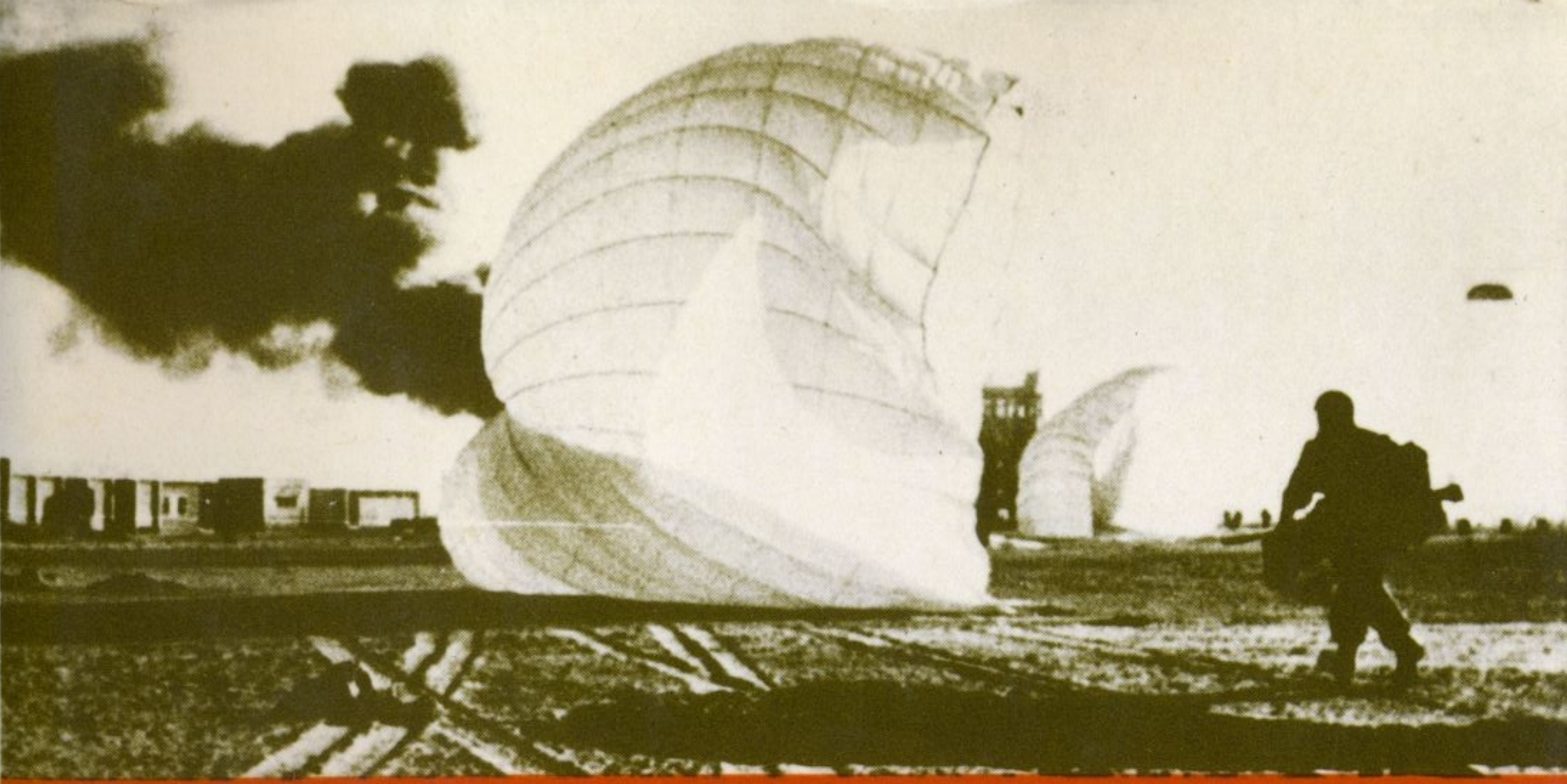


Suez 1956: Operation Musketeer

Jackson


IAN ALLAN



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Robert Jackson

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ROBERT JACKSON

On 26 July 1956 Col Nasser proclaimed the Egyptian government's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal and set the stage for one of the biggest military and political fiascos of modern history — an attempt by the British and French to take control of the Suez Canal by force. The background to Nasser's decision is tortuous and involved, indicative of the political unrest of the 1950s and the shifting pattern of political allegiances and dealings in the Middle East, dominated by the Arab world's united ambition to destroy the State of Israel. From a military standpoint, Operation Musketeer was irretrievably linked to the politics of the situation and was both poorly organised and ponderous, characterised by a major change of plan only weeks before the attack. By the time the landings actually took place — in November 1956 — world opinion and superpower pressure caused the operation to be halted almost before it got started and forced the British and French to withdraw with their tails between their legs, in the face of threats of nuclear bombardment by the Soviet Union. The repercussions were considerable and never again did the United Kingdom play as important a role in world affairs.

In *Suez 1956: Operation Musketeer* Robert Jackson has analysed the political and military background to the operation with a clarity and cogency that belies the inherent difficulties, enabling the reader to understand better the complicated circumstances which led to Operation Musketeer. His balanced account of the landings and subsequent aftermath is highly readable and will interest military historians and strategists alike.

Cover: *Two views showing men of A Company 3 Para moving in to take the airfield buildings at El Gamil, Port Said on the morning of 5 November 1956.* Imperial War Museum

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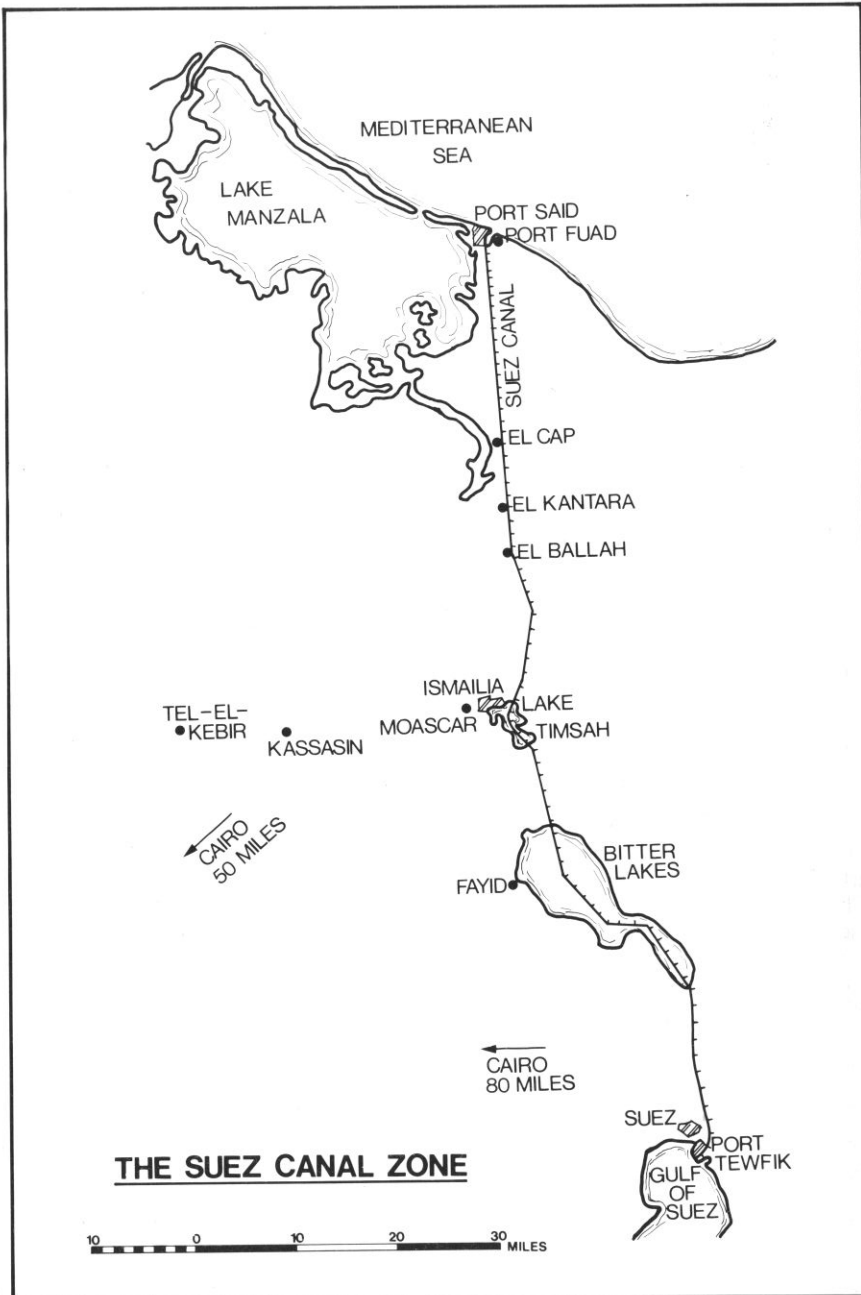
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1

The Political Background

For international politics, 1955 was a bleak year. In Eastern Europe, the fires of discontent were smouldering beneath the iron hand of the communists; Polish workers had already come into open confrontation with the authorities in the town of Poznan and elsewhere, while in Hungary events were inexorably moving towards the explosive uprising that would take place the following year.

Further afield, the flames of nationalism – kindled by the Japanese during World War II and since then ruthlessly exploited by the Soviet Union and Communist China – were now sweeping through the whole of South-East Asia, eroding the dwindling empires of the two great prewar colonial powers, France and Britain. The French, smarting under the bitter defeat of Dien Bien Phu, had relinquished their hold on Indo-China under the terms of the 1954 Geneva armistice agreement – only to find themselves embroiled in a bitter conflict against nationalist rebels in Algeria. Great Britain, for her part, was locked in a dirty backyard war in Malaya, where substantial numbers of troops and aircraft were committed to action against communist guerrillas; other British forces were striving to keep apart bloodthirsty Greek and Turkish Cypriot factions in Cyprus, while in Kenya security forces had finally gained the upper hand over the Mau-Mau.

April 1955 saw the departure from the political scene of the immortal Winston Churchill, whose great prowess as a leader during the dark days of World War II had failed to prevent his rejection by the nation as a peacetime premier. His successor was Anthony Eden, who – as Foreign Secretary during the Churchill administration – was fully aware of the problems that faced Britain and the world during the late 1950s. In the first place, he envisaged Britain's primary international role as that of a mediator between the two great super-powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, both of

which now had the ability to saturate one another with nuclear weapons. The death of Stalin two years earlier had brought to the international scene a glimmer of hope that Russia's attitude to world affairs would now be more flexible than at any time since World War II, but there were many who doubted that Russia's internal political climate had changed at all – and her open support of terrorist groups throughout the world certainly provided no evidence to the contrary.

Elsewhere in the world, any one of the several political flashpoints could conceivably lead to full-scale armed confrontation between east and west. In the Far East, the possibility of war between Nationalist and Communist China – with the consequent involvement of the United States – over the Chinese offshore islands loomed larger with every passing week. The previous months had seen a number of tense incidents in this area, including the sinking of a Nationalist frigate by Communist warships in November 1954, and in February 1955 US jet fighters shot down several Red Chinese MiG-15s which attacked them in international airspace off Formosa. The uneasy truce that followed the Korean War risked being shattered at any moment, as did the peace in Indo-China – achieved only after great personal effort at Geneva on the part of Eden himself.

Most serious of all was the situation in the Middle East, where the commercial interests of France and Britain – upheld by various treaties and the more down-to-earth presence of large numbers of troops – had come into open conflict with Arab nationalism. The bitterness, however, was not confined to relations between the Arabs and the European powers; internally, there was a struggle for the leadership of the Arab world between Iraq and Egypt, and enmity between Syria and Iraq as a result of the latter's desire to unify the two nations under the rule of the Iraqi royal family. This in turn led to hostility between France and Britain, for the French believed that Iraq's aspirations with regard to Syria – where French interests were still strong – were being fostered by the British Government. There was growing hostility, too, between France and all the Arab nations, inspired by the conflict in Algeria. Behind the scenes there was rivalry between the United States on the one hand and Britain and France on the other, for the US State Department – anxious to achieve a commercial breakthrough in the Middle East – was beginning to cultivate relations with the Arab nationalists.

On one score, and only one, were the Arab countries unified: in their bitter hatred of the tiny state of Israel, which had inflicted such a crushing defeat on her Arab neighbours during the War of Independence in 1948. In 1955, tension between Israel and the Arabs had almost reached breaking-point. Hardly a week passed without the world's newspapers reporting some serious incident along Israel's borders; the shooting down of Arab aircraft or exchanges of shellfire.

Perhaps irrationally, Britain felt herself responsible for the fate of the Middle East. It was a sentiment born of history; twice in half a century Britain had stood in the defence of Egypt against an invader, first the Turks and more lately the Germans, and the activities of legendary adventurers such as Lawrence were still strong in the imaginations of the more traditionally minded Britons. If Britain's position in the Middle East in the mid-1950s is to be fully appreciated, such sentiments must be taken in context with her commercial interests, which revolved primarily around the supply of oil. In 1955 the Middle East was the source of most of the oil used by Britain, and half that used by western Europe as a whole; and the gateway to the area's rich oilfields was the Suez Canal.

Then there was the illusion of Empire, which still persisted in 1955; for Britain still stood astride much of the African continent, even though the ground under her feet was somewhat shaky. The illusion was fostered by the fact that Britain was yet the

third strongest world power, both in political and military terms – although in the military sense, the idea of might was bolstered mainly by the fact that, like the USA and USSR although on an infinitely smaller scale, Britain possessed nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them. As events were to show, the possession of nuclear capability was a prop that could be kicked aside with ridiculous ease.

Whatever the weight of criticism levelled against them, there is no doubt that the presence of large numbers of British troops in Egypt since 1882 had provided the biggest single stabilising factor in the internal affairs of the Middle East. The whole picture began to change in the years immediately after World War II, first with the withdrawal of British forces from Cairo in 1947 and from Palestine a year later.

From then on, events in the Middle East followed one another in rapid succession. The defeat of the Egyptian Army at the hands of Israel in 1948-9, exposing as it did the inefficiency of the army as a whole and in particular the corruption that was rife among its senior ranks, spelled the beginning of the end for the rule of King Farouk. In July 1952, following a military coup, Farouk abdicated in favour of his infant son, who became King Ahmed Fuad II. In June 1953, however, General Neguib's military council deposed the young king and declared Egypt a republic, with Neguib himself assuming the presidency. In November 1954 Neguib himself was deposed by Lt-Col Gamal Abdel Nasser and the military council. For the time being the office of president remained vacant, presidential powers being exercised by Nasser. The latter was eventually to become President on 23 June 1956, as a result of an election at which voting was compulsory and he was the only candidate.

One immediate result of the 1952 coup was a wave of anti-British rioting and terrorist activity in Cairo and the shattering, in one blow, of British hopes for the establishment of a Middle East defence organisation. In 1954, Britain and Egypt concluded a treaty which provided for the withdrawal of British forces from the Canal Zone by June 1956; at the same time, Britain was to retain use of the vital supply base of Ismailia in the event of any outside aggression against Turkey or any member of the Arab League – except if such aggression stemmed from Israel. By the time Eden came to power in 1955, the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt had already begun, and British civilian technicians were standing by to maintain the base facilities at Ismailia once the last soldiers had left.

As soon as the British had agreed to withdraw, the United States – who were anxious to cultivate a Middle East defence agreement including Egypt – approached Nasser with the offer of a military aid agreement, which would have enabled the Egyptians to re-equip their armed forces with a modern American weapons. Nasser and his government, however, had already decided that Egypt should pursue a course of non-alignment with east and west, and the American offer was rejected.

Undeterred, the Americans went ahead with their plans to form a defence organisation in the Middle East. A mutual security and defence treaty had already been concluded between Turkey and Iraq in February 1955, and this treaty – the Baghdad Pact – was also signed by the United Kingdom, Iran and Pakistan later that year, forming the Central Treaty Organisation. The organisation received the full backing of the United States, which – although not a full member of the Council – was a member of all major committees and bore a large share of economic and military assistance. As a direct result of US support of CENTO, relations between the United States and Egypt took a turn for the worse; since one of the member countries, Turkey, had officially recognised Israel, Nasser regarded the alliance to be treacherous to Arab interests.

Egypt's intentions towards Israel were becoming increasingly militant. Despite a

United Nations resolution passed in 1951, the Egyptians still prevented ships bound to and from Israel from using the Suez Canal, and there appeared to be no legal means of breaking the deadlock. The Egyptians had also occupied the island of Tiran at the entrance to the Gulf of Akaba and set up a battery of naval guns across the straits at Ras Nasrani on the mainland, effectively denying access to the new Israeli port of Eilat.

In 1950, Britain, France and the United States declared that they would strike up an arms balance between both Israel and Egypt, and if either side crossed the armistice lines of 1948 – held under surveillance by a small force of United Nations observers – they would ‘take common counsel’. The declaration, which hinted at the possible use of force if necessary, was worthless; once the British left the Canal Zone, there would be no allied forces close enough to forestall any sudden move on the part of either Egyptians or Israelis.

In September 1954, the Egyptians seized the Israeli vessel *Bat Galim* as she attempted to pass through the Suez Canal, and soon afterwards a number of Israelis were executed following an espionage trial in Cairo. In February 1955, by way of retaliation, the Israelis attacked the Egyptian town of Gaza, killing or wounding 70 Egyptians.

This action compelled Nasser to revise his policy and request military aid from the United States in the form of 27 million dollars’ worth of arms. Because of Egypt’s economic position, however, Nasser was unable to meet the State Department’s demand for payment in cash, and the deal fell through. Apart from the financial considerations, the State Department also insisted that any arms supplied to Egypt should be accompanied by a supervisory group of US officers, and this Nasser refused to accept.

Nasser’s immediate reaction to the Israeli attack on Gaza was to reinforce the garrison in the Gaza Strip and set up a secret commando school at Khan Yunis, where Arab volunteers – known as Fedayeen – received intensive guerrilla warfare training. These terrorists, who were virtually suicide volunteers (the word *fedayeen* in fact means those who sacrifice themselves), were a constant thorn in the Israelis’ flesh, slipping over the border to carry out their work of murder and destruction with the open acclaim of Nasser’s government. In August 1955 the Israelis launched a punitive strike against Khan Yunis, killing 40 Egyptians and wounding as many more; this was followed by a period of fighting along the frontier of the Gaza Strip, which lasted until the United Nations Truce Commission was able to impose an uneasy ceasefire.

Meanwhile, in May 1955, Syria had received a firm guarantee from the Soviet Union that Russia would supply arms to her. Meanwhile, Nasser had also made approaches to the Soviet Union and Red China with a view to acquiring modern armaments, and although China was unable to help, the Soviet Government expressed its willingness to enter into negotiations. Nasser would still have preferred to purchase arms from Britain or the United States, and at the end of May he made a final appeal to both countries, stating that if they continued in their refusal to supply military equipment he would be forced to turn to Russia. This threat appears to have been dismissed as a bluff – but negotiations between Egypt and Russia for the delivery of arms began less than four weeks later.

An arms deal between Egypt and Russia’s satellite, Czechoslovakia, was concluded in August 1955. It made provision for the supply to Egypt of substantial numbers of Russian-built T-34 tanks, SU-100 self-propelled guns, artillery pieces, rocket launchers, Czech-built rifles, mortars, MiG-15 jet fighters and Ilyushin Il28 jet bombers.

With his military re-equipment programme now assured, Nasser felt justified in

adopting a more militant posture with regard to Israel. In October 1955 he moved a strong concentration of troops into the demilitarized zone around Nizana, where a strategic road junction branched off towards Gaza, Rafah and Abu Ageila, the main Egyptian base in Sinai. That same month, the first batch of equipment from Czechoslovakia – including MiG-15s – reached Egypt aboard the Soviet freighter *Stalingrad*; the fighters were unloaded at Agam and taken to Almaza for assembly under the direction of a group of Czech Air Force technicians. More MiGs reached Egypt in a steady flow during the weeks that followed, assembly work being gradually taken over by Egyptian technicians who had undergone a crash training course in Czechoslovakia. The first two MiG-15 squadrons formed at Almaza in December.

Israel, meanwhile, had carried out another strong counter-attack on an Egyptian frontier post in Gaza during September. Israeli anxiety about the supply of Czech arms to Egypt was growing; as yet the Israeli Intelligence Service, Shin Bet, did not know the full extent of the Egyptian-Czech deal, but it was clear that it represented an overpowering threat to Israel’s security. At the time, Israel possessed only 30 combat aircraft – Gloster Meteor F Mk 8s – that could be considered anywhere near modern, and even these would be no match for the MiG-15. Approaches were made by the Israeli Government to Canada with a view to purchasing the Canadian-built version of the North American Sabre fighter, the aircraft that had proved its worth in combat with the MiG over Korea.

