

## Stewart Maitland George Davies, Perth Modern School Student 1930-32



Source: Virtual War Memorial Australia

Stewart Davies was a machine gunner. His job was to provide support for attacking infantry. In Lebanon on 6 July 1941 he was getting into position to provide covering fire for advancing Australians that included two of his fellow former students from Perth Modern School.

Stewart was born in Guildford to Percival and Florence Davies on 21 December 1916. He completed his early schooling at Maylands Primary School in 1929 and commenced at Modern School on 11 February 1930. At that time, the family home was in Welshpool. Although not particularly interested in school, he achieved his Junior Certificate in seven subjects at the end of 1932.

On 3 March 1939 while working at Wagin Meat Supply as a butcher's assistant, Stewart joined the 25<sup>th</sup> Light Horse (Machine Gun) Regiment, a Militia unit, and was appointed to "B" Squadron. He was 22 at the time and 5'6" (167cms) tall. Trooper Davies was promoted to Lance Corporal on 20 October 1939 and then Corporal in mid-1940. Around this time he married a woman from Wagin, Eva Margaret Griffiths, at a ceremony in Maylands.

The German invasion of France in May 1940 triggered a surge of enlistments in the Australian Imperial Force, the voluntary expeditionary force of the Australian Army. Stewart obtained a discharge from the Militia to enable him to enlist in the AIF which he did at Northam on 14 June 1940. He was appointed to "D" Company of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Battalion. The 2/3<sup>rd</sup> was formed in June 1940 under the command of the legendary Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Blackburn, VC. Although the Battalion was raised in South Australia, D Company came from Western Australia.

After a period of training in Western Australia and then South Australia, D Company returned by train to WA for pre-embarkation leave in March 1941. Newly-promoted Lance Corporal Davies went on leave from 25 March to 6 April 1941. The Battalion less D Company embarked in Sydney on the SS *Ile de France* which called into Fremantle to embark D Company, and sailed from Fremantle for the Middle East on 16 April 1941 as part of a large convoy of troopships. This was the last time Stewart saw Eva and his family.

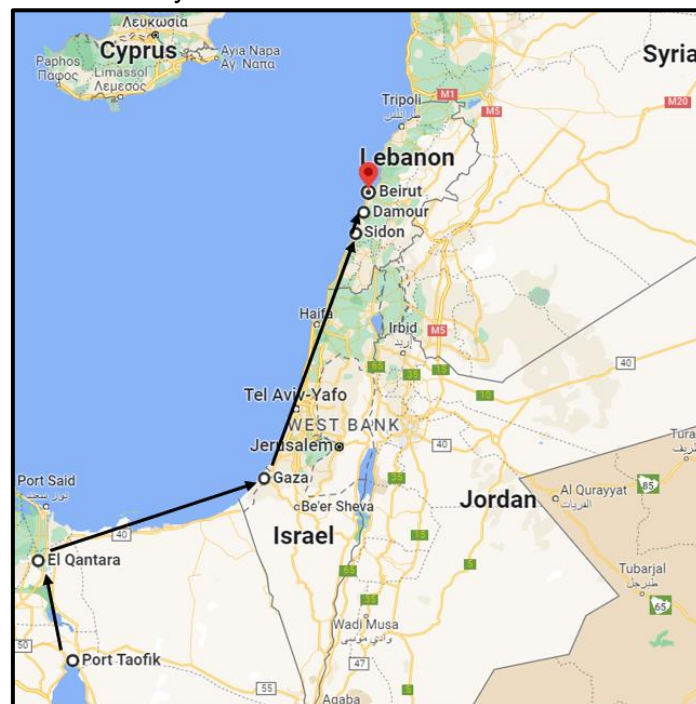
The convoy reached Colombo in late April and shore leave was given. Departing again on 6 May, they arrived at Port Tewfik (now Port Taofik) at the southern end of the Suez Canal and

disembarked on 14 May. They were taken by train north to Kantara (El Quantara) where they crossed to the east side of the canal in barges and travelled by train to a camp at Hill 95, approximately 16 kilometres north of Gaza in Palestine.

On 7 June 1941 the British invaded Vichy France-controlled Syria and Lebanon to prevent Nazi Germany from using bases there for attacks on Egypt. Australian troops made up more than half the invasion force of 34,000 men. The 2/3rd was assigned to the 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 7th Australian Division just before the Division was sent to Lebanon.

Stewart's first encounter with the enemy was on 10 June when the 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade attacked the coastal town of Sidon. D Company was called on to support fellow West Australians of the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion in its part of the attack. After a hard fight over five days Sidon fell to the Australians on 15 June.

