

GUNS DIRECTED FROM ROOF

Cool AIF Officer

By RONALD NONSON
WITH THE AIF IN SYRIA, Sunday.

In Merjityn a young Australian artillery officer crept through houses in an area held by Vichy forces, selected an unoccupied one, and ran a field telephone to it, mounted to the roof, and from there directed the fire of his distant guns on the enemy within the town.

Australians shared possession of it with Vichy's forces. Guns had to be directed with extreme accuracy. The slightest error might have sent shells crashing among houses held by our men. In a low voice the officer gave his orders as he detected hiding places of enemy tanks and personnel. Four miles away, across wild ravines, gunners received ranges and fire orders, and shells came screaming into the village, smashing enemy targets.

Meanwhile, a platoon of Australian pioneers crept through streets armed with bombs seeking out tanks, which they were bent on destroying. From all points occupied by Vichy troops came flashes of machinegun fire, whirr of mortar bombs, followed by deafening crashes. Our Bren gunners replied from houses, from the cemetery, and from an orange grove on the outskirts of the village. It was the queerest battle of this war, and the most thrilling the pioneers and a supporting Queensland battalion have ever been in.

Suddenly the intensity of fire tremendously increased. Darkness was illuminated from a hundred points by bursting shells, mortar bombs, and wicked flashes from tanks' cannon. From wooded hills surrounding the village machineguns commenced stuttering, tanks crashed through bushes, burst into the village, joining those already inside, sweeping points held by our men with devastating fire. Two drew up to shelter by the house in which the artillery officer was perched. He knew they were French, so had to cease giving orders or be overheard. Behind their tanks Vichy infantry reinforcements poured into the village.

Our force, which was only hanging on by its eyelids, knew it was time to get out or be wiped out. They moved back firing all the time, to a better defensive position around the village. There they are holding on preparing to counter-attack when the time is ripe. The artillery officer succeeded in getting away in the darkness. Our artillery and planes are now pounding the village, which is likely to prove too hot for Vichy's men. Just before enemy reinforcements arrived a small Australian force outside the village surrounded a party of Vichy troops who had been pinned in that position for days.

Every move they made brought a hail of bullets from our line. Finally, despairing, they surrendered. We just had time to lead them away when a French force, which would have relieved them, arrived—10 minutes too late.

Foot patrols of West Australians today pushed on to Ras Nebt Younis, several miles in advance of Sidon. A Vichy force advancing from Damour was sighted ahead, engaged in mining a road. West Australians went forward and took mining party prisoner. Damour is strongly held and guarded by deep ravines, with almost perpendicular sides. The enemy has put up plenty of wire and dug a very deep trench system. There is a fight-and-a-half ahead of us when we are given signal to advance.