

LAST OFFICERS RELEASED

Captured in Syria

DEPUTY OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENT.

BEIRUT, Aug. 31.—The last party of British officers who were captured in Syria, and flown out of the country by the Vichy authorities, have now returned to Beirut.

One party of 13, led by Captain Edward Aitken, of Essendon, Melbourne, reached Beirut yesterday, after adventures in the Dodecanese Islands, Greece, Italy, and France.

These officers were sent to Italy by the Vichy authorities, while the Syrian armistice terms were being finalised, and their release was ensured by the internment of the former French Commander-in-Chief in Syria, General Dentz, and other high Vichy officers in Syria.

Captain Aitken, who was captured at Meriyun while leading his company of Pioneers, on June 16, looked fit and well.

"My assaulting company met strong opposition that day," he said. "I found myself with only 20 men, and decided to withdraw. We had got back about 500 yards when a French medium tank rounded us up, and we saw that it was the finish.

"Algerian troops took us back to a fort, where a Vichy officer put us in a stable. We were heavily shelled by our own guns, and they shifted us to new buildings as a terrific bombardment started.

"It was beautiful shooting, looking back on it, but too close at the time.

"After that we were taken to Beirut and thence by train to Aleppo. The trip took 24 hours, and they gave us no food.

"We were there eight days, and I refused to answer an exhaustive questionnaire paper.

"At 3 o'clock one morning, we were motored to the aerodrome and put into a big Air France transport aircraft. We had no idea where we were going, and one of the four engines played up badly, shooting out flames.

FORCED LANDING

"Dawn showed that we were over water, and shortly after the aircraft made a forced landing at Scarpanto. Here we were put into a hut and kept for ten days. The food was bad, but it was the best they could give us.

"The Italian troops were ragged, and, literally, through their boots. Our quarters were full of fleas, and the sanitary arrangements were repulsive.

"On June 26 they put us on a small Italian ship, and we sailed to Rhodes. Here we were kept 10 days

small Italian ship, and we sailed to Rhodes. Here we were kept 10 days in better conditions.

"We saw several German planes strafed on the ground, and ammunition dumps had been hit by our bombers.

"We were then put on another ship, calling at Piraeus (Athens).

"There were plenty of Germans round the wrecked harbour, and odd groups of Greek refugees, who looked pitiful enough to make you weep.

"Prices were high, a tube of tooth-paste cost six shillings.

IN NORTH ITALY

"We then sailed through the Corinth Canal to Brindisi. Here we disembarked and got showers in the quarantine station.

"Next day we set out by train for Northern Italy. We bought papers announcing the death of Bruno Mussolini.

"One Italian officer pointed it out to us and laughed as if delighted.

"What interested us more was a small paragraph announcing the internment of General Dentz.

"We travelled up the east coast of Italy, and were struck by the absence of any young men. Old people were working in the fields, and all the bridges and tunnels were guarded by old soldiers. It was 'against British sabotage' our Italian guards told us.

"We finally got off the train and were motored to Pianello, in a bus. The women and kids on board were very friendly.

"Our prison was in the tenth century castle of Montalbo, not far from The Alps. Here we were greeted by a lot of Greek officers, whose morale was marvellous.

HOME THROUGH FRANCE

"A week ago we were told to be ready with our baggage in an hour. We knew what it meant, and were overjoyed.

"The saddest thing for me was to say good-bye to two Australian captains—Keith Fraser, of Sydney, and Harold Peterson, of Canberra—who had been captured in Libya after hiding with the Arabs for two months. However, they are fit and happy.

"We were taken by bus and train to the new Franco-Italian border near Mentone, where 30 Italian officers and one Frenchman haggled over us, but we got all our money and personal possessions back.

"Then we went by bus at break-neck speed along the coast road through Nice and Toulon. We felt among friends passing the French peasants. They were all so pleased to see us. At Toulon, we were put on a ferry with two Germans and an Italian looking on. They looked as if they would have been glad to shoot us.

"Once on board our ship we heard all the news on Russia in its right perspective. The Italians had boasted to us what their troops were doing in Russia, and got very angry at our mirth."