which Pedder's group would support the main attack in whatever way it could. The third group, Z Party, made up of 4 and 10 Troops, and under the command of Captain George More, would land furthest north, some 2 miles from the Litani River and at the mouth of the second river. More's task was to capture and hold the bridge at Kafr Badda, and so prevent the enemy from reinforcing the area along the coast road from the north, and to capture an enemy gun battery to the east.

Soon after 3.00 am the lead commandos of X Party boarded four landing craft and headed off towards the shore. It would be another hour before daylight. As before, there had been a lack of information during the briefing and so the landing party had been given little idea of how to find the right landing spot. Although there was a reasonable amount of moonlight, it proved a difficult task.

In the end, X Party landed just before 5.00 am about a mile south of where they should have been and on the wrong side of the river. Fortunately, the landing was unopposed. It was now getting light and Keyes quickly realized they had landed on the south side of the river. With no alternative but to mount a frontal attack against heavily armed troops in a fortified position, Keyes ordered his men to move rapidly across the beach towards the river. At that point the whole beach area came under heavy fire, including mortar and artillery fire, as well as that from heavy machine guns. The fire was coming from the same enemy fortification to the north-east of their position that they should have been attacking from the rear.

During their advance to the river the men of X Party soon became pinned down, particularly from sniper fire from the enemy bank, and suffered a number of casualties. One section led by Captain George Highland, with 21-year-old Lieutenant Eric Garland alongside him, managed to work its way forward on the far right, and out of sight of the main enemy position. But faced with only open and flat ground ahead there was little in the way of protection, and they soon became pinned down by an enemy sniper.

As Keyes surveyed the scene, the casualties started to mount; two of his corporals

and a sapper were killed. They could get no further. For the best part of half an hour the commandos remained where they were, but they had now been joined by some Australian infantry supporting the commandos' attack on the river. Using a combination of crawling and sprinting across the open ground, and using whatever cover he could find, Keyes managed to reach Highland's advanced position. He arrived to find that Highland and Garland had just teased out the enemy sniper who had kept his small group pinned down for so long; with his position now exposed, the hapless Frenchman was soon cut down by a burst of commando machine-gun fire.

With the sniper taken care of, and with supporting artillery fire now raining down on the enemy, the commandos had an opportunity to cross the river. A small canvas boat was brought up to the river and positioned amongst some rushes as cover. With the help of the Australians, and with Garland and a handful of commandos on board, the men paddled their way across the river, which, at that point, was just 30 yards wide. Although the river was relatively narrow at that point, it was fast flowing and reaching the other side was hard work, but the Australians soon set up a ferry service to take more commandos to the northern side.

Keyes and his men had now been ashore for more than four hours. Meanwhile, the central group, Pedder's Y Party, consisting of 8 officers and nearly 150 men, had gone ashore in 4 landing craft. They had landed at around 4.30 am just over a mile from the river and had come under fire before they even reached the beach. With the landing craft crews keen to drop off the commandos and withdraw as quickly as possible, many of the latter were left to struggle ashore in water that was chest high. The commandos then ran quickly across the open beach, covering the short distance of just 20 yards or so in record time, before heading inland over the dunes and crossing the coastal road. It was then that they encountered more heavy enemy fire from the higher ground ahead.

Although Y Party had somehow managed to arrive at their position in reasonably good shape, progress was slow and their radio had been damaged. Pedder had no way of communicating with the other two parties and so he was forced to get his men to break out of their cover and into the open. But, as they pressed on towards the barracks, it was impossible to co-ordinate an attack, and it was not long before the commandos became pinned down once more.

Fortunately, one of Pedder's officers, Lieutenant Blair 'Paddy' Mayne, who was leading 7 Troop and would later become a founding member of the Special Air Service, had managed to join up with elements of 8 Troop. They were soon able to press on and then head south towards the river.

But it was 1 Troop and Pedder's headquarters who encountered the fiercest opposition. Undaunted, Lieutenant Gerald Bryan led his men on beyond the barracks to one of the guns. He arrived to find the gun unmanned and the crew taking cover nearby.

The other guns nearby were manned and were firing on the commandos, but Bryan's men succeeded in getting the captured gun in action and firing on those emplacements still in the hands of the enemy.