At the same time, negotiations had also begun with the French Government for the supply of two principal types of combat aircraft: the Dassault Ouragan and Mystère IIC. The French agreed to supply 30 Ouragans and 24 Mystères, and the first 15 Ouragans arrived in Israel in November 1955.

In the meantime, the Canadian Government had also placed an embargo on the supply of arms to the Middle East, shattering Israeli hopes of acquiring the Sabres and leaving them totally dependent on France. In October 1955 the Israelis placed an order with France for 60 Mystère IVAs, an aircraft that could meet the MiG-15 on far more equal terms than either the IIC or the Ouragan, and the first Israeli Air Force Mystère IVA squadron began working up in April 1956.

By this time, Israel – seriously alarmed by the establishment of a unified Egyptian-Syrian military command and the stepping up of guerrilla activity along her borders – was already planning to launch a pre-emptive war against the Egyptian forces in Sinai. In November 1955 the Israeli Premier, David Ben-Gurion, had instructed his Chief of Staff, Brigadier-General Moshe Dayan, to be prepared to capture the Straits of Tiran to ensure the free passage of shipping through the Gulf of Akaba and the Red Sea. Both Dayan and Ben-Gurion advocated speedy action, but at this stage the Israeli cabinet still believed that the matter might be resolved through diplomatic negotiation and the plan was rejected.

Britain, France and the United States had also not yet abandoned hope that a policy of conciliation with Nasser might bear fruit, even though the US State Department took a somewhat jaundiced view of the Egyptian arms deal with the communist bloc. Even at the end of 1955, France embarked on an uneasy courtship with the Egyptians, promising sales of arms if Cairo’s ‘Voice of the Arabs’ radio would cease attacks on French policy in Algeria.

These overtures were viewed with the utmost suspicion by the Israeli Government, who did not discount the possibility of a secret deal between the western powers and Nasser to the detriment of Israel. The suspicion intensified when, in December 1955, Britain and the USA offered to pay the foreign exchange costs of Nasser’s projected

new dam at Aswan, on the Upper Nile; the World Bank would support the project too. In return for this economic aid, Nasser would back western policy in the Middle East.

Nasser, however, was far from enthusiastic. The supply of western equipment and know-how to enable Egyptian technicians to build the dam was one thing; the control of Egypt's economy by the west – which was what the financing of the Aswan project by the western powers would amount to – was another. Besides, the Russians were hinting strongly that they might be prepared to support the project, with no such strings attached.

Britain, meanwhile, was trying hard to keep the Russians out of the Middle East by pursuing the ideal of a co-ordinated defence policy within the framework of the Baghdad Pact. British hopes that Jordan would join the Pact were dashed when, at the end of 1955, violent anti-British rioting – encouraged by Cairo Radio's virulent propaganda campaign – broke out in the Jordanian capital of Amman. Three Jordanian governments fell in rapid succession, and a new Prime Minister affirmed that his country would not join the Pact. The full weight of Egyptian propaganda was now turned against Iraq, the only Arab country still in the Pact.

Matters were further complicated by the French attitude to the Pact, and the French were in fact prepared to go some way towards collaborating with the Egyptians to ensure that the Pact never reached fruition. The French Foreign Minister, Christian Pineau, later stated that Nasser had promised to withdraw his support of the Algerian rebels provided that the French maintained their criticism of the Pact – a statement that was subsequently denied by Nasser himself.

True or not, there was no escaping the fact that French armaments – including 155mm howitzers and ammunition – were still being supplied to Egypt in May 1956, and in view of France's growing alliance with Israel it is difficult to understand the reason for these continuing supplies unless some tentative Franco-Egyptian agreement did exist.

In the spring of 1956 Britain – although still remaining pro-Arab in her Middle East policy – finally realised that there was no longer any hope of conciliation with Egypt. The situation was now potentially dangerous, because the last British troops were scheduled to leave Egypt in June and the question of what would happen to the Suez Canal after that was still unresolved.

Then there was the Aswan Dam project, and a growing feeling that Nasser was cleverly playing the west on the end of a line while courting a better offer from the communist bloc. In May 1956, it was rumoured that the Russians had offered an interest-free loan of £50 million – by which time both Britain and the United States were having serious doubts about Egypt's ability to repay any loan they decided to make.

In July, the British Government reached a decision. In view of the unsatisfactory political situation in the Middle East, and the growing conviction that any financial commitment to Egypt would prove too onerous, Britain would withdraw from the Aswan project.

For Nasser, the news that the west had irrevocably lost interest in the Aswan project came as no surprise; he had been expecting a similar decision for some time. What he had not been expecting was a complete reversal of the Soviet Union's attitude. On 22 July – only days after Britain's decision to withdraw from the scheme – Dmitri Shepilov, the Russian Foreign Minister, suddenly denied publicly that the Soviet Union had offered to finance the building of the dam. For the Egyptians, that left only one other possible source of revenue: the Suez Canal.

On the evening of 26 July 1956, in the course of a three-hour speech to a vast crowd assembled in Alexandria's Liberation Square, Nasser proclaimed the Egyptian Govern-

ment's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company. He seized control of the company's Egyptian offices, declared martial law in the Canal Zone, and ordered all employees of the company – including foreigners – to remain at their posts.

The assembled mob screamed its frenzied approval. It streamed through the streets, shouting anti-British slogans. In the harbour, the crew of the British cruiser *HMS Jamaica* closed to action stations and prepared to use force if the demonstrations became more violent.

Nasser returned to Cairo that night, with the knowledge that there could be no turning back now. What he could not know was that he had set the stage for one of the biggest military and political fiascos in history.

2

Preparations for War

The first reaction to Nasser's proclamation, in both London and Paris, was one of expected militancy. For the British, it was mainly a matter of prestige; for the French, a matter of regarding the Suez Canal as their own undertaking.

It was the British who, at a joint meeting between the Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff on 27 July, were the first to sponsor the idea of a military operation against Egypt. Three days later, Colonel Prieur of the French Army Staff arrived in London and indicated that France was prepared to commit two divisions to any action against Egypt; the French were in favour of launching such an operation at the earliest possible date.

Eden's overwhelming concern, however, was to secure American support, and to this end urgent talks were held between the British Government on the one hand and the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, on the other. The Americans, anxious to play for time, advocated further attempts at conciliation and the arranging of a top-level conference aimed at the internationalisation of the Canal. If Nasser rejected the conclusions of such a conference, there might then be a case for joint military action.

A conference of 22 nations – all with interests in the Suez Canal – was called for 16 August. In the meantime, Britain and France went ahead with preparations for a military operation, and it was now that the full extent of the unpreparedness of both nations to carry out such an undertaking was revealed.

While it was true that units of both the British and French Mediterranean Fleets could be on station off the coast of Egypt within a matter of days, it was also true that the carrier-borne aircraft which would have to spearhead any air attack programme on Egyptian targets were sadly outclassed by Nasser's Soviet-built combat aircraft. The complement of the two French carriers in the area – the *Lafayette* and *Arromanches* –

consisted entirely of piston-engined Corsairs and Avengers; the equipment of *HMS Eagle*, the only British carrier in the Mediterranean at the time of Nasser's speech, comprised more modern Sea Venom and Sea Hawk jets, but even these would be no match for the MiG-15. Neither would the RAF's Venom fighter-bombers, with which squadrons in the Middle East were equipped at the time. The only RAF fighter which could meet the MiG on advantageous terms was the Hawker Hunter, and the few squadrons so far equipped with this type were based in the United Kingdom. The French Air Force possessed several squadrons of Mystère IVs and F-84F Thunderstreaks, but these were all based in either France or Germany and it would take at least two weeks to transfer some of them and their supporting equipment to the Mediterranean. In Algeria, the most modern French combat aircraft was the Mistral, the licence-built version of the elderly de Havilland Vampire.

It was evident that, because of the distances involved, Cyprus would have to be the principal base for any assault on Egypt. A large number of the British Army's already overstretched reserves were, in 1956, committed to operations on the island against the EOKA terrorists; the British forces included two battalions of the 16th Parachute Brigade, two battalions of the Royal Marine Commando Brigade, and eight infantry battalions.

The Cyprus operations had seriously interfered with the routine training of both paratroops and Marines. It was a year since the latter had been able to take part in an amphibious assault exercise, and almost as long since the paratroops had carried out an airdrop. There were, moreover, no transport aircraft based in Cyprus, and the only amphibious warfare squadron in the area was based on Malta. This consisted of two tank-landing ships, each of which was able to carry eight assault landing craft and two tank landing craft – completely inadequate for the size of operation envisaged. Some assault equipment left over from the Normandy landings 12 years earlier was still stored in the UK, but most of it had been sold abroad or auctioned for scrap. Some of the former British wartime landing craft were, in fact, still in service with the French Navy.

Apart from the forces available in Cyprus, the only other units that were in a position to take part in an immediate assault on Egypt were the French 10th Parachute Division and the 7th Mobile Mechanised Division, both of them based in Algeria. The British 10th Armoured Division was in Libya and the 10th Hussars in Jordan, but since they were both based in Arab countries their use against Egypt would almost certainly lead to dangerous repercussions.

Despite all the obvious deficiencies, preparations for the invasion of Egypt went ahead – although the British Chiefs of Staff came out firmly against the immediate use of force. Although it was theoretically possible for paratroops to go in immediately and capture key points on the Canal, there was no logistics organisation to support them subsequently and a hasty decision of this kind was almost certainly bound to lead to disaster.

On 2 August, a Royal Proclamation was issued, calling up a number of reservists – mainly specialists and technicians from Sections 1 and 2 of the Army Emergency Reserve – and retaining all regular troops due for discharge. At the same time, it was announced that the return of National Servicemen from overseas might be delayed by 'extensive troop movements and precautionary measures in the Mediterranean area'.

The first of the 'precautionary measures' involved the assembly of units of the French fleet at Toulon and the hurried despatch of three British aircraft carriers – *HMS Bulwark*, *HMS Theseus* and *HMS Ocean* – to join *HMS Eagle* in the Mediterranean. RAF Transport Command's routine world-wide services were also

cancelled, and units ordered to stand by for a major airlift operation. Units of Bomber Command were also alerted in readiness for a rapid deployment overseas, as were a battalion of the Life Guards and a battalion of the Grenadier Guards, stationed at Windsor.

On 7 August, joint talks began in London between the British and French military staffs. The overall aim was to form an integrated Anglo-French command system under a British commander; he would have a French deputy, and each service involved would follow a parallel system. Cyprus would be the operational base.

On 11 August, General Sir Charles Keightley – C-in-C British Land Forces Middle East – was appointed to be Supreme Allied Commander, with Vice-Admiral d'Escadre Barjot, C-in-C French Mediterranean Fleet, as his deputy. Command of the land forces was vested in Lieutenant-General Sir Hugh Stockwell, commander of the British 1st Corps in Germany; his deputy was General Andre Beaufre, who had been recalled from commanding the 2nd Mechanised Infantry Division in Algeria. The allied naval forces were to be commanded by Vice-Admiral M. Richmond, with Contre-Admiral Lancelot as his deputy. Richmond was later replaced by Vice-Admiral D.F. Durnford-Slater. Responsibility for the air element rested with Air Marshal Denis Barnett, whose deputy was General Raymond Brohon.

To undertake an operation of the scope envisaged, it was decided initially to commit 80,000 troops: 50,000 British and 30,000 French. At this stage, no firm decision had been taken to spearhead an assault with airborne forces; even if such a decision was taken, the number of paratroops employed would be strictly limited by the relatively small numbers of available British and French transport aircraft, and it was clear that the greater part of the invasion force would have to be transported by sea. Hundreds of vessels of all types, ranging from troopships and tankers to landing craft, would be needed, as well as over a hundred warships to escort them and provide firepower during the landings.

The problems confronting the assembly of such an armada, and the loading of men, stores and equipment, were stupendous. Cyprus's principal harbour of Famagusta was completely inadequate in terms of both size and quay facilities for a major provisioning operation; it was so shallow that any vessel of over 5,000 tons would be denied access, and would have to stand a mile offshore. The port of Limassol was even worse, with no wharf facilities at all. All stores here would have to be loaded by lighter.

Because of these considerations, the Allied planners turned their thoughts towards the possibility of a landward thrust into Egypt by the 10th Armoured Division in Libya, following the route taken by Rommel's Afrika Korps in World War II. This, however, was soon discounted, for such a move would depend on securing the approval of the Libyan Government, and since it involved the use of force against another Arab state it was unlikely that approval would be forthcoming.

The only alternative was to assemble the invasion force on Malta – nearly 1,000 miles and a week's sailing time away from Egypt, which meant that any element of surprise would be lost. It was therefore generally agreed that Malta would be the main assembly base, despite all the obvious disadvantages.

It was still not clear what the invasion force was going to do once it reached Egypt. The overall aim was to occupy the Canal Zone, but this basic strategy was soon clouded by political thoughts of overthrowing Nasser and his government, which in turn influenced the choice of objectives. If the main object was to seize the Canal Zone for the purpose of safeguarding Allied interests, the capture of key points along the Canal might be sufficient; on the other hand, the deposing of the Egyptian Government

would mean a drive on Cairo, with the destruction of the Egyptian armed forces and the occupation of the entire country.

In the latter case, with Cairo as the main objective, the most suitable Egyptian port for an Allied landing would be Alexandria, which was well enough equipped to handle the largest sea traffic. An initial bridgehead here could be rapidly reinforced, and a two-pronged thrust towards Cairo and the Canal could soon be initiated. The main disadvantages in the choice of Alexandria lay in the fact that any drive towards the Canal would have to cross the Nile Delta, which was densely populated and well suited to defensive action.

From the geographical point of view, Port Said was a much more favourable position, lying at the northern end of the Canal. A rapid drive from here through to Suez would not only place the whole of the Canal in allied hands, but would also split the Egyptian Army in two. The facilities at Port Said, however, were far from adequate for coping with large-scale loading and unloading operations, and because of its position on a peninsula the exit routes from it would be vulnerable to enemy attack. From Port Said, the roads and railway followed a narrow strip of land adjacent to the Canal for 25 miles as far as El Qantara, crossing two principal bridges on the outskirts of the port. The capture of these bridges was of paramount importance to a fast breakout from the port; equally as vital was a fast drive along the 25-mile causeway, where the advance could easily become bogged down in the face of enemy resistance.

During the first two weeks of August, there was a great deal of travelling to and fro on the part of the allied commanders and their staffs between London, Cyprus, Toulon, Paris, Malta, Algiers and Libya. Apart from the problem of having key personnel dispersed over a wide area, other complications arose; not the least of them was the language barrier. Only a handful of French and British personnel had more than a schoolboy knowledge of the others' language; this could be a serious shortcoming in action, when British signallers would be required to call on French air and naval support and vice versa. In the end, the allies arrived at a solution of sorts by exchanging signallers who were reasonably proficient in both languages.

By 15 August the first outline of the plan had begun to take shape. The deadline for its completion was fixed for the middle of September, when everything had to be ready for the assault. The original codename for the operation was Hamilcar – a reference to Hamilcar Barca, the Carthaginian general who had a long history of successful campaigns. Units were ordered to paint the initial letter of the name on their vehicles for identification purposes – and even here the difference in language reared its head, for the French spelling of the name was Amilcar. Within a matter of days the codename had been changed – to Musketeer, a name that was eminently acceptable to both French and English.

In broad outline, the plan was very similar to the invasion tactics developed by the allies in the Mediterranean Theatre during World War II. The first task was to achieve total air superiority; once this had been accomplished, the seaborne invasion would be preceded by an airborne assault. With a firm beachhead secured, troops and material would then be poured ashore under covering fire from the allied fleet.

The plan in itself, however, led to differences of opinion in the British and French High Commands. The French regarded it as too ponderous; they were firmly in favour of speedy action, with the actual landing preceded by a very short and very intense period of air attack; the British, on the other hand, envisaged up to six days of air attacks – the length of time, in fact, that the convoys from Malta would be at sea – and they were against the idea of the invasion fleet sailing at all until all hope of a political compromise had vanished. Some British air commanders even voiced the optimistic

opinion that the air attacks alone might be sufficient to break the Egyptians' will to resist – despite all the evidence to the contrary that had emerged from World War II and Korea.

The French viewpoint was summed up by General Beaufre, who later wrote:

'First, what was the object of the operation? I had no directive on this subject but it was clear that, from the French point of view, the target was Nasser; his was the revolution which was setting alight and unifying the Arab world. We must therefore defeat the Egyptian Army and go to Cairo. Any more limited operation would leave the dictator's government in being and allow him to rouse world opinion through the radio. Moreover if we did not, directly or indirectly, take over the reins of government in Egypt, a guerrilla resistance movement similar to that which had just driven the British from the Canal Zone would soon make its appearance. It was therefore essential that we should have available the forces necessary for a decisive operation, with the proviso that its scope could be limited if the political object had been achieved before it was fully under way.'

The original plan called for the capture of Alexandria by means of an airborne drop south-west of the town, followed by a seaborne assault, and then a drive on Cairo. The British forces were to capture the port, while French air- and seaborne forces secured the western and south-western exits from the town. One week would be allowed for the concentration of Allied forces in the beachhead before the advance on Cairo, and the battle for the Egyptian capital would be fought between D+6 and D+14. The subsequent thrust eastwards to Suez would be assured either by the capture of the Cairo bridges across the Nile, or by a French paratroop operation on the Nile Delta Barrage.

It was accepted by both French and British that the Alexandria operation would be risky and possibly attended by heavy losses, particularly in its early stages. Submerged reefs made the approaches to both the main and secondary beaches at Alexandria dangerous, and the beaches themselves – according to the latest intelligence reports – were being heavily mined. There was also the possibility that the paratroop dropping zone, some distance away to the south of Lake Mariut, might be cut off by Egyptian armour before allied support could arrive.

Nevertheless, the Alexandria plan went ahead, and by 18 August the finishing touches were being put to it. The landings were to take place on 15 September, preceded by two days of air strikes, and two clear weeks had to be allowed for the assembly of the invasion force. There was no time to be lost.

The final seal of approval was to be set on the Alexandria plan at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in London on 25 August, presided over by General Keightley. The meeting had hardly begun when, quite out of the blue, the French – through Admiral Barjot and General Gazin – proposed an alternative to the Alexandria operation in the form of a landing at Port Said. Keightley and Stockwell, once they had got over their initial surprise, agreed to study the new plan – although they did not seriously believe that the allies could embark on an entirely new concept at this stage in the proceedings.

Preparation for the Alexandria landing continued, and a timetable was drawn up. In Malta and Algeria, British and French troops earmarked for the operation began an intensive phase of training, culminating in a joint Anglo-French amphibious assault exercise on Malta on 5 September. Both British and French were now experiencing serious logistics problems, with the result that the timetable for the operation was put back by eight days. The landings would now take place on the 25th.

Behind the scenes, however, political forces were at work which, within days, would

turn the carefully laid plans upside down. Egypt had now rejected every Allied compromise proposal, which meant that Anthony Eden and the French Premier, Guy Mollet, were now faced with the decision to order the invasion to go ahead. They met on 10 September in London, and the first decision they made was that the objective should be changed from Alexandria to Port Said. Once the Canal Zone was occupied, it was generally agreed that there would then be an allied drive westwards on Cairo.

The reasons for the change were varied and complex. First of all, political opinion in the United Kingdom was moving firmly against an attack on Alexandria, and as far as Mollet and his ministers were concerned the Alexandria plan was too cumbersome. They advocated a swifter scheme, making greater use of airborne forces to seize the Canal Zone in a few hours. Then there was the American attitude to be considered: in a series of lengthy telegrams to the British and French Prime Ministers, Dulles advocated a new scheme known as the Suez Canal Users' Association, a projected international organisation which would deal with all problems of passage through the Canal. Even if Nasser refused to accept the proposal, Eden thought that Britain, France and the USA might bring it off together. However, as he remarked to the Home Secretary, he personally thought it a 'cock-eyed idea, but if it brings the Americans in, I can go along'.

Logistics factors, however, played a leading part in the switch from Alexandria to Port Said, and it is useful at this point to look at the size of the forces allocated to the operation. On the British side, there were 45,000 men, 12,000 vehicles, 300 aircraft, 100 warships; on the French side, 34,000 men, 9,000 vehicles, 200 aircraft and 30 warships. The airborne assault would be undertaken by the British 16th Independent Parachute Brigade and General Massu's French 10th Airborne Division, while the nucleus of the seaborne assault would consist of the British 3rd Commando Brigade, supported by one regiment – 48 Centurion tanks – of the 10th Armoured Division. Behind them would come the British 3rd Infantry Division, sailing from the United Kingdom, and the French 7th Division Mekanique Rapide from Algeria. The whole was comparable to the allied force assembled for the assault on Anzio in 1944.

