While Britain was losing control of its mandate in Iraq, French Syria would be an outlet to the Mediterranean. The overwhelming majority of the French overseas territories (including Syria and Lebanon) aligned with Philippe Petain and the Vichy regime. When Vichy ordered Syria and Lebanon to provide bases to the Luftwaffe they followed orders. Iraq’s “Golden Square” asked for Luftwaffe support to secure their control of Iraq. This created a remarkable situation: France (formerly a British Ally) arranged to ship French weapons to Iraq for the Luftwaffe to repair and refuel in Syria. Vichy arranged for Iraqi oil to flow via pipeline to the French refinery and port in Lebanon.

With British forces reeling from the German conquest of Greece, and the far more dangerous offensive from Libya towards Egypt by Rommel’s Afrika Korps, Britain’s military position was at the breaking point. The possibility of a two-front Axis drive in the Middle East from Libya and Syria was a daunting prospect. At this point, had Hitler committed a tenth of his available strength towards exploiting his position in the Mediterranean theatre from Greece, Libya, and made a serious intervention in Lebanon and Syria the Third Reich might have taken Egypt and the Middle East all the way to the border of Iran. This would have meant a limitless supply of oil for the Reich and placed the Suez Canal in German hands: in essence, the whole of the Mediterranean Sea would have been under Axis control. But the Nazis never dedicated the resources which Rommel begged for – instead, German forces were assembling for OPERATION BARBAROSSA in June 1941.

Circumstances in Spring 1941 created one of those seemingly contradictory and confusing wars typical of the Middle East. Not for the first time nor the last time, there would be fighting in the ancient desert region by forces and for reasons from far away as well as by the people who lived there. Great Britain committed several thousand Indian troops to fight their former ally in Syria because of German support for Iraqi nationalists. The May-July 1941 fight in Iraq and Syria saw Indian troops under British command landed at the Persian Gulf port of Basra. Iraqi forces of the “Golden Square” (with Luftwaffe support) then besieged an ill-prepared RAF base west of Fallujah. A mishmash of a few thousand British and Arab Legion troops then invaded Iraq from British Transjordan. A small number of RAF planes, meanwhile, came to help from Egypt against superior Luftwaffe fighter-bombers. The Golden Square junta went into a panic, imagining the British response was much stronger and better organized than it really was. A mere 2,500 Allied troops approached Baghdad and Iraqi resistance collapsed altogether.

After that, the British (reinforced with Australian and Free French troops) turned to ousting the Vichy regime in Syria. This was a far more dangerous threat: a collaborationist force of

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com
thirty thousand Vichy French and French Empire troops with about one hundred tanks.

British and Free French leaders believed that Vichy-loyal officers would surrender their positions and change sides. Vichy officers, however, considered themselves loyal to the government of France, and viewed the Free French forces as illegitimate and treacherous. This foreshadowed the utterly bitter fight for Syria and Lebanon in June and July 1941, with about 1,500 dead and many thousands more wounded. The RAF and Australian air forces battled French pilots who a year before had fought the Germans above France. The Royal Navy intercepted Vichy reinforcements in the Mediterranean before they could reach Lebanon. The battle was terribly close, and Indian Army forces crossed the desert from now subdued Iraq to join the fight. The Australian capture of Beirut on July 10 brought the fighting to a halt, with German planes and advisors fleeing just in time.

This fight seems a minor incident when contrasted with the titanic land battles to come, and there are reasons why this area has attracted less attention than it deserves. It highlights the mythology of a nation united against the Germans ignores the reality. Furthermore, post-war decolonization movements in the Arab world often contained a strong National Socialist component. The Ba'athist party of Saddam Hussein was ideologically and structurally modeled on the NSDAP. The legacy of Britain on the NSDAP. The legacy of Britain and France and Great Britain and France by Great Britain from the British attack on the neutral French fleet at Mers El Kebir, at Oran in 1940 to the wanton destruction of French villages, towns, and cities during the Bomber Offensive. Most histories gloss over the relationship between France and Great Britain and de Gaulle’s post-war myth of a nation united against the Germans ignores the reality. Furthermore, post-war decolonization movements in the Arab world often contained a strong National Socialist component.

Further Readings:
Freya Stark, East is West (London: John Murray, 1946).
Norman Goda, Tomorrow the World: Hitler, Northwest Africa, and the Path toward America. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998.)
Jeffrey Herf, Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

Announcements:
Vietnam War Roundtable – Fall of Saigon – Covid permitting, May 2021
World War I Roundtable (zoom) 10 Feb. 2021 – Post-9/11 Roundtable (zoom) TBD – rdietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 16 Feb. 2021 – Decapitating the Union: Plot to Assassinate Lincoln - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - TBD - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - TBD - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com
Civil War Symposium -TBD - info@tccwrt.com
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org
8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - https://www.8thmn.org
Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com
Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 612-338-2717 - crazyjerry65@hotmail.com
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.caf.org
Selim Center for Life Long Learning, UST, https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/
Western Naval Historical Association info@wnh.org
MacArthur Memorial, Norfolk VA, http://www.macarthurmemorial.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or goldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2021
9 Mar Nazi Art
23 Mar Nazi Scientists in US Space Program
13 Apr The Tragedy of Poland: Nazis; Soviets
11 May The “Mighty Eighth” and Victory in Europe

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