Elsewhere amongst Pedder's group, the commandos mounted an assault against the barracks but they were met by heavy machine-gun and sniper fire. Casualties soon started to mount as Pedder ordered his men to withdraw towards a gully for shelter. It was at that point that Dick Pedder was killed. It was a savage blow. Other officers had also become casualties. Captain Bill Farmiloe and Lieutenant Donald Coode had both been killed and the last remaining officer, Gerald Bryan, who had now taken over command of the men, was then wounded; Bryan would, nonetheless, manage to keep the enemy at arm's length for two hours before he was taken prisoner.

With all his officers gone it was left to Regimental Sergeant Major Lewis Tevendale to regroup and rally the men and head for the river. They managed to reach some cover, but after several hours of continuous fire they were finally overrun; with no other option, the commandos surrendered.

Meanwhile, further to the north, George More's Z Party also had no way of communicating with the other groups; a landing craft had hit a submerged rock during its approach to the beach and the radio set had been soaked, rendering it nothing short of useless. The other landing craft seem to have been caught on a sandbank and so the commandos had to make their way in chest-high water. They then had to make their way across the beach and open ground under sporadic enemy fire, a distance of several hundred yards, before they were able to find any cover. Although they encountered more enemy fire once they arrived at the coastal road, Z Party managed to mount a frontal attack on the enemy. The Vichy troops were outfought and seemingly had little stomach for a heavy fight. By 6.30 am the commandos had seized the bridge intact.

Having overrun many vacant enemy positions, where the occupants had clearly departed in a hurry, the commandos of Z Party started rounding up prisoners. For most of the day they managed to hold off the enemy, although the flatness of the surrounding terrain made it difficult. They also succeeded in capturing four gun emplacements and a transport pool, as well as take a number of prisoners. It was only when a number of enemy armoured vehicles arrived that More was forced to withdraw his men. Some headed off east in a group led by Lieutenant Tommy Macpherson before going south to reach the Australian lines, while More led others off south, still under heavy enemy fire, to join up with Y Party. However, the latter were soon caught in open ground and, unable to communicate with the commandos further south, suddenly found themselves coming under fire from all directions. Amongst the five men killed was one of the young officers, 21-year-old Lieutenant Geoffrey Parnacott. Three other men were wounded, and with no hope of getting to safety, they surrendered.

Back at the river, the commandos of X Party were busy crossing the Litani. More boats had been made available, but it was now already early afternoon and had taken more than three hours to ferry the men across. As more men reached the far side, the commandos gradually gained a stronger foothold on the northern bank. Led by Highland and Garland they slowly cleared the enemy positions and captured the enemy redoubt, although it came at a cost, with several commandos killed and wounded during the assault on both sides of the river.

Having crossed the river, and now fearing a counter-attack, Keyes consolidated his position. Several prisoners had been captured and sent back across the river using the boats. Throughout the afternoon more and more Australians crossed the river. A pontoon bridge had been built, and by the early evening Keyes was able to hand over command of the fortification to the new arrivals.

The surviving commandos remained at the river overnight before the enemy forces in the area surrendered the following morning. Keyes was then ordered to withdraw at midday and to leave the redoubt to the Australians. One stroke of fortune was that George More and the commandos captured during the fighting the previous day were now released. Their captors from the day before had now become prisoners of the Australians. Keyes then led his men off southwards and by that night they were safely back at Haifa.

The men of 11 Commando returned to Cyprus on 15 June. They had acquitted themselves well and had achieved the objectives of the revised plan; they had crossed the Litani River and held the north bank long enough to allow the Australian Brigade to cross the river and move on towards Beirut. The commandos had landed with only enough ammunition to last for eight hours, but they had ended up having to fight for more than twenty-four. But it had been at a cost. Of the more than 450 men that had left Cyprus just 11 days before, 45 had been killed and a further 85 wounded.

But despite the courage and determination of the commandos, they had been let down even before they set foot on the beaches, particularly by weak intelligence and poor navigation. There is no doubt that casualties would have been far fewer had the commandos been landed in the right place. This was down to the fact that Pedder had been given insufficient information about the coastline and landing beaches before leaving the *Glengyle*, and X Party's landing beach had been misidentified during the run-in before daylight. This had left Keyes and his men fighting all morning to get to the place where they should have been from the start.

After the raid, Geoffrey Keyes was given command of 11 Commando and awarded the Military Cross. Also awarded the MC were George More and Gerald Bryan, while Eric Garland received a bar to his MC, which he had won earlier in the war during the retreat to Dunkirk. Amongst the other awards, RSM Tevendale was awarded the DCM.