As planning for the original Alexandria operation progressed during August and early September, it began to be obvious that – because of the critical shortage of landing craft and seaborne transport of all types, as well as the lack of base facilities – a force of this magnitude would prove too unwieldy to meet the demands of a limited time schedule such as that envisaged in the Alexandria landings. It was doubtful whether sufficient stores, equipment and reinforcements could be put ashore in the six-day period set aside before the planned drive on Cairo, and yet any holdup in the timetable might prove fatal in an operation where speed was of the essence.

The seizure of Port Said and limited objectives in the Canal Zone – which could conceivably be held for a lengthy period by the paratroops and marines with full allied air superiority, enabling the main seaborne forces to disembark more or less at leisure – therefore seemed to present a far more acceptable solution.

Nevertheless, the logistics problems were still formidable, and the difficulties were not lightened by the fact that the logistics arrangements had to be changed with every alteration to the main plan. Apart from the necessity to build up vast depots of stores and fuel on Malta and Cyprus, the lack of airfield facilities on the latter island – without which the airborne assault could not take place – posed a severe headache. In August 1956 only one of the three Cyprus airfields that could accept transport aircraft – the international civil airport of Nicosia – was operational, and even then extensive construction work severely limited the space available for parking large numbers of aircraft. The RAF base at Akrotiri was being expanded, with a great deal of new con-

struction under way, and was one of EOKA's principal targets. It would be the middle of October before both fields were fully operational, and both were allocated for RAF use during the emergency. The French were assigned to Tymbou, five miles from Nicosia on the main road to Famagusta; this had been used only as an emergency landing ground, and a crash development programme was begun in August to make it fit for use by the French transport aircraft. In the light of these known deficiencies, the new date fixed for the Port Said landing – 1 October – appears totally unrealistic.

To meet the schedule, the first ships would have to leave England on 21 September at the latest – and it was now the 12th. There was no time for anything like a complete revision of the loading plans; all that could be done was to re-assign the forces destined for Alexandria to objectives of more or less similar importance in Port Said. The plan itself was therefore merely an adaptation of the original idea, and was known as *Musketeer Revised*.

Port Said was now the British objective, while the French were to land further east at Port Fuad. Both forces would then drive southwards, with the British on the west bank of the Canal and the French on the East. On reaching El Qantara the British were to push westwards to Abu Sueir, while the French were to cross over to the west bank of the Canal to take Ismailia and Suez. The British and French were then to join forces in a two-pronged drive on Cairo from Abu Sueir and Suez.

If everything went according to plan, the French estimated that the Canal Zone could be occupied in four days; the more conservative British estimate was between a week and 10 days. The codeword that would launch the operation was to be 'Toledo'. Although details of the plan were subjected to many variations, the basic structure remained the same as preparations went ahead. First of all, an intensive series of air strikes would eliminate the Egyptian Air Force, after which the weight of allied air power would be turned on the Egyptian coastal defences. These would be subjected to a further bombardment by naval guns; this would last for an hour and cover the assault force, which was scheduled to hit the Port Said beaches 35 minutes after sunrise. Thirty minutes after the first landing, the paratroops would be dropped on their objectives. While the Egyptian garrison was being overwhelmed, minesweepers would open up a passage into the harbour, and it was hoped to get tanks ashore within three hours. By this time the seaborne force should have joined up with the paratroops, opening the way for the armour to proceed down the Canal road towards Suez.

The plan in itself – although feasible enough on paper – laid bare the serious misgivings which had been voiced for some time by senior commanders about the very severe shortcomings in Britain's postwar defence policy. All three services, their resources whittled away steadily since the end of World War II, now found themselves faced with a serious manpower crisis. Men were desperately needed to bring the regular units up to strength, and other units – such as those concerned with the operation of railways, port and dock facilities, which were not included in the peacetime order of battle – had to be mobilised from the Army Emergency Reserve. Men who were called up found themselves kicking their heels in depots and training regiments with little or no sense of urgency, which did nothing to improve their morale. Some reservists – and this was particularly true of the paratroops – were well trained and slipped back into active military life easily; others had been out of touch for so long that they were useless. Nevertheless, despite being dragged away from their jobs and homes at such short notice and for an indefinite period, most of the reservists settled down stoically enough to see the emergency through.

Of the formations earmarked to carry out the initial assault, most of the 3rd Commando Brigade and two battalions of the 16th Parachute Brigade Group were in

Cyprus, engaged in Operation Pool Bull – the search for the terrorist Lenas gang, which was reported to be in the Troodos Mountains. On 10 August the Commandos were relieved in their sector by units of the Gordon Highlanders, and four days later No 45 Commando embarked on *HMS Theseus* at Famagusta and sailed for Malta, where a period of intensive training lay ahead. Much emphasis lay on co-operation with tanks, as the plan called for the landing of an armoured regiment with the assault force. Since it was not thought likely that the Libya-based 10th Armoured Division could be used, it was decided early in August to raise a new armoured brigade as part of the 3rd Infantry Division in the United Kingdom, and one of its units – the 6th Royal Tank Regiment – was placed on the order of battle for invasion.

One of No 45 Commando's officers later described the training in Malta:

'We had barely time to get re-accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of Ghain Tuffieha Camp before we found ourselves in the midst of an intensive training programme. Three full-scale amphibious exercises in quick succession punctuated troop training, and two "set piece" exercises with live enemy run by the unit for each rifle troop in turn. A troop of LVsT (Landing Vehicles Tracked, or Buffaloes) were living with the unit at this time and much training was done with them, although we never worked with them operationally. A Squadron, 6th Royal Tank Regiment, drove up from Marsa at dead of night and spent a week on Mayesa field firing range, during which time each troop did an exercise with two troops of tanks, which was of great value. It was felt by the infantry, however, that realism had over-stepped the mark when the umpires made them wear respirators for half an hour during an uphill assault; even the fittest marine formed the opinion that a death by gassing would be preferable to drowning in his own perspiration.'

In the case of other units, training was very much an improvised business. Troops of 81 Port Regiment, for example, who were flown to Cyprus at the end of August and who would have to supervise the unloading of stores and equipment during the actual operation, spent weeks working with the dockers of Famagusta, helping to unload merchant cargoes. As well as assisting in the build-up of the Cyprus depots, this activity had an immense training value.

Two armoured regiments – the 1st and 6th Royal Tanks – were included in the original Order of Battle, and the state of readiness of both units left much to be desired. One of the 1st Royal Tanks' squadrons had no armoured vehicles at all, its personnel working as mechanics with the Territorial Army; another squadron was being used for training at the School of Infantry, and the third was on garrison duty at Tidworth. The 6th Royal Tanks had recently completed a tour in Germany, and many personnel were still there; the remainder were scattered throughout the United Kingdom, working with the Territorials.

The reorganisation of both regiments was chaotic. Much of the equipment issued to them from depots up and down the country was outmoded and totally inadequate; some of it dated back to 1940. Many of the vehicles also lacked essential items of equipment such as wireless aerials and ammunition racks.

Transporting the armoured regiments to their UK embarkation ports proved a nightmare for everyone involved. The weight of the Centurion tanks made movement by rail out of the question, which meant that the journey from Tidworth to Southampton and Portland had to be made on road transporters. Since the Army had only a handful of these vehicles, they had to call on the services of the civilian firm of Pickfords, who used heavy transporters to move large components for industry. Pickfords' crews,

however, were tied to union working hours, which meant that they took a week to do a trip that could have been made by Army crews in half the time. The result was that the move took four weeks, two of which might otherwise have been spent in valuable training.

The 6th Royal Tanks, with 47 Centurions, finally sailed for Malta on 4 September. Because of all the transportation delays it was to be nearly two months before the 1st Tanks followed it. To complicate matters even further, out of the 32 tank landing ships available on paper to transport the regiments to the Mediterranean, only two were actually in service; the rest were in storage and had to be made seaworthy when their cocoons were removed. Only 12 more could be made ready in time.

There was also a critical shortage of vessels suitable for trooping. The first ships to be pressed into service in this role were the aircraft carriers *Ocean* and *Theseus*, which sailed for the Mediterranean at the end of July. Both vessels had been serving for some time as 'school ships' and were no longer equipped to operate aircraft. A third carrier in British home waters, *HMS Bulwark*, had also been used for training, with her operational squadrons at shore bases. After embarking three squadrons of Sea Hawk Mk 6s she also sailed for the Mediterranean, arriving at Gibraltar on 9 August. Three days later she joined *HMS Eagle* off Malta and began an intensive period of flying training, her crews carrying out close-support operations in conjunction with No 45 Commando, air-to-air firing, practice shipping strikes on the frigate *HMS Ulysses* and the French carrier *Arromanches*, and low-level photo-reconnaissance. While these exercises were still in progress the carrier *HMS Albion* also sailed for the Mediterranean following a refit; she arrived at the end of August and began working up her squadrons of Sea Hawks and Sea Venoms. En route to Malta she passed *Ocean* and *Theseus*, homeward bound once more after their initial period of trooping. On their return to the UK both carriers were provided with more permanent accommodation for further trooping work; *Ocean* was fitted with an operating theatre and extensive hospital facilities, which would enable her to be used as a hospital ship on station off the Egyptian coast during the operation.

This re-equipment had hardly been completed when both ships were suddenly assigned to a new role – as helicopter carriers. *HMS Ocean* was to embark the Whirlwinds of No 845 Squadron, while *Theseus* was to take on the mixed complement of Sycamores and Whirlwinds belonging to the Joint Experimental Helicopter Unit (JEHU), a combined Army and RAF venture. This meant that many of the bunks newly erected in the carriers' hangars had to be taken out again.

On 31 September, both carriers put to sea to practise helicopter operation techniques. Fourteen days later, No 845 Squadron was transferred from *Ocean* to *Theseus* in place of the JEHU aircraft, and the carrier sailed for Malta. Five days afterwards, *Ocean* also sailed for the Mediterranean after embarking JEHU.

In Malta, the men of No 45 Commando had been looking forward to a daring helicopter assault in which a commando task force was to have been landed by two waves of No 845 Squadron's helicopters with the object of securing the strategic bridges to the south of Port Said. On 27 October, however, they were bitterly disappointed to learn that this task had been assigned to the French paratroops, and the Commandos' mission was changed to that of helicopter reserve to the main seaborne assault in the first phase of the operation. This meant that No 45 Commando was, in effect, scheduled to standby to land at any point on the beachhead in support of Nos 40 and 42 Commandos.

The last days of October were spent in more training, including the rehearsal of helicopter drills aboard *HMS Theseus* and *HMS Ocean*. The Commandos also

practised loading bulky equipment, such as the 106mm anti-tank gun. Then events started to move rapidly; on Monday 29 October it was learned that the Israelis had launched an offensive against the Egyptian forces in Sinai, and within 24 hours the order was issued for No 45 Commando to embark on *HMS Ocean*. Their vehicles and heavy stores went aboard the LCT *Lofoten*, to sail for Port Said with the Amphibious Warfare Squadron. On Friday, 2 November, *Ocean* steamed out of Valetta's Grand Harbour, accompanied by *HMS Theseus* and an escort of destroyers and frigates, and headed south-eastwards into the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, in Cyprus, the 16th Parachute Brigade Group had now been brought up to strength by an influx of reservists. On the arrival of the 2nd Battalion in September, the 1st and 3rd Battalions – which had been engaged almost continuously on anti-terrorist operations – were flown back to the United Kingdom for refresher parachute training, following which they returned to Cyprus in the middle of October.

The French, for their part, had already been in Cyprus for some weeks, the initial contingent of 2,700 men of the 10th Parachute Division arriving at Limassol on 7 September. The majority were billeted in a collection of huts and tents known as 'Camp X' at Tymbou, where they soon became the target of EOKA propaganda. The terrorists scattered leaflets around the French area, exhorting the Paras to abandon co-operation with the British and hand over their weapons to aid EOKA's 'struggle for freedom'. The Paras' experience in Algeria, however, had not made them well disposed to terrorists of any kind, and on more than one occasion they opened fire on terrorists who were foolish enough to show themselves.

The build-up of air power also continued. By the third week of October there were 17 RAF bomber squadrons – equipped with either Canberras or Valiants – based on Malta and Cyprus. The RAF fighter elements now included the Venom FB4s of Nos 6, 32, 73 and 249 Squadrons, all based on Akrotiri, the Meteor NF13s of No 39 Squadron, which moved from Luqa to Akrotiri early in October, and the Hunter 5s of Nos 1 and 34 Squadrons, based on Nicosia. For long-range photo-reconnaissance there were the Akrotiri-based Canberra 7s of No 13 Squadron, while the Shackletons of No 37 Squadron carried out maritime reconnaissance from Luqa.

Air transport units at Tymbou comprised the Valettas of Nos 30, 84 and 114 Squadrons and the Hastings of Nos 70 and 99 Squadrons, RAF Transport Command; later, the Hastings of No 511 and the Comet 2s of No 216 Squadron also operated out of this base. Also at Tymbou were the Noratlas of the Armee de l'Air's 61e and 63e Escadres. Other French units had been secretly moved to Israel to support the Sinai offensive; these were the 1ere Escadre, whose F-84Fs operated out of Lydda, and the 2e Escadre, flying from Haifa with Noratlas. The 3e and 33e Escadres were at Akrotiri with F-84Fs and RF-84s.

In both Cyprus and Malta, the last week of October was characterised by boredom and a good deal of disillusionment. The preparations were virtually complete, and yet there was still no sign of action. Everyone – and particularly the reservists, anxious to return to their families and jobs – was asking: how much longer?

3

The Military Scene in Egypt

During September and October 1956, Lockheed U-2 aircraft belonging to a detachment of the USAF's 4080th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, operating out of Incirlik in Turkey, made a series of high-level photo-reconnaissance flights over Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. The U-2s, which were already operating over the Soviet Union with impunity, were not intercepted and it is improbable that they were even detected by the Egyptian air defence.

It is known that some of the photographic intelligence gathered by the U-2s was passed on to the British Government, proving extremely useful in the forming of an overall picture of the disposition of Nasser's armed forces. The order of battle of the Egyptian Air Force – the largest in the Middle East, and certainly the best equipped since the arrival of its Russian MiGs and Ilyushins – was of particular interest, since considerable opposition might be expected from this quarter.

In 1956, the Egyptian Air Force possessed some of the finest air bases in the Middle East – airfields which had been evacuated by the Royal Air Force under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1954. The largest of these was Abu Sueir, 10 miles west of Ismailia on the main Cairo road. The last RAF unit – a Meteor squadron – had left on 10 March 1956, and less than a month later the first MiG-15s moved in. Although Abu Sueir was used mainly as a storage depot for complete aircraft until sufficient crews had been trained to fly them, an operational MiG-15 Squadron – No 30, with 15 fighters – had been formed there in June 1956.

Ranking next to Abu Sueir as a base of first-line importance came Kabrit, at the southernmost point of the Great Bitter Lake. Immediately after the RAF moved out, the Egyptians set to work lengthening the base's 6,000ft runway by an extra 3,000ft to make it suitable for the operation of fast jet traffic. When this work was completed,

Kabrit was used as a base for the EAF's MiG-15 operational conversion unit, which shared the base with two operational MiG squadrons – Nos 1 and 20. The task of these squadrons, together with No 30 at Abu Sueir, was to provide fighter cover over the Canal Zone; both bases were defended by a concentration of Czech-built 20mm anti-aircraft batteries.

Fayid and Kasfareet, further to the north-west, were used by the EAF's Vampire and Meteor squadrons. Fayid was the home of No 2 Squadron, with 15 Vampires; No 5, with 12 Meteors (F4s and F8s); and No 40, with 20 Vampires and 10 Meteors, six of the latter tropicalised NF13s. The EAF's remaining Vampire squadron, No 31, was based on Kasfareet.

Further inland, Cairo West served as the main EAF bomber base, and by the late summer of 1956 a total of 24 Il-28 jet bombers were deployed there with Nos 8 and 9 Squadrons. Only 12 of these aircraft were anywhere near an operational standard; the remainder were being used for operational conversion, and other Il-28s which had reached Egypt by this time were held in storage. The other military airfield in the vicinity of Cairo, Almaza, was the EAF's transport base, being the home of No 3 Squadron with 20 Ilyushin 14s, No 7 with 20 C-46 Commandos, and No 11 with 20 Dakotas. The EAF's six recently acquired Meteor NF13 night fighters were also based there, as were eight elderly Hawker Fury piston-engined fighters.

The Egyptian Army, which was well-enough equipped on paper, was of dubious value as a fighting force. Despite a large-scale reorganisation programme and determined efforts to imbue an esprit de corps, morale remained generally low; there was still a noticeable hangover from the defeats suffered during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

The army, commanded by General Ali Ali Amer, had a total mobilized strength of 100,000. It was grouped into two main formations; one for the defence of Sinai and the Gaza Strip, the other for the defence of the Canal Zone in the event of possible aggressive action on the part of Britain and France. By far the bulk of the forces were in Sinai; they included the 3rd Infantry Division, the 8th Palestinian Division and the 2nd Motorised Border Battalion. The defence of the Canal Zone was in the hands of the 2nd Infantry Division, with the 1st Armoured Brigade Team in reserve.

In all there were 18 brigades; 10 infantry, one medium machine gun, three armoured, one coastal defence and three anti-aircraft. Each of the infantry brigades – which were generally organised on British lines – was supported by an artillery battery of either British 25-pounders or Soviet 122mm guns. An anti-tank company equipped with 17-pounder or 57mm guns was also attached. Other artillery support was provided by independent field regiments using Soviet SU-100 self-propelled guns, or medium regiments with Soviet 152mm guns. There were also four heavy mortar regiments – three of them deployed in Sinai – each with three batteries of 120mm mortars.

The three armoured brigades each consisted of one armoured regiment composed of three battle groups, together with three squadrons of motorised infantry carried in either Ford Power trucks, Valentine armoured personnel carriers or Soviet BTR-152 scout cars. The armoured regiments were equipped with Soviet T-34s and JS-3s (Joseph Stalins) or with British Centurion Mk3s. A few units still used ageing Sherman, although these were being rapidly replaced by Russian equipment.

The anti-aircraft brigades were probably the most efficient of all Egyptian Army formations, and appeared to enjoy a far higher standard of morale than other units. They were well equipped, too, with Czech-built long-barrel 20mm cannon, 30mm Hispano-Suiza and 40mm Bofors light AA guns, and a few Russian 57mm cannon. The anti-

aircraft batteries were deployed on airfields, at strategic points in the Canal Zone, at the entrance of the Canal itself and on the mole at Port Said. Some 20mm batteries were sited on the roofs of buildings adjacent to depots and barracks.

Backing up the regular army was a 100,000-strong volunteer National Guard, comparable with Britain's Territorial Army. Its standard of training was poor and its weapons outdated, consisting mainly of early models of the Lee Enfield .303in rifle. The regular army, in contrast, was equipped with modern Soviet 7.62mm carbines. Most of the National Guard units were mobilised late in July, and some of them were attached to the army in Sinai.

In addition to the National Guard there was a strong police force, run with strict military discipline, armed with the latest infantry weapons and known to be completely loyal to Nasser. During the late summer of 1956 police units received special training in street fighting and anti-paratroop operations, and it seemed likely that determined resistance would be encountered from this quarter.

Of the three Egyptian services, the Navy seemed likely to present the least obstacle to a successful invasion. Its largest warships were four destroyers, two of which – the *El Fateh* and *El Qaher* (formerly *HMS Zenith* and *HMS Myngs*) – had been refitting in England when Nasser announced the nationalisation of the Canal in July. When the British embargo on the supply of arms to Egypt was announced on 30 July, the *El Qaher* was at Portsmouth making ready to sail for her home country and the *El Fateh* was undergoing trials at the Thornycroft shipyard in Southampton. Both vessels eventually sailed for Alexandria in August, but without ammunition and torpedoes. The other two Egyptian destroyers, the *Al Nasser* and *Al Zafr*, were both ex-Soviet Skoryi class vessels; they had been handed over to the Egyptian Navy at Alexandria on 11 June 1956.

The Navy's inventory included seven escorts: the *Tarik*, *Rashid*, *Port Said*, *Abikir*, *Domiat*, *El Sudan* and *Ibrahim el Awal*, all of them ex-British. There were two former British Bangor class corvettes, the *Matrouh* and *Nasr*, and eight ancient wooden coastal minesweepers.

If the Egyptian Navy was in a position to present any threat at all to the Allied invasion convoys, it was likely to come from its small force of motor torpedo boats. Twelve Soviet P-6 type MTBs had been delivered in April 1956, as had two ex-Yugoslavian boats. There were also five ex-British Fairmile type MTBs. The Soviet boats were certainly fast and well armed enough to cause problems for the Allies should the Egyptians decide to send them into action. The Egyptians were also known to have a small force of frogmen, some of whom had been trained by the Royal Navy. It was conceivable that they might operate against the Allied invasion fleet in Alexandria and Port Said, even after an official Egyptian surrender.