Stewart's Middle East Journey: Port Taofik - El-Qantara - Gaza – Sidon - Damour River




Source: Google Maps

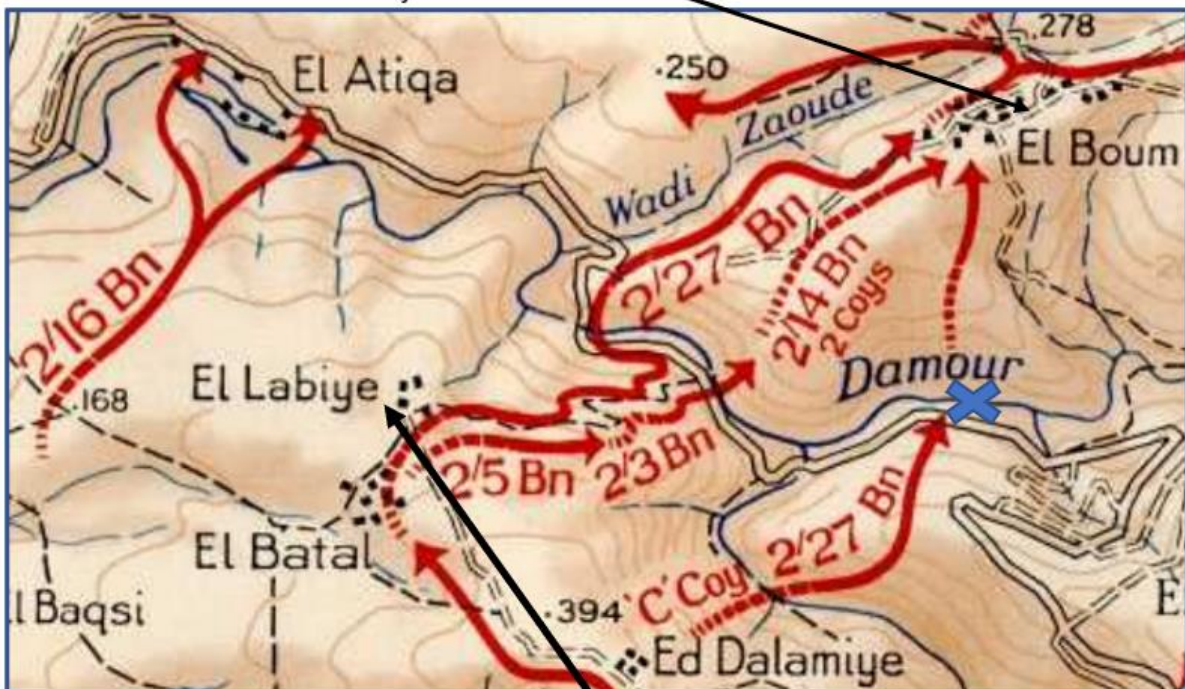
The next major engagement by D Company was during the Battle of Damour. Andrew Faulkner in *Arthur Blackburn, V.C.* takes up the story:

“Blackburn’s D Company had supported the infantry along the coast since 15 June. They had been split up among the various infantry battalions – the 2/14<sup>th</sup>, 2/16<sup>th</sup>, 2/25<sup>th</sup>, 2/33<sup>rd</sup>, 2/31<sup>st</sup> and the South Australians of the 2/27<sup>th</sup> and, like their sister companies, had played important roles in various frenzied little battles. They were about to be thrown into the biggest fight of the campaign.

“At midnight on 5/6 July, the Australian attackers clambered down a steep ravine to the edge of the Damour River, where they sat themselves down and waited. At 12:35am [on 6 July], when 60 field guns and howitzers shattered the silence, the diggers went off across the river and up the other side, which was just as steep. Bitter firefights erupted across five kilometres of front.

“Blackburn’s 13 Platoon was with the 2/27<sup>th</sup> Battalion, which was set the tough task of filing down a goat track into the ravine then climbing up and seizing the village of El Boum on a ridge almost 300 metres above sea level. When the supporting barrage opened, the Vichy artillery replied and the din bounced off the cliffs, making spoken communication impossible. Shells exploded among the Australian’s ranks, killing two 2/3<sup>rd</sup> men – Lance Corporal Stewart Davies, a 24-year-old butcher from Wagin in Western Australia, and Private Anthony Graham, 24, of Perth.”

Map showing the attack on El Boum by the 2/27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion supported by D Company of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Battalion. The blue cross  shows where Stewart was killed in the Damour River valley.



Stewart was initially buried in the small village of El Labiye on 7 July 1941. He was reburied in the Beirut War Cemetery on 2 October 1941.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade’s attack was successful and Damour was captured on 9 July, leaving Beirut indefensible. The Vichy French commander, General Dentz, sued for peace on 11 July and the Australian 7<sup>th</sup> Division entered Beirut on 12 July, ending the campaign.

The five-week campaign in Syria-Lebanon is undoubtedly the forgotten campaign of World War 2, yet 416 Australians lie in cemeteries there. One of them is Stewart Davies. Another two are former Modern School students Lieutenant Tom Harper and Lieutenant Harry Stapledon who fought with the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion and who were struck down in the same battle and on the same day as Stewart.

Stewart Davies was 24 when he died.

**LEST WE FORGET**

## **References**

Perth Modern School archives

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