With all factors considered, it seemed likely to the Allied planners that, in view of the general low state of the Egyptian armed forces, even co-ordinated resistance would not last for long. The real problems could be expected to begin during the subsequent occupation phase, when the Anglo-French forces – as well as having to contend with the daily administration of a large civilian population – might also have to deal with armed terrorist groups.

Oddly enough, as September gave way to October, there seemed to be a general relaxation in the tension that had hung over the Middle East since Nasser's speech in July. Even when the original Suez Canal Company ordered 500 of its non-Egyptian employees in the Canal Zone to cease work – a move that had the immediate effect of halving the strength of the Canal pilots – the Canal itself continued to function and sea traffic went on flowing through it as it had always done. As time went by, the

possibility that the British and French would take military action seemed increasingly remote to both the Egyptian Government and the civil population.

Even the Egyptian force in Sinai seemed affected by the apparent ease in tension; border incidents over the past few days had been confined to skirmishes between Israel and Jordan. The Egyptians went about their routine duties as usual on Sunday 28 October, unaware that in Tel Aviv David Ben-Gurion had declared general mobilisation – or that in just a few hours they would be fighting for their lives.

4 The Israelis Strike

The Israeli assault on the Egyptian forces in Sinai began at 1630 on 29 October. As the sun sank towards the western horizon, 16 C-47 Dakota transports of No 301 Squadron, Israeli Air Force, roared at 500ft over the desert, keeping low to avoid detection by the enemy radar. Seventy minutes earlier they had formed up over their base at Ekron and set course south-westwards towards the Peninsula. The transports carried 400 men of the 1st Battalion of Colonel Ariel Sharon's 202nd Airborne Brigade, and their objective was Mitla, 40 miles east of Port Suez. The troops were to be dropped at the Parker monument – a memorial to Colonel Parker, the British officer who was twice Governor of Sinai – at the eastern end of the Mitla Pass, the vital defile that controlled the Ismailia-Tur and Nakhel-Suez crossroads. Even at this late hour of the afternoon, the 20-mile pass would be like a cauldron. The road that wound through it was flanked by steep scorching rock walls, pitted with fissures and caves that formed natural defensive positions.

The 1st Battalion's task was to secure the pass before the Egyptians had time to bring up reinforcements, and to hold it until the remainder of the Airborne Brigade arrived. The rest of the Brigade, some 2,000 men, spearheaded by two companies mounted in half tracks, had already crossed the start line on the first stage of the 130-mile dash across enemy territory to Mitla, making a diversionary feint towards the Jordanian frontier.

Ahead of Sharon's forces lay three fortified Egyptian posts at Kuntilla, El Thamad and Nakhel. Sixty miles further north, another Israeli task force had also crossed over into enemy territory at Sabha and was now pushing on to capture the strategic crossroads at Kuseima. Once the crossroads were secure, this force, which consisted of an armoured brigade under Colonel Ben-Avi and an infantry brigade under Colonel

Harpaz, would be in a position to come to the aid of the paratroops at Mitla by way of either Nakhel or Bir Hasana. The success of the Israeli offensive, code named Operation Kadesh, depended on complete surprise, the inability of the Egyptian General Staff to react quickly to the situation, and the ability of the paratroop battalion to deny the Egyptians access to central Sinai through the Mitla Pass.

As they approached the dropping zone, the Dakota pilots took their aircraft up to 1,500ft, conscious that the enemy radar was certain to pick them up at any moment and that the Egyptian air base at Kabrit with its two squadrons of MiG-15 jet fighters was only 45 miles away on the other side of the Great Bitter Lake. The escort for the Dakotas was provided by 10 twin-jet Gloster Meteor F Mk 8s, whose task was to provide air cover for the transports during the actual drop. On the way out the Dakotas would be escorted by eight Dassault Ouragans, more modern aircraft which would stand a better chance of dealing with any MiG-15s that came up from the other side of the canal. More Israeli fighters, 12 Dassault Mystères, cruised in pairs at 10,000ft over the east bank of the Great Bitter Lake within sight of Kabrit, ready to engage any Egyptian aircraft that attempted to interfere with the para-drop. Although they could see the Egyptian MiGs parked in full view on Kabrit airfield, the Israeli pilots were under strict orders to remain over the East Bank and were consequently forced to ignore a very promising target.

At 1658, the first paratroops went down and a few minutes later the Dakotas turned for home. All returned safely to base. The Egyptian Air Force had not put in an appearance, but for the air and ground crews of the Dakota Squadron there was to be no respite. All that night and for the three nights that followed, the transports were to fly sortie after sortie, dropping supplies to the Israeli forces advancing through Sinai.

Because of the glare of the afternoon sun, which made visual navigation extremely difficult, the Dakota crews had made a slight error and had in fact dropped the battalion three miles east of the actual dropping zone. The paratroopers suffered 13 casualties, mostly with sprained ankles. After a two-hour march the men reached the memorial and dug themselves in close to the mouth of the pass. At 2100 a flight of Dakotas dropped eight jeeps, four 116mm recoilless guns, two 20mm mortars, ammunition and food. There was one brief skirmish in the darkness when an advance party of paratroops ran into two Egyptian light reconnaissance vehicles and opened fire on them. The crew of one was killed instantly and the vehicle slewed off the road, but the other escaped.

During the hours that followed, the paratroops set up road blocks and cleared a dropping zone to the east. Meanwhile, the main body of the Airborne Brigade had successfully overrun the frontier post at Kuntilla, attacking from the west. The same sun that had blinded the Air Force pilots at the Mitla drop now blinded the Kuntilla defenders. Although they fought back valiantly they were unable to prevent the Israelis breaking through the perimeter in a crazy charge on their half tracks, and the Egyptians retreated into the desert. Two Israeli half tracks were blown up by mines and one man was wounded. He was later evacuated aboard a Piper Cub liaison aircraft.

Many of the brigade's vehicles were already suffering badly from a shortage of fuel and lack of spares, even spare tyres being in short supply, and it was not until 2230, five hours after the attack on Kuntilla, that the paratroops were able to push on to their next objective, El Thamad, 40 miles further on. The attack on El Thamad was launched at 0600, about an hour after sunrise, which the Israelis used to their advantage by launching their assault from the east. El Thamad was defended by two companies of the Egyptian Frontier Force and a National Guard detachment. They put up a short and spirited fight but pulled out as soon as the Israelis broke through into their

positions, leaving 60 dead behind them. The Israelis' loss was three killed and 10 wounded.

While the remainder of the Brigade regrouped at an oasis a few miles from El Thamad and strove to get as many vehicles serviceable as possible, the 2nd Battalion moved into the positions they had just captured from the Egyptians. At 0700, the battalion was attacked by four Egyptian MiG-15s which came in low from the West and made several firing passes, causing 40 casualties and destroying six vehicles.

During the course of the morning, the Brigade received an air-drop of supplies from two Noratlas transports. The next objective was Nakhel, another 40 miles to the West, but the Brigade's commander had no intention of pressing on without his supporting artillery, which had got bogged down in soft sand on the drive from Kuntilla. The artillery turned up at 1100 but the commander still had a difficult decision to make. He could push straight on in broad daylight, trusting that the patrolling Mystères and Ouragans would be able to disrupt any concentrated attacks by Egyptian fighter bombers, or he could disperse the brigade and wait until nightfall, pushing on to the next objective under cover of darkness.

The decision rested on how the battalion at Mitla was faring. More supplies had been dropped to the battalion at sunrise by Noratlases of the French Air Force's 64e Escadre, operating out of Haifa, and not long afterwards a Piper Cub, one of five attached to the Airborne Brigade, had been sent up to make contact with the forward element. It had still not returned at 1000 and the brigade commander, seriously worried by this time, decided to send out a second liaison aircraft. The fact was that the forward battalion had been under attack since dawn; the battalion commander had made a serious mistake. In the darkness of the previous night he had not realised that the positions occupied by his men were overlooked by high ground on the southern side of the pass. This high ground was occupied by a company of Egyptian troops, who had reacted with amazing speed and rushed to the spot from the western end of the pass. Now, even before the sun had begun to disperse the thick dawn mist that hung over the area, they began to lob mortar bombs on to the Israeli positions around the monument. A probing attack by the enemy was successfully beaten off by the paratroops but it could only be a matter of time before a heavier assault developed.

In fact, units of the Egyptian 2nd Brigade were at that moment crossing the canal and preparing to race to the scene of the action. The Israeli paratroops were also attacked several times by Egyptian MiG-15 and Vampire FB52s which took advantage of a gap in the Israeli air cover to bomb and strafe the paratroops' positions. The enemy aircraft caused some casualties and knocked out a Piper Cub liaison aircraft that was standing, unoccupied, on the improvised landing ground to the east of the monument. At 1200, the second Piper Cub, which had missed the latest strafing attack, returned to El Thamad with news of what was happening and also with an urgent request for air support. Until this moment, the Israeli Air Force had not been authorised to undertake close support operations; but now, with the Egyptian Air Force having struck the first blow, the Airborne Brigade commander was informed by GHQ that support would be available from 1300 onwards.

The commander requested immediate air cover for the battalion at Mitla and air support for his own column on the drive to Nakhel from 1600. The main body of the brigade moved off at 1330, with Mystères and Ouragans maintaining standing patrols overhead. No further attacks were made on it by the Egyptian Air Force during this phase.

The brigade reached Nakhel at 1600 and the assault began almost immediately, spearheaded by AMX tanks and half tracks under cover of an artillery barrage. After

30 minutes of stiff fighting the main defensive position had been overrun, and by nightfall the whole area was in Israeli hands. The Israelis found a number of Soviet half tracks intact and at once pressed them into service alongside their own vehicles. Leaving one battalion at Nakhel, the Brigade pressed on to Mitla under cover of darkness. The drive was not opposed and the link-up with the men of the 1st Battalion was made at 2230. Supply drops were made by Dakotas and Noratlases and the Airborne Brigade dug itself in and prepared to withstand the Egyptian counter-attack that was certain to come either later that night or at dawn.

In fact, Egyptian plans to rush up reinforcements from the Canal Zone had been seriously hampered during the afternoon of the 30th by the Israeli Air Force, which had really begun to get into its stride after about 1400. Twenty of the IAF's P-51 Mustangs had been in action almost continuously, attacking the Egyptian columns on the east bank of the Suez Canal. Some Mustangs had also provided support for the central task force's assault on Kuseima, where some of the heaviest fighting of the initial phase had taken place. The piston-engined Mustangs took severe punishment from ground-fire and two of them were shot down.

Throughout the first day the Egyptian Air Force made only 40 sorties. The last attack of the day was carried out on the Mitla positions by two Egyptian Meteors escorted by six MiGs; the latter tangled with the standing patrol of Israeli Air Force Mystères, and while the skirmish was going on above the Meteors slipped in unnoticed and made their attack. Another dog-fight developed at about the same time over the east bank of the canal not far from Kabrit, between eight Mystères and 12 MiG-15s. The Israeli pilots claimed the destruction of two MiGs with two more probables. One Mystère was badly damaged but the pilot flew back to base and made a safe landing.

By midnight on 30 October, the Egyptian defenders of the Mitla area had received reinforcements in the shape of two more battalions which took up position at either end of the pass. Worse still, the bulk of the Egyptian 2nd Armoured Brigade had now been ferried over to the east bank of the canal and was on its way to the scene. There seemed to be little doubt that the Egyptians were recovering well from the initial surprise of the Israeli blitzkrieg.

On the morning of 31 October, the central task force found itself involved in still more heavy fighting. The 7th Armoured Brigade, which had been fighting continuously for two days without rest, had circled Abu Ageila in North Eastern Sinai. Soon after dawn it came under heavy fire almost immediately from Egyptian artillery positions at Um Shihan. An Egyptian armoured unit made two attempts to dislodge the Israelis from their new positions but each time it was beaten off with heavy losses. It was here, for the first time in history, that guided weapons were used against tanks. The Israelis had acquired a small number of Nord SS10 wire-guided anti-tank missiles shortly before the campaign started and now they used them to good effect. The SS10 proved to be a devastating weapon even against the heavily-armoured Soviet T-34 tanks. The third Egyptian attempt to overrun the Israeli positions was smashed by air attack. It was a different story from the previous day, when there had been an almost complete lack of contact between the units on the ground and the Air Force. Vital signalling equipment had been put out of action during the Kuseima battle with the result that the central task force had been unable to request air support when it needed it most. Worse still, Israeli units had been attacked three times by their own aircraft, which had knocked out one half track and damaged several other vehicles. Fortunately there had been no serious casualties.

On this morning of D+2 however, there was complete liaison between air and ground units and the Egyptians were subjected to a well-directed onslaught by

Ouragans, Mustangs and Harvards. Two Mustangs and one Harvard were damaged but they all returned safely to base. At 1100 the pilot of a reconnaissance Harvard returned with some disturbing news. He reported that he had located large Egyptian reinforcements, including armour, driving eastwards through El Hama, only 25 miles to the west of Abu Ageila. The brigade commander immediately ordered two companies of infantry and half tracks and a squadron of Sherman tanks to set up a road block 15 miles to the west and to pin down the advancing Egyptians for as long as possible. He also asked the Air Force to attack the enemy column. At 1150 a flight of Ouragans that came up in answer to this request became involved in a vicious dog-fight with eight MiG-15s. The Ouragans were badly damaged in the ensuing air combat and were rescued in the nick of time by a flight of Mystères which came up to their assistance. Later, it turned out that the MiGs had been flying top cover for four Egyptian Meteors which had been attacking Israeli units at Bir Hasana, south-east of El Hama, and it was sheer bad luck that the Ouragans had run into them.

The Ouragan pilots had also failed to locate the Egyptian column for the simple reason that the Israeli reconnaissance pilot had made a mistake. The enemy reinforcements were not at El Hama but at Bir Gifgafa, a good 50 miles from Abu Ageila. The mistake was quickly discovered and a second flight of Ouragans was detailed to attack the Egyptian concentration at its new-found location. Once again, the attack was frustrated by the appearance of enemy aircraft but this time the Israeli fighter pilots came out on top and a MiG-15 was shot down. The Israeli Air Force operated all day with Ouragans and Mustangs maintaining continual pressure on the Egyptian ground forces. There were several more skirmishes high above the desert. During one of them, a brand new Egyptian MiG-17 was damaged and forced down, Israeli engineers subsequently recovering it virtually intact from the shallow waters of the lake.

The principal target for the Israeli ground attack pilots was the Egyptian column at Bir Gifgafa on the central road into Sinai and considerable damage was inflicted on it. The Egyptian 1st Armoured Brigade in particular came in for a good deal of their attention. It was known as the Soviet Brigade because it was equipped exclusively with Russian tanks and self-propelled guns. It was also well defended by mobile 40mm anti-aircraft cannon, and every attack had to be pressed home through a murderous barrage of shell fire. By the end of the day, the forward elements of the 1st Armoured Brigade had reached Bia Rod Salim, 20 miles west of Jebel Libni, but the main body was still in the Bir Gifgafa area and the road between was littered with the burnt-out wrecks of 90 tanks, trucks and carriers, grim testimony to the efficiency of the Israeli pilots.

A second Egyptian column consisting of two small mixed brigades of armour and infantry was also attacked from the air as it advanced along the coastal road that led eastwards. Preliminary attacks on the column were made by the F-84F Thunderstreaks of the French Air Force's 1ere Escadre operating out of Lydda together with the Mystères of the 2e Escadre based on Haifa. These aircraft had been held in reserve as an insurance against possible attacks on Israeli cities by Egyptian Ilyushin Il-28 jet bombers. However, the Anglo-French ultimatum to Egypt and Israel of 30 October, stating that British and French forces would occupy key positions on the Suez Canal unless both sides ceased hostilities and withdrew 10 miles either side of the Canal – to which the Israelis had readily agreed, since they were still a long way east of their main objective – had been rejected outright by the Egyptians in the early hours of the 31st, and the two French fighter squadrons based in Israel were now released for offensive operations.

The other French Air Force unit in Israel, the 64e Escadre, had been operating its Noratlas transports in support of the Israeli advance since the first night of the campaign. All the French aircraft in Israel had had their blue, white and red roundels obliterated. Some carried hastily stencilled Israeli stars, but many bore no insignia at all. The majority of the F-84Fs and a few of the Mystères also carried black and yellow invasion stripes similar to those painted on allied aircraft during the subsequent attacks on the canal zone. This led to some confusion and angry Egyptian claims that there had been collusion between the British, French and Israelis over plans for the invasion, but the Egyptians had no idea at the time that French combat aircraft were operating from bases in Israel.

In the Mitla Pass meanwhile, the men of the Airborne Brigade had been involved in a day of heavy fighting as they tried to dislodge the Egyptians from their positions. Throughout the day, in spite of air patrols, the brigade had been subjected to sporadic air attacks by Egyptian Vampires and Meteors. One of the heaviest came at 1600 when part of the attacking Israeli force was cut off in one of the defiles and strafed by four Meteors, which caused heavy casualties. One Meteor was destroyed by the Mystères, the second to fall victim to their guns that day.

The air attacks ceased at dusk, by which time the paratroops had seized the high ground on both sides of the pass. Three hours of desperate hand-to-hand fighting followed as the Israelis winkled out the Egyptians from their positions in the caves below. Once they realised there was no escape, the enemy fought bravely to the end. By 1900 the exhausted paratroops were well on the way to completing their mopping-up operation at a cost of 50 killed and three times that many wounded. An hour later, three Israeli Air Force Dakotas appeared overhead and dropped supplies. On learning that there were many casualties below, the transport pilots – ignoring strict orders not to land under any circumstances – dropped flares and came sliding down towards the primitive airstrip by their lights. All the Dakotas made a safe landing and the wounded, about 100 of them, were hurriedly embarked. It was as many as the aircraft could hold. They were already dangerously overladen and take-off was hazardous in the extreme but the three aircraft lurched into the night without mishap, their wheels bumping over the rough ground at the far end of the airstrip. As they droned away the paratroops consolidated their new positions and prepared to withstand a possible counter-attack by Egyptian armour approaching from Bir Gifgafa.

So D+2 came to an end. In the north-east, the key Abu Ageila position had been captured by the Israelis, who were now getting ready to launch an assault on Um Gatef. The 7th Armoured Brigade was at Bir Hasana and ready, if necessary, to go to the help of the paratroops at Mitla; and Rafah, the key to the Gaza Strip, was also under heavy Israeli attack. Air power had been used extensively but had not played a decisive part in the day's operations. The Israeli Air Force had destroyed three Vampires, three MiGs and two Meteors but they had not prevented the Egyptian Air Force from pressing home its attacks. On the other hand, some Israeli ground support missions which had hit their objectives had undoubtedly hampered the Egyptian columns but had not succeeded in disrupting them. Nevertheless, when darkness fell on 31 October, there was no disputing the fact that the Israeli Air Force enjoyed a considerable measure of air superiority.

It was at this point that events took a completely new turn with the start of the allied air attacks on the Egyptian airfields in the canal zone. On the morning of 1 November, President Nasser, now faced with the threat of invasion by British and French forces, ordered all Egyptian units not actually engaging the Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, to pull out and withdraw westwards across the Suez Canal. The

withdrawal, the order for which reached the majority of the Egyptian commanders during the course of the afternoon, was to take place on the night of 1-2 November.

In the early hours of 1 November, the Israelis launched their assault on Rafah at the southern end of the Gaza Strip. The action began with a bombardment of the Egyptian positions by the destroyers *Yafo* and *Eilat*. It began at 0200, lasted for half an hour and was totally ineffective. The Israeli Air Force was then called in with disastrous results. At 0235 a Mosquito dropped a cluster of target markers right on the Israeli positions. Before anything could be done, half a dozen more Mosquitos droned over and dropped their bombs on the heads of the cursing Israelis. Fortunately, no one was killed and the Mosquito crews were quickly appraised of their mistake but precious time had been lost. The Mosquitos made a second attack and this time dropped their bombs in the right place. However, the bombing had not softened up the Egyptian defences as the Israelis had hoped and they met with heavy fire as they began to move forward. It was not until first light that real progress was made when Mustangs and Ouragans appeared and pounded the enemy positions with rockets and napalm.

One after the other, after vicious hand-to-hand fighting, the Egyptian defensive positions were overrun. At 0800 the Egyptian commander ordered his units to withdraw to El Arish and an hour later Rafah was in Israeli hands. At 1000 a battalion of AMX tanks trundled westwards along the coastal road heading for El Arish. Two hours later they ran into a road block and dispersed under heavy anti-tank fire. Fifteen minutes later, a flight of Ouragans appeared and blasted the obstacle into smouldering wreckage but more Egyptians came up and still kept the Israeli tanks pinned down. It was not until 1500, after another air strike and an assault by Israeli infantry, that the defences were overwhelmed and the tanks were able to push on. In the meantime, Ouragans and Mustangs strafed the Egyptian airfield at El Arish where a number of Vampires had been reported that morning. The Vampires had gone but the aircraft attacked three MiGs and a Mraz Sokol – a Czech-built three-seat communications aircraft – on the ground. The MiGs were later found to be wood and canvas dummies but the Sokol was real enough and the cannon shells tore it apart. Sporadic air attacks on the Israeli forces in the Mitla area continued during the morning of 1 November and one Egyptian Vampire was shot down. By the middle of the afternoon, further Egyptian Air Force activity over Sinai had virtually ceased.

By this time, the main Egyptian airfields had been subjected to heavy strafing attacks by carrier aircraft and RAF fighter-bombers operating out of Cyprus. A few MiG-15s and three long-nosed Meteor NF13 fighters were seen over Sinai during the early part of the afternoon but they stayed at high altitude and did not offer combat.

From now on, the Israeli Air Force was free to turn its attention exclusively to ground attack operations. Throughout the remainder of the day, Mustangs, Mystères, Ouragans and the old Harvards hammered Egyptian positions that remained near Abu Ageila and at Um Gatef. The Egyptians counter-attacked with armour after dark in a desperate attempt to smash through the road block set up by the Israelis to the west of Abu Ageila but the attempt was shattered by highly accurate Israeli fire.

At dawn on 1 November, the men of the 1st Battalion of the Airborne Brigade stood to in their positions in the mist-shrouded Mitla Pass and waited to repel the armoured thrust that was expected from Gifgafa. It never came. Moreover, the Egyptians had gone from their remaining positions in the area of the pass. They had received orders to withdraw during the night and were making their way westwards in scattered groups. During the late afternoon, Israeli Air Force reconnaissance aircraft reported that columns of Egyptian troops and vehicles were streaming back across the desert towards the canal everywhere. The majority of the Egyptian commanders, realising

that their position, without hope of reinforcements or air cover, was hopeless, had decided not to wait until nightfall to begin the withdrawal of their units. The retreating columns were harassed by the Israeli Air Force until darkness fell.

By the morning of 2 November, it was obvious that the Egyptian forces in Sinai were in full retreat. Only two major formations showed no sign of moving; the 1st Armoured Brigade which was still at Bir Gifgafa and a mobile brigade straddling the coastal road between El Arish and Kantara. The function of both these units was to keep the way open for the Egyptian withdrawal. The 1st Armoured Brigade began to move back itself at dawn covering the tail-end of the withdrawal. The advancing Israelis arrived in Bir Gifgafa about noon to find the place empty. They went on with their pursuit and finally caught up with the Egyptian rearguard near Katib el Sabha, 30 miles out from the canal, at about 1600. There was a short, sharp battle and three T-34 tanks were left in flames by the roadside.

It was the final encounter between the Israelis and the 1st Armoured Brigade. By nightfall the Egyptian formation had completed its crossing of the canal. It had been under almost constant attack by the Israeli Air Force since dawn and had taken a severe mauling. Altogether the Mustangs and Ouragans had destroyed 22 T-34 tanks, five SU-100 self-propelled guns and at least 35 personnel carriers.

The Israeli Air Force was in action from first light onwards over El Arish, towards which the Israeli 27th Armoured Brigade was advancing along the coastal road. At 0530 Ouragans made a series of attacks on scattered Egyptian units on the western edge of the town. The units were the rearguard of the 4th Egyptian Brigade in the act of withdrawing from the locality. The Israelis let them go, not wishing to have large numbers of prisoners on their hands, and did not enter the town until the afternoon.

The Israeli Air Force continued to strafe the Egyptian columns now streaming westwards in a disorganised mass along the coastal road. Many of the Egyptians abandoned their vehicles as aircraft appeared overhead and continued on foot, moving through the desert in small groups. When the forward units of the 27th Armoured Brigade continued their drive along the coastal road towards El Kantara, the Israelis counted 400 Egyptian vehicles of all types and 40 tanks by the roadside. A few had been knocked out by cannon and rocket fire and were still burning but most had been abandoned intact.

Meanwhile, at 0600 on 2 November, an Eastern task force consisting of the Israeli 9th Infantry Brigade had left Ras El Nakeb, north-west of Eilat, and begun a long advance southwards along the Gulf of Akaba towards Sharm el Sheikh. This objective, together with nearby Ras Nasrani, commanded the straits of Tiran. Both positions were strongly fortified and possessed heavy anti-aircraft defences. While the Israeli Air Force pounded Sharm el Sheikh during the afternoon, two companies of paratroops were dropped at El Tur and a battalion of the 12th Infantry Brigade was flown in together with its supporting equipment.

By the end of the day, the force at El Tur was preparing to advance on Sharm el Sheikh and the 9th Infantry Brigade was advancing laboriously over high ground along the Gulf of Akaba towards the same objective. One battalion of paratroops had also left the Mitla area, advancing towards Ras Sudar on the Gulf of Suez. Its ultimate objective was a link-up with the task force at El Tur, completing the encirclement of the Sinai Peninsula. There had been no air combats during the day and Israeli Air Force operations had been confined to strafing attacks on the withdrawing Egyptians, supply missions and liaison.

At dawn the following morning, the Israeli 11th Infantry Brigade had almost completed the occupation of the Gaza Strip. Only the town of Khan Yunis still held out but

when the Israelis advanced on it with their armour at 0630 they met with only small arms fire. By 0830 the town was in their hands, all except one Egyptian stronghold whose defenders obstinately refused to surrender. It was wiped out later in the day by air attack.

In the south the paratroop battalion arrived at Ras Sudar, which it captured after a sharp fight and stayed there. The remainder of the Airborne Brigade at Mitla assembled at the western end of the pass and prepared to descend on Port Tewfik, but this plan was later cancelled and the brigade stood in readiness to complete the occupation of southern Sinai.

The Israeli Air Force now concentrated its main efforts against the Egyptian defences at Sharm el Sheikh and Ras Nasrani. From first light onwards both these positions were subjected to a series of heavy air strikes; anti-aircraft fire was still severe and one Ouragan was shot down. The pilot ejected safely but was taken prisoner.

The main concern of General Moshe Dayan, the Chief of Staff, was to complete the occupation of Sinai before pressure from the western powers brought a halt to the Israeli operations. In the afternoon of 3 November he ordered his available forces to proceed with the capture of Ras Nasrani and Sharm el Sheikh with all possible speed. At dawn the following morning, the paratroop battalion moved out of Ras Sudar and reached El Tur at noon. It was this unit that was to take part in the final pincer movement against the Egyptian stronghold. The two companies of reserve paratroops and the infantry battalion already at El Tur were evacuated in the course of the morning by Air Transport Command. A lot of their equipment, including their jeeps, had been badly damaged during the air drop and they were consequently ill-prepared to go into action.

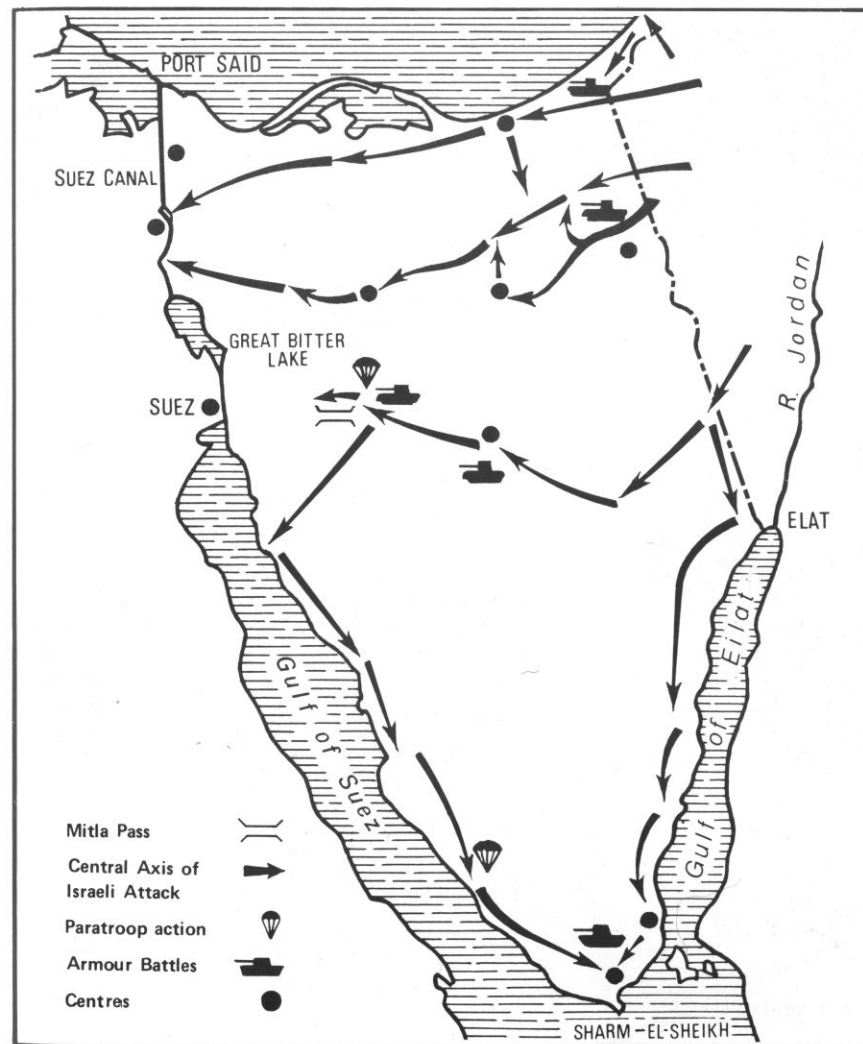
The 9th Infantry Brigade meanwhile was rapidly approaching Ras Nasrani, where the Israelis expected to meet stiff resistance. Ras Nasrani, with its battery of big naval guns commanding the Straits of Tiran and the approaches to the Gulf of Akaba, was an important strategic position. At 1200, five Mustangs showered the Egyptian defences with napalm in what was meant to be a softening-up attack. On their return to base, the pilots reported that there had been a complete lack of anti-aircraft fire. It was hardly surprising; the 400-strong Egyptian garrison had already fallen back on Sharm el Sheikh having spiked their naval guns.

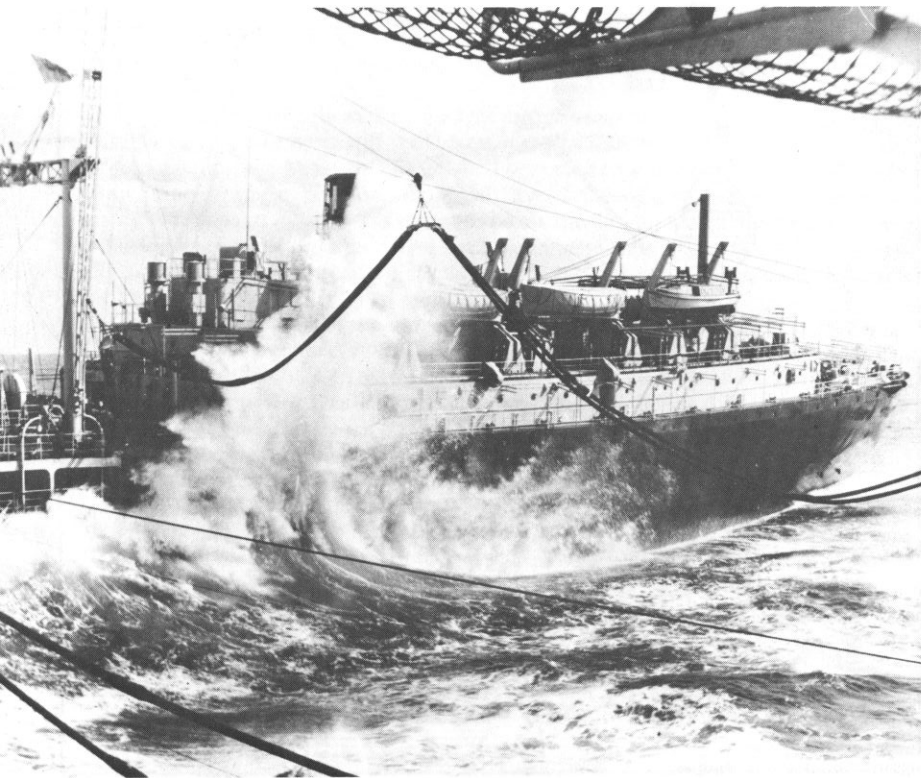
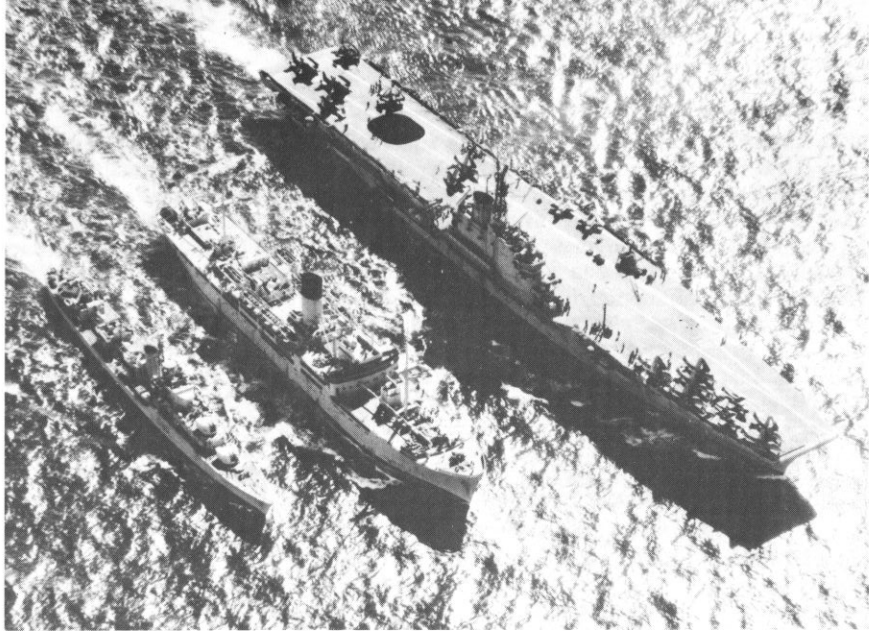
The Israeli column pressed on and arrived opposite the perimeter of Sharm el Sheikh at 1400. The leading elements were pinned down by heavy fire from an outpost, but this gave no further trouble after two Mustangs hit it with 32 rockets an hour later. The Israeli Air Force made several more attacks on Sharm el Sheikh during the remainder of the afternoon while the Israeli ground forces regrouped and refuelled in readiness for another assault. By nightfall Sharm el Sheikh was shrouded in a pall of smoke and its defenders were battered and dazed by the continual onslaught.

The first ground attack opened at 0330 on 5 November and was quickly pinned down by heavy Egyptian fire. The Israelis withdrew after sustaining some losses to wait until daybreak before launching another assault. At 0700 the infantry moved forward again with Mustangs, Ouragans and Mystères strafing ahead of them in an almost continuous cab-rank. Under cover of the air attacks the first wave of Israeli infantry reached the wire on the western perimeter of Sharm el Sheikh but they were pinned down once again by murderous machine guns. For the next hour the Israelis were involved in some of the most vicious hand-to-hand fighting of the whole campaign as they blasted their way through the wire and stormed into the Egyptian defences under cover of a smoke screen.

At 0830, the paratroop battalion from El Tur arrived and pitched into the fray, and

after that the enemy defences were quickly overrun. The shattered garrison finally surrendered at 0900. About one third of the Egyptian forces had become casualties; there were 200 dead and 300 wounded. At 1130, the Israeli Air Force mounted its last strike mission of the campaign when Mustangs and Ouragans attacked the small island of Sanafir, adjacent to Tiran about two miles offshore, and pounded it with rockets and napalm for 20 minutes. Soon afterwards, Israeli troops landed by LCM and made a thorough search of the island; it was deserted. The small Egyptian garrison, not more than a dozen men, had already been taken off before first light. The Sinai mission was over.





Top left: HM light fleet aircraft carrier Albion and destroyer Barfleur on either side of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Retainer when about to transfer stores on 11 November 1956 in the Eastern Mediterranean. / All photographs credited to Imperial War Museum

Left: The Royal Fleet Auxiliary Tiderange coming alongside HMS Albion to refuel.

Above and top: One of HMS Albion's Whirlwind helicopters undergoing a between flights inspection on the flight deck.



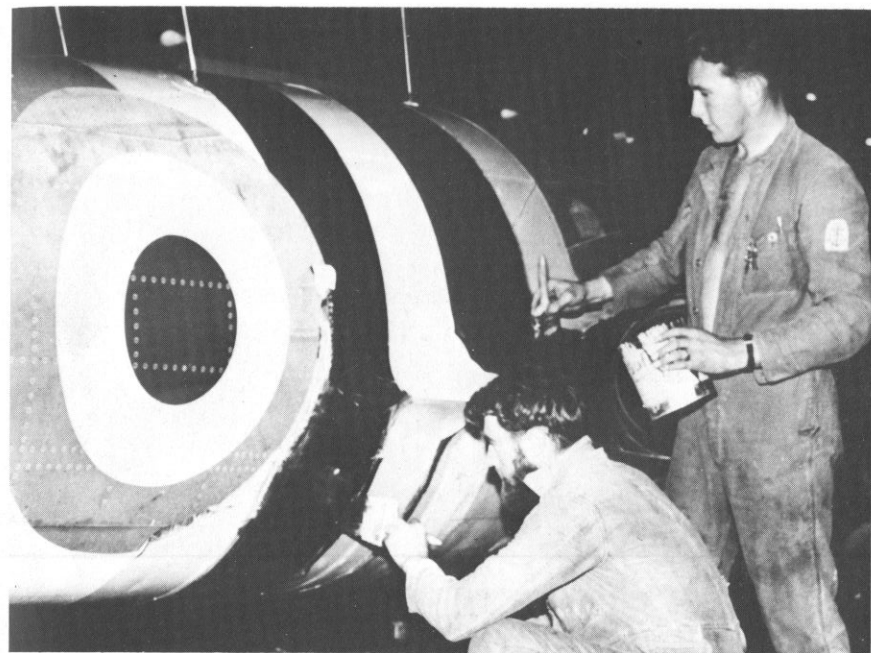
Left: Royal Marine Commandos checking equipment on board HMS *Theseus* before being landed.

Below left: General Stockwell, officer commanding operations in Egypt, addressing aircraft maintenance crews of HMS *Eagle*.

Above: A Sea Hawk of No 802 Naval Air Squadron returning on board HMS *Albion* with its starboard long-range fuel tank damaged, after a sortie over Egypt during the operations in the Canal Zone.

Below: Sea Hawk aircraft of No 800 Naval Air Squadron being rearmed between sorties, on board HMS *Albion*.

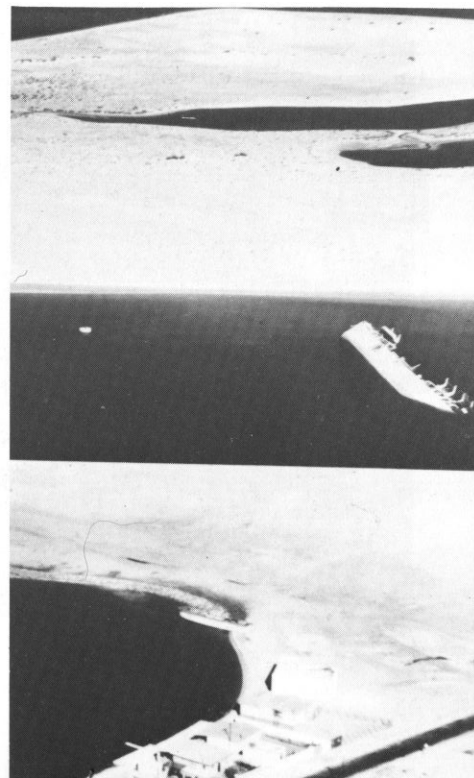


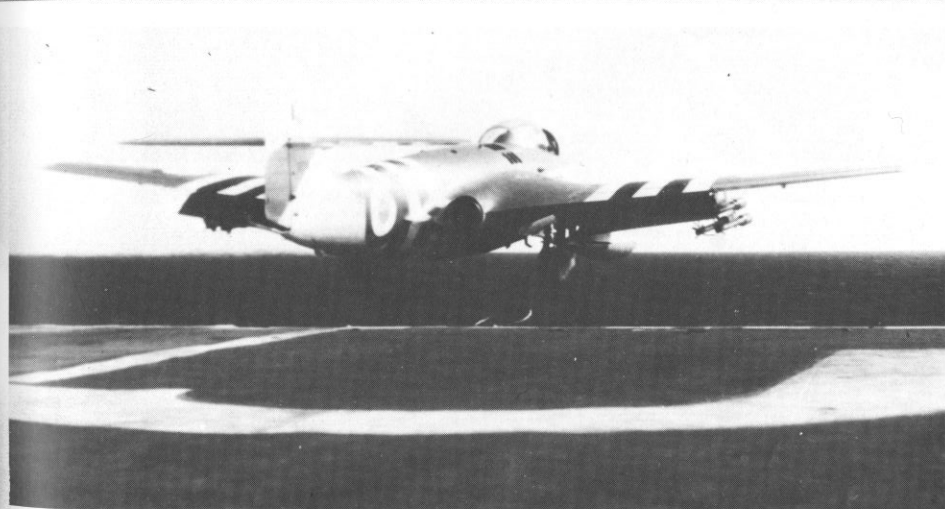


Above left and left: A flak-damaged Sea Venom of No 893 Squadron landing on HMS Eagle with no undercarriage.

Above: A Wyvern strike aircraft of No 830 Squadron gets its Anglo-French identification markings painted on, aboard HMS Eagle.

Right: The first blockship across the Suez Canal.

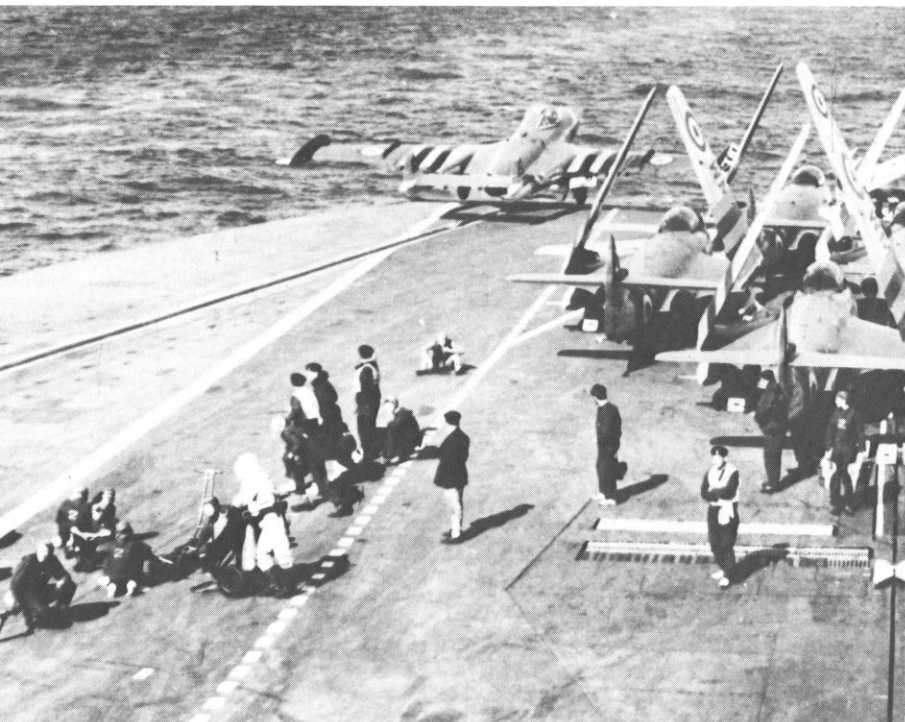




Top left and left: Arming up a Sea Hawk aboard HMS Eagle in preparation for strike on an Egyptian airfield.

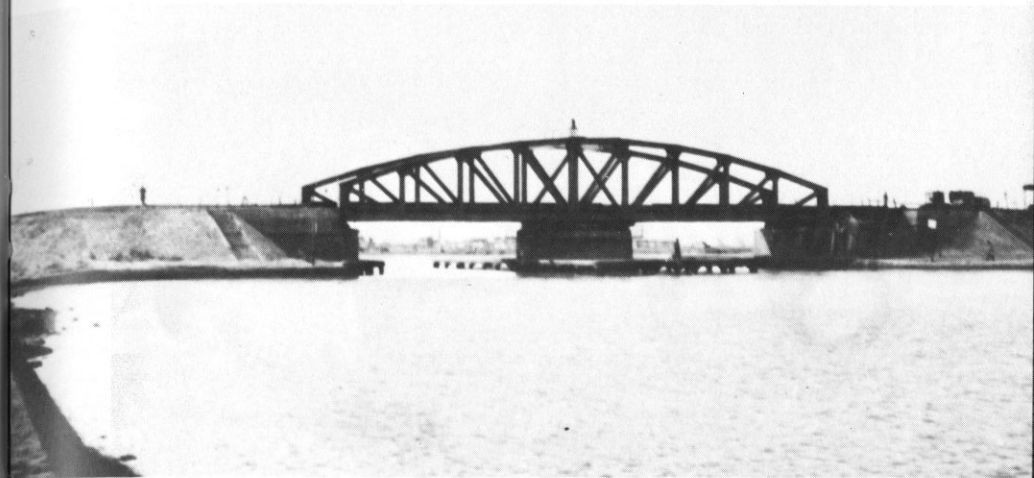
Top: A Sea Hawk of No 899 Squadron HMS Eagle armed with rockets, about to be catapulted for a strike.

Above: A rocket-armed Sea Hawk of No 899 Squadron, HMS Eagle, catapulted for a strike on an Egyptian airfield.



Left: A Sea Venom of No 809 Naval Air Squadron being catapulted from HMS *Albion*.

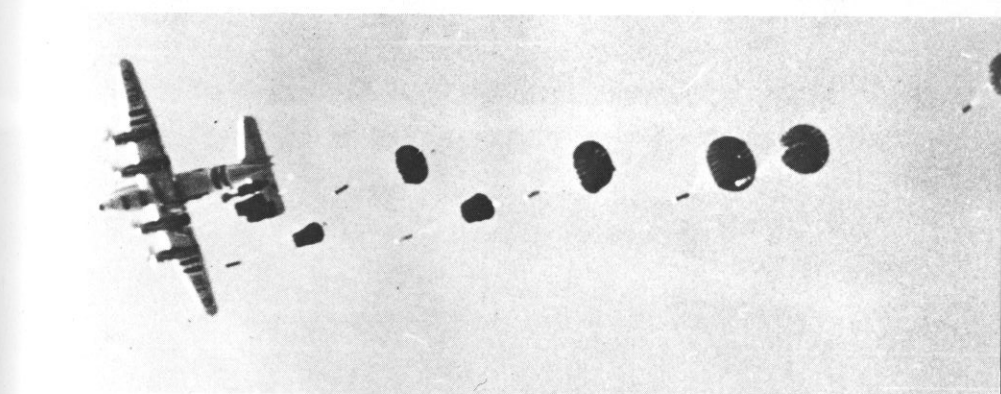
Below left: Fleet Air Arm strike in progress against Gamil airfield.



Above: The swing bridge carrying the road out of Port Said to the south, a French objective taken by coup de main parachute force on 5 November 1956.

Below: El Gamil Airfield on the afternoon of D-Day 5 November 1956, with fighting in the Sewage Farm and cemetery area in progress. Smoke is from RN air strikes.



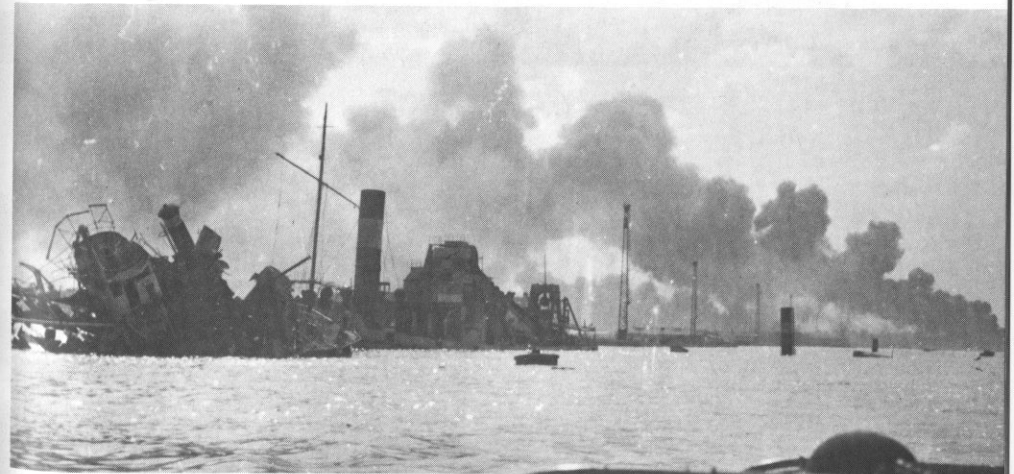


Top left: Picture taken immediately after capture of airfield buildings El Gamil Port Said, 5 November 1956. The first troops had just rushed the buildings whilst other members of the first lift are still seen dropping from the last aircraft.

Left: Men of A Company 3 Para of the first lift of the airborne assault on El Gamil Airfield, Port Said 5 November 1956, move in to take airport buildings. Picture taken at approximately 0520. Drop commenced at 0515 GMT.

Top: CO (Col P. E. Crook) 3 Para and his Tac HQ move into airport building El Gamil Airfield Port Said after the airborne assault.

Above: RAF Hastings dropping CLE containers during the parachute assault on El Gamil Airfield Port Said on 5 November.

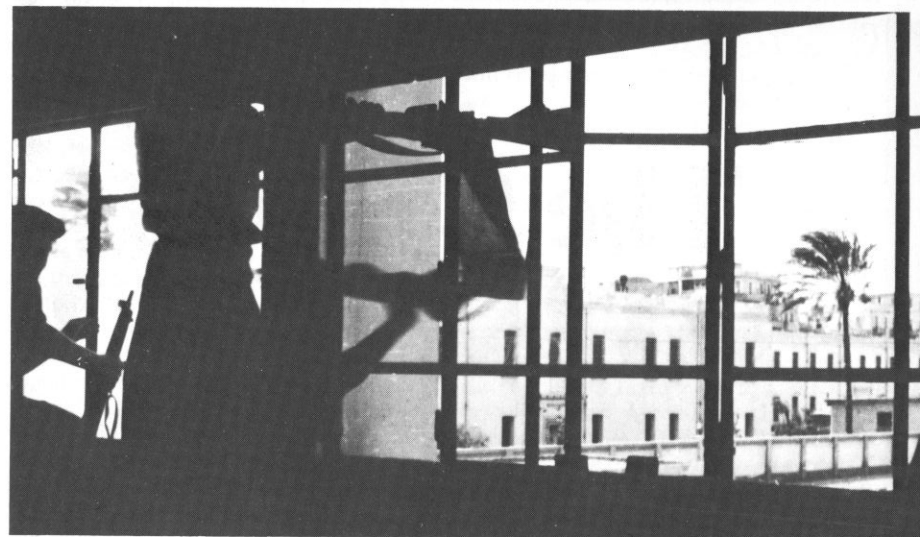


Top left: Men of A Company 3 Para after clearing the airport buildings El Gamil Airfield Port Said, 5 November.

Top: Port Said burning.

Above: View of Port Said from sea.

Left: Aerial photograph of the tank park burning.



Left: Smoke from oil tanks.

Above: Men of 3 Para knocking out windows in order to clear a field of fire during street fighting in Port Said, 6 November.

Below left: E end of cemetery area Port Said showing two 3.7in anti-aircraft guns used by Egyptians against parachute aircraft and to shell the airfield after landing on 5 November. Gun positions overrun by the airborne soldiers (looking towards cemetery).

Below: 32-barrelled Russian rocket launcher used against the parachute soldiers after the assault on El Gamil Airfield and knocked out by RN strike aircraft.



5

The Convoys

During the last 10 days of October, the whole of the Mediterranean was a scene of intense naval activity. On the 19th, units of the French fleet slipped unobtrusively out of Toulon harbour; their crews had been told that they were heading for Bizerta, but in fact the warships rendezvoused secretly off the coast of Cyrenaica.

On the weekend of 27/28 October, troops of the 7e Division Mecanique Rapide embarked at Algiers and sailed for an unspecified rendezvous. In the meantime, ships of the British Mediterranean Fleet had begun to assemble off Malta for a combined naval exercise known as Boathook, and on the 26th the aircraft carriers *HMS Bulwark* and *HMS Eagle* sailed into Valetta harbour while *HMS Albion* stood off to sea. They had been in the vicinity of the island only a matter of hours when they received orders to sail with all speed for the eastern Mediterranean, together with the French carrier *Arromanches*. They arrived on the night of the 31st and took station some 50 miles off Port Said, in readiness for the coming series of air strikes.

On the morning of Sunday 28 October a conference was held between senior officers of the three British services in Malta and orders were issued for a large-scale embarkation exercise in war conditions. Although it was emphasised that this was to be just another routine training exercise, most of those present knew that they were preparing for an actual military operation.

The preparations continued throughout the 29th, the day on which the Israeli forces attacked the Egyptians in Sinai. The embarkation of the troops in Malta began the following morning, and by 0900 on the 31st the main assault force was all embarked and ready to sail. Vessels of the amphibious warfare squadron, totalling eight LSTs and nine LCTs, carried Nos 40 and 42 Commandos and the 6th Royal Tanks, the force that was to spearhead the seaborne assault. No 45 Commando, which was to

carry out a helicopter-borne assault, did not embark until 2 November. The main force set sail before dawn on the Wednesday morning, escorted by warships of the Mediterranean Fleet under the command of Rear-Admiral D. E. Holland-Martin. As soon as the ships were at sea, the troops were informed that they were to take part in a military action against Egypt and that they were the task force assigned to capture Port Said. After months of tedious training, most of the men greeted the news with considerable enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, the 3rd Infantry Division under General Churcher was also embarking aboard troopships in the United Kingdom. This force would still be at sea when the initial assault on Egypt took place. Scheduled to land five days later, its task was to relieve the assault troops and bring the campaign to an end, providing a garrison force for the occupied areas. Still more ships carrying supporting troops, stores and reinforcements came in the wake of the 3rd Division.

The assault force continued on its way, the remainder of the Mediterranean Fleet assembling behind it. Exercise Boathook was now officially cancelled and the warship captains assigned new tasks. On 30 October, the captains of *HMS Theseus* and *HMS Ocean*, who had been en route to Malta to join the exercises, were informed that their next mission would be to carry troops. The carriers arrived in Valetta on Wednesday morning; by Friday evening they had taken on their complement of troops, ammunition and stores and were ready to sail. *HMS Ocean's* complement consisted of the Joint Experimental Helicopter Unit, 600 men of No 215 Wing, RAF Regiment, and half of No 45 Commando; *HMS Theseus* carried the rest of No 45 Commando, the Whirlwind helicopters of No 845 Squadron, and support units such as engineers and administrators whose task would begin once Port Said had been occupied.

The two carriers and their escorts sailed from Malta at 1700 on Saturday 3 November. The voyage was described by Lt Jack Smith, Commander of Z Troop, No 45 Commando:

'The sea passage from Malta to Port Said took three days, an intense period of briefing, rehearsal and preparation. The first day at sea was taken up with briefing and preparing loading tables. In *HMS Ocean* these were complicated because there were two types of helicopters, the Army version of the Whirlwind with a load of only five fully armed men, and the Sycamore capable of carrying three. Each man, as well as carrying his own ammunition, weapon, rations, water, respirator and spare clothing, had to carry some support weapon ammunition. All the Commando's vehicles had already sailed in the slow LST and LCT convoy a week before, and were thus unlikely to join up with the unit for some hours after landing.

'A loaded Sycamore presented an extraordinary sight. The back seats, side panels and unessential fittings had been stripped to increase the lift. The three passengers sat on the floor, one hunched in the middle with six mortar bombs on his lap, and the other two with their legs dangling over the side, each holding a 106mm anti-tank shell about three feet long. The man in the centre was responsible for the two out-board members not falling out. The Whirlwind was a little more orthodox, but there were no seats, doors or windows. The five passengers hung on to any hand hold available. On approaching the landing zone the Bren gunner was ordered to put down suppressive fire out of the window if necessary, while the rifleman covered the area of the door. Communication between troops and pilot in both aircraft was either by shouting or tugging at the pilot's legs.

'The second day at sea was devoted to rehearsing loading drills. The ship was darkened and the troops filed from their mess decks led by guides. The Commando

was assembled in the forward hangar by helicopter sticks in landing waves. The after hangar was used for helicopter maintenance and for stowing the Joint Experimental Helicopter Unit's ground support vehicles.

The helicopters were ranged on crosses on the flight deck. On the order "stand by" the first wave of troops was raised in the lift and led to the sponsons on the starboard side of the flight deck. Then, on "start up", all Whirlwind motors were started. On "emplane", the sticks were led to their helicopters, emplaned, and the stick leader then tugged the pilot's leg, signifying that all was ready. The first wave could take off. A similar procedure was adopted to load the Sycamores.

'During the third day there were further rehearsals, test firing of all automatic weapons, issues of operational ammunition, and inspections. The Commando was now ready to land.'

There could be no question, however, of lifting the whole of 45 Commando in one go, as there were simply not enough helicopters available, and the two standard types were vastly different both in terms of performance and the useful load they could carry. There were two possible alternatives. The first involved sending out the helicopters in a stream, taking off from the carriers, discharging their cargoes individually and then returning for another load. This would help to reduce congestion on the carriers' flight decks, but it would not be feasible if there was strong opposition on the ground. The other alternative was for groups of helicopters to approach the landing zones in formation, discharging their cargoes at the same time, and it was felt that this was the only workable plan if there were still enemy defences to overcome. There were other factors to be taken into consideration, too – including the length of time needed to reinforce the first lift, how close the helicopters could get to the enemy defences without suffering prohibitive casualties, how many casualties might be anticipated as a result of accident or enemy action, and the effect of wind, temperature and humidity on the useful loads the helicopters could carry.

Refuelling was also going to present something of a problem, since the limited space available on the decks of the *Ocean* and *Theseus* meant that only six helicopters could be refuelled at any one time. In its finalised form the helicopter assault plan called for the landing of 200 men in the first wave, with a further 170 landing in the three subsequent waves together with their supporting mortars, machine guns, anti-tank guns and ammunition. Once this assault had been completed, the tempo would be slowed down and the aim then would be to land 415 more men and 20 tons of stores in the following two and a half hours. The plan envisaged that a wave of 22 helicopters would need five minutes to load its sticks of commandos and nine minutes to refuel, but in fact this time was to be reduced during the operation itself.

Both *HMS Ocean* and *HMS Theseus* were shadowed during their voyage by units of the United States Sixth Fleet, led by the heavy cruiser *USS Salem*. There was a brief exchange of signals but the American warships made no move to interfere, contenting themselves with steaming on a parallel course. It was a different story with the main assault force; at an early stage of the passage across the Mediterranean, one of the escorting destroyers detected an unidentified submarine in the vicinity and moved in to attack. The submarine quickly surfaced and hoisted a United States flag before sailing past the Allied ships on a reciprocal course. Other American warships steamed across the bows of the Allied convoys in an obvious attempt at harassment; on one occasion, several North American FJ-4 Furies from one of the American carriers made a series of dummy attacks on the French cruiser *Georges Leygues*, but soon sheered off when the warship's main armament swivelled round to track them.

At this stage, neither the British nor the French knew what instructions had been issued to the commander of the 6th Fleet. For all they knew, the Americans might even be prepared to take aggressive action to prevent the Allied convoys from reaching their destination. Later, Vice-Admiral Brown, the Sixth Fleet's commander, stated that his sole mission in the Eastern Mediterranean was to evacuate United States nationals from the combat area, and to do this he had deployed his forces' in such a way as to defend the ships and aircraft from attack'. Nevertheless, there was no escaping the fact that the activities of the American warships did interfere to some extent with the passage of the Allied convoys, although such actions made no difference to the schedule for the landings.

As far as the Allies were concerned, wartime conditions applied throughout the whole voyage and the ships were darkened at night. When they were not practising their drills, checking ammunition and weapons and attending lengthy briefings, the troops listened avidly to the BBC's news bulletins and to the endless political discussions, and many of them laid bets as to whether the operation would go ahead or not.

In fact, one warship – the New Zealand cruiser *HMNZS Royalist* – was recalled from the operation on the orders of New Zealand's Prime Minister, but the British Government had been informed in advance of his decision and the warship was replaced by the British cruiser *HMS Ceylon*, which arrived in plenty of time to take part in the operation. During the landings the cruiser's guns were to support the British paratroops on Gamil Airfield, her fire directed by a small party of Royal Artillery observers who were dropped with the paratroop battalion.

Meanwhile, on Sunday 4 November, the second echelon of the Allied invasion convoy had sailed from Cyprus. Brigadier Butler's 16th Parachute Brigade Group had been among the first to embark in their tank landing ships and the troopship *Empire Parkston*, and on Sunday morning the vessels formed up in a convoy two miles off Limassol harbour. Now that the operation was finally under way, speed was of the utmost importance and embarkation had to be carried out to a strict schedule. The men were issued with two days' rations which were to sustain them after the landing. Personal equipment was stacked below and heavy equipment lashed to the decks. Operational briefings began even before the ships left their Cypriot harbours and were to continue throughout the whole voyage until every man knew, down to the last detail, what he had to do.

There were a lot of last-minute changes in the loading lists, some items being replaced by others which, it was thought, would be more appropriate. The whole process of loading was further complicated by the limited quay space of the Famagusta docks, where most of the heavy equipment went on board. Some of the merchantmen which had been hired for the operation were also in a sadly antiquated state; their loading equipment was completely inefficient and they were generally unsuited to a military operation. The brunt of the loading operation had to be borne by the Army's Z Craft, and although their crews worked non-stop it was a slow process. The loading of troops and their first-line supporting equipment went off fairly smoothly, but after that the system began to break down. By dusk on Sunday, the whole procedure had become hopelessly entangled and it was not until the middle of the following morning that the loading schedule could be reorganised. This breakdown, together with delays in entering Port Said harbour, resulted in the stores destined for the 16th Parachute Brigade arriving in Egypt exactly three and a half hours before the paratroops were due to embark for the return voyage to Cyprus.

On Sunday evening the ships sailed to join the Malta convoy 100 miles south of

Cyprus. The nine o'clock news that night was followed by a broadcast by the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, which was relayed to the troops over loudspeakers:

'All my life I have been a man of peace, striving for peace and negotiating for peace. I have been a League of Nations man and a United Nations man. And I am still the same man with the same convictions and the same devotion to peace. I could not be other even if I wished, but I am utterly convinced that the action we have taken is right. Our passionate love of peace and our intense loathing of war have often held us back from using force, even at times when we knew in our heads, if not in our hearts, that its use was in the interests of peace. And I believe with all my heart and my head that this is a time for action effective and swift.'

On Monday morning, contact was made with the ships from Malta. That afternoon, the combined convoy joined up with the French and the entire armada moved in towards the Egyptian coast. It was a magnificent sight; the whole sea was black with ships from horizon to horizon, from battleships down to small freighters. That evening the troops, heartened by Eden's broadcast of the previous day, once again settled down to listen to the news. This time, however, the tone was different. The speaker was the Leader of the Opposition, who told of a disastrous policy, and of a Prime Minister utterly discredited in the eyes of the world.

It was hardly suitable propaganda to reach the ears of men on the eve of battle.

6 The Air Attacks

At 2000 on 31 October, Canberra B2 WH853 of No 10 Squadron, operating out of Nicosia, sped southwards at 30,000ft through the Mediterranean darkness towards the Nile Delta. Its target was the Egyptian airfield of Almaza, north of Cairo, and its crew – Flt Lt J. Slater and his two navigators, Flg Offs E. West and G. Harrop – were well aware that a hot reception at the hands of the Egyptian air defence might await them. For some hours now, both Cyprus and Cairo Radios – the latter at the instigation of the Allies – had been warning the Egyptian population that a series of attacks on the airfields near Cairo and in the Canal Zone would begin following the expiry of the Anglo-French ceasefire ultimatum, which the Egyptians had rejected. This, together with a series of high-level photo-reconnaissance sorties over the Nile Delta by the Canberra PR7s of No 13 Squadron during the previous 48 hours, was certain to have placed the Egyptian defences on full alert.

The anticipated reaction from the Egyptian air defences, however, failed to materialise. Visual navigation presented no problem, for every town in the Nile Delta was ablaze with light. Within minutes, Slater had picked out Almaza, clearly marked by a cluster of red target indicators dropped by another Canberra a few miles ahead, and began his run-in. As the navigator released the full 500lb bomb load some flak started to come up, but it only reached a height of about 8,000ft. Its mission completed, the Canberra turned and headed back towards Cyprus; its crew kept a wary eye open for night-fighters, but none was encountered.

It was only after the first bombs fell that the Egyptians began to impose some pretence of a blackout. Meanwhile, the air offensive continued. Throughout the hours of darkness, four airfields in the Nile Delta – Almaza, Bilbeis, Cairo West and Inchass – and eight in the Suez Canal Zone – Abu Sueir, Deversoir, Fayid, Gamil, Ismailia,

Kabrit, Shallufah and Suez – were attacked by the Canberras of Nos 10 and 12 Squadrons and the Valiants of No 148, the latter operating out of Malta. For the Valiants, the mission involved a five-hour, 1,800-mile round trip, with an average of 15 minutes spent in the target area. For the most part the bombers attacked singly from 40,000ft or more to minimise the risk of interception, and in many cases their 500lb and 1,000lb bombs went considerably wide of the mark. Most of the bomber crews made two runs over the target to ensure adequate identification, great emphasis having been placed on reducing Egyptian casualties to a minimum. All the targets were marked by red TIs, dropped by 'pathfinder' Canberras.

Throughout the entire series of air attacks only two Egyptian night-fighters, both of them Meteor NF13s, were sighted by individual bomber crews; the first by a Canberra of No 12 Squadron and the second by a Valiant of No 148. In the first case, the enemy fighter made no attempt to attack but simply circled at a respectful distance before diving away into the darkness. In the second, an NF13 fired two bursts of inaccurate tracer at the Valiant, captained by Grp Capt L. M. Hodges, DSO; the bomber pilot took swift evasive action and the fighter vanished.

It was not until much later that the Allies learned the principal reason why the Egyptians had not offered combat on the expected scale. The Egyptians and their Eastern Bloc 'advisers' had in fact made good use of the Allied warning period, and by the time the first bombs fell on the night of the 31st most of the serviceable MiG-15s and Il-28s had been hastily flown out of the danger area by Russian, Czech and Egyptian crews.

From Kabrit, 20 MiGs and 20 Il-28s – which had been in transit, destined for the Syrian Air Force – flew to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, accompanied by 10 Egyptian MiG-15s and followed up by 10 Ilyushin Il-14 twin-engined transports. After refuelling, they went on to their Syrian bases. Twenty Egyptian Il-28s were evacuated south to Luxor, on the Red Sea coast, but they were unlucky; they had been there less than 48 hours when F-84F Thunderstreaks of the Armee de l'Air's 1ere Escadre, operating out of Lydda with long-range tanks, swept over the Gulf of Suez and destroyed all 20 bombers with rockets and cannon fire.

This large-scale air exodus, however, was not the only reason for the lack of Egyptian opposition. Two ex-RAF officers, Sidney Brisk and David Larcombe, who had been employed as civilian instructors to the Egyptian Air Force since the end of 1955 and who were still there at the height of the crisis, later gave their impressions:

'When the call to action came in October, there were certainly no more than 500 pilots in Egypt who were capable of flying operationally, and probably the total figure was more like 200. The shortage of trained pilots was evident from the fact that all the Egyptian instructors at the college were called up for squadron service the moment any trouble seemed to be brewing. The number of pilots capable of flying the Russian jet planes must have been very much smaller than 200, for the Egyptians had great difficulty in mastering the MiGs and Il-28s properly. When they found they could not get the Russian planes down on the runway, their only solution was to make the runway longer. If this did not suffice, they made the runway longer still.

'Our opportunities for observing just what was going on began to be limited about March 1956. At this time we became aware that our movements were being watched and that we needed to be careful what remarks we passed in the company of Egyptians. We knew for a fact, however, that MiGs were stationed at Fayid, Almaza and Cairo West. There were Il-28s at Cairo West and one or two at Inchass. But when the build-up of Russian planes at Cairo West Airfield began to be too obvious to

passers-by on the main road to Alexandria, the road was diverted so that travellers would no longer get within sighting distance of the airfield.

'When the British ultimatum came, the first reaction of the Egyptians with whom we were working was one of frank disbelief. They were certain it was a bluff. Then when the RAF bombers appeared the Egyptians were completely shattered. If you ask why the Egyptian Air Force did not take to the air against the attackers, there is one simple answer; the RAF had played an ungentlemanly trick by launching their attack at night. The Egyptians did not like flying in the dark. In fact, they never flew the MiGs or Il-28s at night; and when weather conditions were at all unfavourable, all flying was automatically cancelled. No flying was allowed to take place unless there was a doctor at the airfield.

'After the British night attacks had stunned the Egyptians into inactivity, came the renewed daylight offensive at first light of dawn. We saw Egyptian pilots gazing into the sky at the British bombers and remarking wistfully that something should be done about them. But it never occurred to them to take to the air themselves. In fact, so chaotic was the communications system that there seemed to be no one with the necessary authority to order the fighters to scramble.

'When it became evident that the British threat was not bluff, the BBC broadcasts were listened to avidly. As soon as it was announced that a certain place was to be bombed, the Egyptians solidly moved out. During the bombing of Bilbeis the villagers moved into the airfield and stole as much furniture and equipment as they could lay their hands on. Afterwards, when we asked one of our own cadets how this had happened and how the villagers had got past the sentries, we were told that all the airfield's personnel had been "busy hiding".

'But the tragic thing is that, in spite of the obvious success of the RAF attacks, the Egyptians firmly believed they had won a great victory. Loudspeakers in the streets were pouring out propaganda day and night. The Egyptians were told that the RAF lost 185 aircraft during the raids – and the majority of the population believed it.'

An hour before daybreak, while the last of the night's high altitude attacks were still under way, Venom FB4s of Nos 6,32, 73 and 249 Squadrons, together with French Air Force Thunderstreaks of the 3e Escadre, were taking off from Akrotiri and winging southwards to maintain the offensive. At the same time, 50 miles off the Egyptian coast, the aircraft carriers *Albion*, *Bulwark* and *Eagle* had turned into wind and were preparing to launch their first air strikes of the campaign, having held their Wyverns, Seahawks and Sea Venoms at readiness for some hours.

At precisely 0403 GMT, with the rising sun catching the contrails of the last of the high-level bombers as they headed for Cyprus and Malta, the land and carrier-based fighter-bombers made simultaneous attacks on the airfields of Inchass, Almaza, Dekheila near Alexandria and the Canal Zone airfields of Abu Sueir, Fayid and Kasfareet. These attacks, made with rockets and cannon fire, caused massive damage compared with the high-level attacks of the previous night. The Egyptians were taken completely by surprise and the fighter-bombers, attacking at low level through light flak and small arms fire, succeeded in knocking out several hangars, fuel dumps and gun installations, as well as destroying a number of aircraft that had been left behind in the night's evacuation eastwards. These included eight Ilyushin Il-28s and five MiG-15s, all of them parked in full view by the sides of runways. A planned attack on Cairo West, where there were known to be a number of Il-28s, was cancelled at the last minute when the strike aircraft were already airborne because of the reported presence of American nationals travelling along the adjacent road for evacuation.

At noon on 1 November, the Jordanian Government informed Britain that the RAF bases at Amman and Mafraq could not be used in the air offensive against Egypt – an anticipated reaction. During the day's operations, an Egyptian tank landing craft under tow as a blockship was attacked by carrier-borne aircraft and later sank in Lake Timsah, where it partially blocked the Canal. French Corsair fighter-bombers from the *Arromanches* also attacked an Egyptian Skoryi class destroyer, which was set on fire. The Fleet Air Arm flew a total of 355 sorties during the day, and subsequent photo-reconnaissance revealed 50 Egyptian aircraft destroyed and 40 damaged. Although a few sightings of Egyptian fighters were reported, none of them interfered with the Allied fighter-bombers, all of which returned safely to their bases.

The 1st also saw the first naval action of the campaign, when the Egyptian frigate *Domiat* opened fire on the British cruiser *Newfoundland* in the Gulf of Suez. The *Newfoundland* returned the fire with her main armament, and after a brief engagement the Egyptian warship turned over and sank.

The air offensive followed much the same pattern for the next 72 hours. Attacks on the 12 major Egyptian airfields continued in strength for two more nights. Towards the end the night bomber missions were carried out at medium level, which allowed greater bombing precision; these were generally attended by far greater success than had been registered when the raids started. In an endeavour to keep casualties to a minimum, personnel at all the Egyptian airfields were warned in advance by Cyprus radio that raids were imminent.

Widespread raids by RAF Valiants and Canberras continued throughout the night of 1/2 November. Cairo West airfield was attacked for the first time by the Valiants of No 138 Squadron, commanded by Wg Cdr R.G.W. Oakley, DSO, AFC, DFM. There was no enemy opposition and the bombing was highly accurate, several sticks falling across the runway intersections. At the same time a force of Canberras of No 27 Squadron, under Sqn Ldr Peter Helmore, destroyed Cairo Radio's transmitters in a pinpoint attack. With the onset of daylight Allied fighter-bombers struck at the Egyptian flying training school at Bilbeis and Air Force installations at Helwan and Heliopolis; in these operations Fleet Air Arm aircraft were joined by French Thunderstreaks, Corsairs and Skyraiders. Fighter-bombers also attacked the artillery barracks at Almaza in the face of intense anti-aircraft fire.

The crews of the naval aircraft were averaging four sorties a day, alternating their strike missions with spells of combat air patrol. The timing achieved in flying off the naval strike aircraft was superlative; every 20 minutes, as regular as clockwork, the carriers of the naval task force, steaming at 30 knots in a fixed pattern, turned their bows into wind to enable aircraft to be launched or landed on while the hours of daylight lasted. The French carriers *Lafayette* and *Arromanches*, whose Corsairs and Skyraiders had a longer range than the British strike aircraft, operated further out to sea than their British counterparts; nevertheless, a high degree of coordination was achieved.

After taking off from their carriers the strike aircraft formed up in squadrons and climbed to 20,000ft, generally approaching the target in a long run out of the sun. Because of range considerations, almost all the targets attacked by the naval strike aircraft lay between Cairo and the coast. Objectives further afield were left to the Valiants and Canberras and to the F-84F Thunderstreaks of the French Air Force, operating from Israeli bases.

The problem of range was to limit the effectiveness of some of the combat aircraft based on Cyprus, particularly the Hawker Hunters of Nos 1 and 34 Squadrons and the Meteors of No 39 Squadron. These aircraft were used to fly combat air patrols over

Egypt during 2 November, but their limited endurance did not allow sufficient time over the target areas and they were not used again. During the rest of the operation the Hunters and Meteors, together with Mystères of the French Air Force, were employed on quick reaction alert at Akrotiri and Nicosia, their pilots sweltering under the hot sun as they sat strapped in their cockpits, ready to take-off and intercept any Egyptian aircraft that appeared.

Radar stations and anti-aircraft crews on Cyprus remained on full alert throughout the Allied air attacks and subsequent landings in case of retaliatory raids by Egyptian jet bombers. Cyprus was in easy range of the EAF's Ilyushin Il-28s, and at this stage it was not known to what extent the Egyptian jet bomber force had suffered in the air strikes, or that large numbers of Nasser's combat aircraft had already been evacuated from the danger zone.

It was probably just as well that the enemy bombers never came. Only one attempt was made to carry out a practice air-raid drill in Famagusta, and that resulted in a panic-stricken riot in the docks area. Troops trying to close the dock gates as part of the air-raid drill were almost trampled to death by a frantic horde of dock workers, fleeing for their lives. Air strikes by Egyptian aircraft would almost certainly have wrought untold havoc on the principal Cypriot airfields, where the volume of air activity was fantastic with aircraft taking-off at the rate of one per minute.

Meanwhile, flying at heights of 35,000ft or more over the combat areas, photo-reconnaissance Canberra PR7s of the RAF's No 13 Squadron and RF-84Fs of the Armée de l'Air's 33e Escadre continued their surveillance of targets included in the attack programme, bringing back detailed information after every new air strike. Low-level reconnaissance sorties were carried out by Navy Sea Hawks, gathering information on the enemy defences in readiness for the coming landings. In fact, so much information was brought back by the photo-recce aircraft that the Allied intelligence staffs were unable to process it all in time to provide full tactical briefings for subsequent strikes. Moreover, tactical air reconnaissance – which had functioned like a well-oiled machine during the latter part of World War II – had been allowed to gather cobwebs for some time, and the air operations had been going on for at least 48 hours before anything like an efficient system was worked out.

These high-flying reconnaissance aircraft could have proved easy meat for the Egyptian MiG-15s had the latter chosen to oppose them in strength. As it was, two Canberra PR7s of No 13 Squadron were intercepted by MiG-15s on the morning of Thursday 1 November. One of the Canberras was damaged by cannon fire but succeeded in getting back to base without further incident, and the other outclimbed its pursuer and escaped unharmed. Another No 13 Squadron Canberra was not so fortunate: it was shot down by a MiG-15 while on a photo-reconnaissance mission over Syria, gathering evidence of the build-up of MiGs and Il-28s on Syrian airfields. It is almost certain that the MiG was flown by either a Russian or a Czech pilot, for at the time of the Suez operation no Syrians had been fully trained to fly the Russian fighter. The MiG must also have been an evacuated Egyptian aircraft, for all the jet fighters earmarked for delivery to Syria had in fact been based on the Egyptian airfields of Almaza and Abu Sueir while their pilots underwent conversion, and only four – all MiG-15UTI trainers – escaped the Anglo-French air strikes.

By nightfall on 2 November, the Egyptian Air Force had virtually ceased to exist as a fighting force, which meant that the Allied fighter-bombers could now be released from the attacks on enemy airfields in search of new targets. The latter included units of the Egyptian Navy at Alexandria, which were scheduled for attack by Corsairs from

the French carrier *Arromanches*, but this had to be cancelled at the last minute because of the presence of American warships, which had arrived to evacuate US nationals.

Aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm maintained their attacks on airfields, but with diminished ferocity; they also carried out a series of strikes on other objectives, including the Huckstep barracks near Cairo, where photo-reconnaissance by Seahawks had revealed over 1,000 tanks, armoured cars and lorries parked in neat lines in a large compound.

In the course of their sorties on 3 November, the Navy's Sea Hawks and Wyverns created untold devastation; when they had finished their task the barracks lay under a pall of smoke caused by rivers of burning fuel. At the Al Maya artillery barracks, a concentration of guns and vehicles was knocked out by Venoms and Corsairs, while the radar station at Abu Sultan was destroyed by French Air Force Thunderstreaks. Just before nightfall the Canberras of Bomber Command made their longest penetration so far, bombing Luxor airfield in the south.

On Saturday 3 November, *HMS Albion* was withdrawn for refuelling in readiness for the impending sea and airborne landings, and targets around Port Said were attacked by aircraft from the remaining carriers. Egyptian forces, many of them withdrawn from Sinai, were flooding into the Cairo area, and the weight of the Allied fighter-bomber offensive was now directed against lines of communication. The roads running from the west towards Port Said soon became blocked with burnt-out transport and armoured fighting vehicles. The approach across Lake Manzala was attacked by rocket-firing Venoms and destroyed. The task of the fighter-bomber pilots was now complicated by the fact that the roads were choked with masses of refugees, streaming away from the Canal Zone, and great care had to be exercised to avoid attacking columns of civilians by mistake.

By the end of the day, enemy communications had ground to an almost complete standstill. The fighter-bombers struck at every known military centre. The vital marshalling yards at Nefisha near Ismailia, on the main Cairo-Port Said railway line, were heavily attacked and blocked by bomb craters and derailed rolling stock. During these attacks a RAF Venom failed to pull out of a dive and struck the ground, exploding with the loss of its pilot, Flt Lt A.E. Sheehan. A Royal Navy Wyvern was hit by anti-aircraft fire and staggered out over the coast, losing height and smoking. The pilot bailed out safely and spent an uncomfortable 30 minutes in the water, floating two miles off the coast, while the Port Said garrison shelled him with field artillery. Despite the efforts of the Egyptians he was successfully picked up by a Whirlwind helicopter from *HMS Eagle*, cruising over the horizon.

Pilots returning from air strikes reported that the accuracy of the enemy anti-aircraft fire had now improved considerably, no doubt as the Egyptian gunners got used to coping with aircraft speeds of 300-400mph. Since this growing efficiency posed a serious threat to the slow-flying transport aircraft which were to carry out the airdrop on the following Monday, the strike aircraft were detailed to silence as many of the anti-aircraft batteries as possible, particularly around Port Said. It was a difficult and dangerous task, and many of the aircraft returned to their carriers or to their bases in Cyprus with varying degrees of battle damage. The intense ground fire accounted for another Wyvern, two Sea Hawks and a French Thunderstreak and Corsair. Both the French pilots were killed, as was one of the Sea Hawk pilots; the others were safely picked up by helicopters from the carriers.

On the morning of Sunday 4 November, *HMS Albion* returned to station and *HMS Eagle* withdrew into the Mediterranean for replenishment, making rendezvous with a fleet auxiliary operating in support of the task force south of Crete. *Eagle's* crew made

use of the break to repair the carrier's starboard catapult, which had been out of action during the whole operation. She returned to station that night, fully serviceable.

Meanwhile, shortly before nightfall, Sea Hawks from *HMS Bulwark* had made a successful attack on three Egyptian motor torpedo boats, which had been reported by air reconnaissance to be heading out of Alexandria in the direction of the naval task force. Using rockets and cannon fire, the Sea Hawks sank two of the MTBs and damaged the third, which they then permitted to pick up survivors and return to Alexandria.

During Sunday afternoon, in readiness for the airborne assault, the air offensive was switched against the defences of Port Said, which were attacked by wave after wave of carrier-borne aircraft and fighter-bombers from Cyprus. The latter also struck at a concentration of Russian-built tanks and self-propelled guns which lay close to the Pyramids. Fighter-bombers operating in pairs maintained constant patrols along the roads and railways leading into Port Said, but they spotted little in the way of enemy movements and targets were becoming increasingly difficult to find.

The last two offensive operations on Sunday were carried out by Valiants and Canberras from Malta and Cyprus, one against coastal guns and radar installations on El Agami island near Alexandria – intended to divert Egyptian attention from the Port Said area – and the other against the Huckstep Barracks, adding to the devastation caused by the strike aircraft on Friday. Also under cover of darkness, a lone Hastings from Cyprus dropped half a million leaflets on Cairo, urging the Egyptian Government to accept the Allied proposals.

As night fell over Cyprus, ground crews worked flat out to service the Hastings and Valettas of RAF Transport Command and get them on top line for the coming operation, while men of the 16th Parachute Brigade Group made last-minute studies of target maps and photographs. By this time there was no doubt that the Egyptian Air Force had practically ceased to exist, and it was not thought that the parachute drop would meet any air opposition. Port Said had been completely cut off by the constant air strikes, preventing the Egyptian Army from reinforcing the garrison, and many armoured concentrations which might have presented a serious threat to the allied landings had been decimated.

On the carriers and the Cyprus airfields, the fighter-bomber pilots snatched a few hours' sleep. Their first task had been successfully accomplished, but with the coming of morning they would be committed at maximum strength to provide close support for the allied forces – a role that left little margin for error.

7 The Air-drop

In Cyprus, the last week in October saw the men of the British 16th Parachute Brigade involved in yet another police action against the bands of EOKA terrorists concealed in the densely wooded Troodos Mountains. It was a frustrating task; for the most part, terrorists who knew the woods and valleys like the backs of their hands were easily able to evade the ambushes laid by the paratroops. Nevertheless, by the 27th the operation was beginning to produce some results, and the British net was beginning to close on several terrorist hideouts.

At that moment – inexplicably to the men engaged in the mission – the whole operation was brought to an abrupt end, and the paratroops were ordered to return to their base to take part in a training exercise. Brigade Headquarters staff knew that the brigade was, in fact, earmarked for an operation overseas but only the brigadier and his brigade major knew that Egypt was to be the objective.

The unit selected to spearhead the allied invasion was the 3rd Battalion under Col Paul Crook. Its target was Gamil, the airfield on the outskirts of Port Said. The choice of a single battalion was dictated by the fact that the airfields on Cyprus simply could not cope with transport aircraft in sufficient numbers to lift a force of more than battalion strength; the remainder of the brigade would have to be ferried to the combat zone later either by air or sea.

Although the morale of the men was generally good, some of the senior officers viewed the coming operation with misgivings. Hardly any of the men had experience of carrying out a parachute drop under combat conditions; the last time British paratroops had carried out such an operation had been during the crossing of the Rhine in 1945. Much of their equipment, too, was sadly out of date, from the weapons they carried to the aircraft that were to take them into action. The latter were piston-

engined Hastings and Valettas, types which had been in service for the best part of a decade. Although they were admirable aircraft in their own way, it could not be claimed by any stretch of the imagination that these workhorses of RAF Transport Command were adequate for the rapid transportation of the Parachute Brigade to virtually any part of the world under combat conditions; and when all was said and done, the establishment of just one parachute brigade as Britain's airborne strategic reserve was pitifully small in view of Britain's world-wide commitments.

Although both the Army and the RAF had for some time been advocating the establishment of a powerful strategic airborne reserve and the provision of aircraft capable of ferrying it and its full supporting equipment to any destination at a few hours notice, the equipment of Transport Command had remained sadly depleted when compared with that of the other RAF operational commands. In 1956 the re-equipment of the RAF, with its emphasis on the building-up of the V-force and the ability to deliver nuclear weapons, was wholly influenced by thoughts on nuclear strategy. The plain fact was that the British armed forces were no longer fit to fight a conventional war on anything like a large scale. Nevertheless, the Airborne Brigade would have to make the best of the equipment at its disposal, even though it meant a great deal of frustration from the logistics point of view.

The use of the Hastings and Valetta – both of which had side-loading freight doors, unlike the transport aircraft in services with other major air forces – meant that the type of heavy equipment which could be transported in support of the airborne battalion was severely limited, with no possibility of dropping heavy guns and transport. Even ammunition and supplies which, in the case of tail-loading aircraft, could simply be rolled out of the rear door on platforms and parachuted down in bulk, had to be packed into special containers which were slung under the fuselages of the Hastings and Valettas. Packaging of these supplies was in itself a major operation, involving countless man-hours and necessitating the fitting of special delivery equipment to the transport aircraft. The only transport capable of being dropped by the Hastings was the old wartime jeep, which had to be brought out of mothballs for the operation.

Even then the aircraft, overladen with paratroops, could handle only a few of these vehicles. Much of the material necessary to support the airborne operation was in fact carried by the paratroops themselves, who were to go into action festooned with over 100lb of equipment in addition to their parachutes and harnesses. The flight out to the dropping zone would, to say the least, be uncomfortable.

In the matter of weapons, too, the British paratroops were at a disadvantage. They used standard British infantry equipment, which meant that their arms and ammunition had, for the most part, to be dropped in separate containers. Only the Sten gun could be carried during the actual drop, and even this practice had been discontinued because it was feared that the gun might become entangled in the harness of the parachute or interfere with the static line and cause an accident. This lack of small arms support and the resulting inability to return any fire from the ground meant that the paratroops would be at the mercy of the enemy defenders on the way down; a serious state of affairs since the drops were to be made right on the heads of the Egyptians. Once on the ground there would be a further delay while the paratroops, taking advantage of whatever cover they could find, broke open the weapon containers and extracted their contents.

The French paratroops were far better equipped, both in terms of hardware and training. Whereas the British paratroops usually carried out only one large-scale training exercise a year, the French training programme called for a drop at least once a month. Their standard transport aircraft was the Nord Noratlas; a twin-boom, twin-

engined machine with tail-loading doors which could carry either 35 fully equipped parachutists together with their personal equipment and support weapons, or platform loads of vehicles and artillery.

French operational techniques were also far less rigid than those of their British counterparts. The Paras, benefitting from years of operational experience under combat conditions in Indo-China and Algeria, were equipped with specially-designed rifles and sub-machine guns with folding butts, enabling them to be carried across the chest during the parachute descent, so that when the paratrooper landed he could go into action immediately. Because of a lack of formality, with no inspection prior to the drop of a stick of parachutists, the French were also able to make their exit from an aircraft far more quickly. Five minutes before the drop, when the red warning light came on inside the aircraft, the parachutists would carry out an impromptu check of each others' harness and equipment and then, on the signal of the green light, they would jump in two streams from both sides of the Noratlas's fuselage with one parachutist following right on the heels of the man in front. This meant that a complete stick of 17 paras could exit from an aircraft in 10 seconds, which in turn meant that under favourable conditions, the stick would be spread out over no more than half a mile. A typical stick of 15 British paratroops, carried by the Hastings, took 20 seconds to leave the aircraft and were spread out over one mile.

In the late afternoon of 29 October, General Andre Beaufre, who was to command the French task force during the Suez operation, arrived in Cyprus with his staff. The following morning it was learned that the Israeli attack in Sinai had begun, and General Beaufre issued the necessary orders to Colonel Simon, his representative in Tel Aviv, to carry out supply operations on behalf of the Israelis with the aid of the French Air Force transport unit based on Israeli airfields.

The French airborne task force that was to take part in the Suez operation had been in Cyprus since the end of August, and the Paras were desperately keen to go into action. Beaufre's arrival sent a wave of optimism through the men; at last, they thought, the long wait would be over. It was not to be. The operation was to be subjected to further delays while Beaufre and the British commanders thrashed out the final details of the plan. At noon on the 30th, the other senior allied field commanders, General Hugh Stockwell and Admiral Barjot, also arrived at Episkopi, and later that afternoon the first joint operations meeting was held. Part of the conference was devoted to a study of the latest intelligence reports from Egypt, which told of reinforcements of the Canal Zone. The remainder was devoted to the question of rapid intervention by airborne forces should the Egyptian army collapse at an early date.

Afterwards, General Beaufre drafted a directive for his commanders in the field, Generals Gilles and Massu, outlining the operational plan. On D-Day one French regiment was to be dropped on Port Fuad. On D+1 another regiment would go down on El Qantara and on D+2 a third regiment on El Qantara or further to the south. The British meanwhile would land 2,500 men of the Marine Commandos. The idea behind this directive was that the airborne forces should compensate for the delay in committing the seaborne task force.

The next day, in the wake of the delivery of the Anglo-French ultimatum to the Egyptians and Israelis, the Allied commanders held two meetings in Cyprus with the object of drawing up an emergency plan to capture Port Said should the Egyptian army collapse. The plan, known as 'Omelette', called for a British parachute drop on Gamil, together with a helicopter assault by Royal Marine Commandos on the approaches to the south of the town, and a French parachute drop on Port Fuad – the latter possibly supported by naval gunfire. The airborne spearhead could be reinforced

by further French parachute drops – first on Gamil, then the next day on El Qantara and possibly Ismailia – while the remainder of the 16th British Parachute Brigade could also be brought in by sea. With their initial objective secured these forces would then turn on Port Said, which – with the support of the guns of the British and French fleets – was expected to succumb quickly. In this way it was hoped that the Canal Zone could be occupied within 24 hours, before the Egyptians had time to recover or regroup sufficiently to offer any serious resistance, and that the forces in position would be able to hold on until the arrival of the main convoys some days later.

The main point about Omelette was that it could only be carried out in the event of the Egyptians offering no opposition; in other words, it was an emergency plan for occupation, not for assault. The actual plan of attack was still Musketeer, or at least a revised version of it, and the seal of approval still had to be set on a number of final details. To this end, the allies held a number of conferences on 31 October and 1 November. The first obstacle was the date; up to now the French had been proceeding on the basis that the landings were to take place on 6 November. However, the French Navy, having solicited British opinions more closely, believed that the landings would not take place until the 8th. Mainly as the result of French pressure, the British were now reluctantly prepared to go ahead on the 6th and all the allied convoys could be in position off the Egyptian coast by that time. If speed became of the utmost importance, and if a rendezvous between the troopships and assault craft was carried out at sea off Cyprus, then the landings could be brought forward 24 hours and could take place on the 5th. The airborne operation in turn could be launched on the 4th, or possibly 24 hours earlier than that.

This proposal, however, met with considerable opposition from both the British and French naval commanders. Admiral Durnford-Slater for his part was afraid that the capture of Port Fuad would make it impossible to employ naval counterfire in support of the Port Said operation, while the French Admiral Lancelot pointed out that a landing on the 5th would not permit his minesweepers sufficient time to clear the waters in front of the beaches, and without this he was unwilling to send his craft ashore.

As a result of these discussions, the date of the landing was fixed definitely for the 6th, but the idea of an earlier airborne drop remained a distinct possibility. Early on 2 November, Admiral Barjot took General Beaufre to one side and told him that the French Government was pressing for the operation to go ahead as soon as possible. Soon afterwards, the Allied commanders conferred yet again, and the picture that emerged was a gloomy one. In Port Said the Egyptian defences were being strengthened by units which had not yet been committed to the battles in Sinai, and by other units which had escaped the Israeli trap and managed to reach the west bank of the canal. In addition, there were known to be a substantial number of Soviet-built tanks at Port Said, an unfavourable situation to be faced by a relatively weak airborne force relying on carrier-based fighter-bombers for its sole support. In particular, the possibility of strong enemy opposition rendered the novel idea of a helicopter assault impracticable and a replacement would have to be found for it.

It was General Beaufre who came up with a possible solution in the form of a British paratroop drop in Gamil, a French drop to take the place of the helicopter assault on the bridges, and a second French drop to the south of Port Fuad. It was agreed that this drop should take place at 30 minutes after H-hour to avoid the risk of the airborne forces being shelled by their own naval guns. In numerical terms, because of the limiting factors imposed by the lack of airfield facilities on Cyprus, the initial assault would have to be carried out by only 600 men of the 3rd Paratroop Battalion and 500 of the 2nd Regiment de Parachutistes Coloniaux, together with a handful of engineers,

signallers and a medical detachment. Also, since the airborne assault would have to be coordinated with the arrival of seaborne forces en route from Malta, the paratroops would have to go in well after sunrise.

The lack of naval gunfire to support the airborne assault also caused some misgivings, but in the event this did not turn out to have any relevance as the naval strike aircraft which softened up the enemy defences before the drop and continued to give full close support thereafter provided an adequate substitute. As far as the British drop was concerned, the geographical location of the airfield at Gamil, which was about a mile and a half long and half a mile wide and bounded to north and south by the sea, meant that the transport aircraft could approach only from the north-west or south-east. Both approaches had their disadvantages. Coming in from the north-west meant that the pilots would be flying straight into the sun, and an approach from the south-east would bring the transports straight through the anti-aircraft defences of Port Said. There was little doubt that the airfield itself would be defended, since photo-reconnaissance had already shown that the Egyptians had placed hundreds of large oil drums on the field to hamper any landing. In the event these drums, which were filled with sand, proved a boon rather than an obstacle to the Paratroops, providing useful cover behind which the men could shelter while they unpacked their containers and got ready for action.

The French dropping zone at Port Fuad was even more restricted. It was only 150yd across and bounded by the sea, roads, the canal and lines of trees. However, thanks to the compact nature of the French dropping techniques, Colonel Pierre Chateau-Jobert of the 2e Regiment Colonial believed that the DZ would be more than adequate. The first objective of Chateau-Jobert's forces was the twin bridges near the waterworks crossing the interior basin waterway, a vital link on the Port Said-Suez route. After these had been taken, the Paras were to attack the Port Fuad area on the opposite side of the canal facing Port Said.

Because of the densely populated and restricted nature of the assault areas, normal marking techniques involving the drop of a small number of paratroops close to the dropping zones with the task of marking the run-in to the DZs by means of flares, and the actual point at which the paratroopers were to be released by means of a cloth T, were out of the question. It was therefore decided that a Canberra bomber of No 10 Squadron would drop a flare five miles from the dropping zones to mark the run-in for the transports, and natural features were selected to mark the actual points of release. In the case of Gamil airfield, the main natural feature was a sea wall, and the French were to make use of the beach immediately to the west of their zone for similar purposes.

Since the transport aircraft destined for Gamil were to make their run straight into the sun, hasty arrangements were made to equip them with sun visors to cut down the pilots' discomfort. One squadron of Valettas was in fact fitted with these devices, but the main transport force was being held in Britain until the last possible moment and there was no time for the visors to be fitted to the bulk of the aircraft. As it turned out, the glare did not impair the success of the drop in any way, and even without the visors the pilots managed to place their parachutists accurately over the target. As far as the pilots themselves were concerned, approaching in the sun was infinitely preferable to approaching over the defences of Port Said. In that event they would have been instructed to wear hot, heavy, armoured flak vests which would have increased their fatigue factor tremendously.

The assault on Gamil was to be led by the Valettas with the Hastings, carrying their underslung loads of heavy equipment, bringing up the rear. The air armada was to approach in two columns, with the aircraft flying in pairs. These pairs were to form

boxes of six with the first two aircraft at 600ft and those behind stepped up at intervals of 100ft and 15 seconds. This arrangement, it was hoped, would give adequate time for the paratroops dropping from the aircraft in front to get clear by the time the second stick went down. Each box of six aircraft was separated by an interval of one minute – about two miles in terms of distance. Since the target was expected to be heavily defended, speed was of the essence and the plan was for the whole British force to come down on Gamil in eight minutes. To enable the paratroopers to go into action quickly, heavy equipment such as anti-tank guns was to be dropped with the troops. To cut down the risk of injury, the aircraft carrying heavy loads flew 400ft above the aircraft carrying the paratroops.

The French tactics in the drop were somewhat similar to the British, with their transport aircraft approaching the dropping zone in pairs. The difference here was that the whole formation was much tighter, with 60yd between each aircraft in any one pair and the pairs separated by a gap of 120yd. Moreover, because of the confined nature of their dropping zone, the French decided to jump from the unusually low altitude of 400ft; in this way it was estimated that the drop could be completed in four minutes.

Whereas the French paratroops had been ready for action since August, their British counterparts had to work hard to complete preparations in time for the assault. They had exactly a week between 29 October, when the 3rd Battalion returned from their anti-terrorist operations in the Troodos mountains, and 5 November to get everything ready. The packing of stores, ammunition and equipment into airborne containers or the ships of the seaborne force which were to follow up the airborne assault was a mammoth task in itself, while the paratroops had to be put through a rapid refresher course in aircraft drill and parachuting techniques. A lot of anxiety was caused by inevitable delays in the arrival of vital pieces of equipment such as parachutes and roller conveyers, with which heavy loads were to be dropped from the aircraft, and it was not until late in the afternoon of 1 November that much of this equipment arrived. Matters were further complicated by the fact that there was no mobile parachute packing section on Cyprus, so that all the parachutes had to be packed in the United Kingdom and then flown in. It was an incredible omission, in view of the Parachute Brigade's role as part of Britain's Strategic Reserve.

Despite all the worries, everything went more or less as planned and on 4 November the paratroops, having been briefed that the attack would take place the following morning, made last minute checks to their equipment and a drumhead service was held before noon. At 0300 on Monday 5 November, the British Paratroop Battalion climbed aboard its waiting transports at Nicosia while Colonel Chateau-Jobert's men did the same at Tymbou.

At 0415 GMT, with the dawn breaking in the eastern sky, the first of the RAF Valettas roared down the runway at Nicosia. The whole aerial armada formed up over a rendezvous point over the south coast of Cyprus and then set course towards Egypt. Two hours flying time away, as the transports flew out over the Mediterranean, a last-minute change to the dropping order had to be made. This was caused by the fact that the Hastings MkIs, which had been the last to take-off from Cyprus with their loads of paratroops and which were to have overtaken the Hastings MkIIs carrying the heavy loads of equipment en route, were subjected to a certain amount of drag from the parachute containers slung below their fuselages and made far slower progress than had been anticipated. This meant that over the target some of the heavy equipment had to be dropped before the paratroops had all gone down. Fortunately this change in the proceedings did not jeopardise the success of the operation in any way.

As the RAF contingent approached Gamil, the No 10 Squadron Canberra, with a

squadron of Fleet Air Arm Sea Hawks circling watchfully overhead, dropped its marker flares three miles from the dropping zone. At this point, despite the glare, the pilots of the Valettas and Hastings could see the dropping zone quite clearly. With a minute to go the paratroops came to action stations and moved to their jumping positions. From their positions in the open doorways, the stick commanders could see the concrete runways of Gamil airfield and the occasional flash of sunlight on wings as strike aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm strafed targets close to the dropping zone, a reassuring sight. Then the green lights went on and the first sticks launched themselves into space.

Eighty-five per cent of the British force was on the ground within 10 minutes, the paratroops taking cover behind the sand-filled oil drums and trying to regroup. There were only four major casualties during the course of the drop; two men drifted out to sea and almost drowned before they managed to rid themselves of their parachutes and swim ashore, one man dropped into a minefield and was killed, and one landed right on top of the airfield control tower and received serious injuries.

There was nothing like the anticipated volume of enemy small arms fire during the drop, although some paratroops were wounded. Heavy equipment also landed on target although some of the aircraft had to make two runs to get their loads away safely. The volume of Egyptian anti-aircraft fire over Gamil was moderate, but not as accurate as had been expected. Nevertheless, nine aircraft were damaged although none were lost.

As the transport aircraft droned away towards Cyprus to pick up their second load of reinforcements and supplies, the 3rd Battalion rapidly got organised. It was split into three companies, each of which had been assigned a specific task. A Company, which had dropped nearest to the release point had the task of securing the north-west corner of the airfield. B Company, which had dropped last in order to land on the Port Said end of the field, was responsible for sealing off that area. The third company, which comprised Battalion headquarters, Brigade headquarters and the various supporting units had been dropped in the middle, and could be diverted to wherever its assistance was most needed.

A and B Companies quickly went into action. They had no trouble in occupying the control tower which was still burning from rocket attacks by Royal Navy Sea Hawks and Wyverns. A Company then began to move out towards the north-west, mopping up Egyptian positions as they advanced. The strongest opposition came from an enemy pillbox, but this was put out of action by the first shot from a rocket launcher which went through the firing slit, killing two of the defenders and wounding the remaining eight, who surrendered. B Company at the Port Said end of the airfield had a stiffer fight on its hands, having landed right on top of the Egyptian defences. There was a brief and bloody hand-to-hand encounter before the defenders were overwhelmed and the paratroops were able to move on to their next objective.

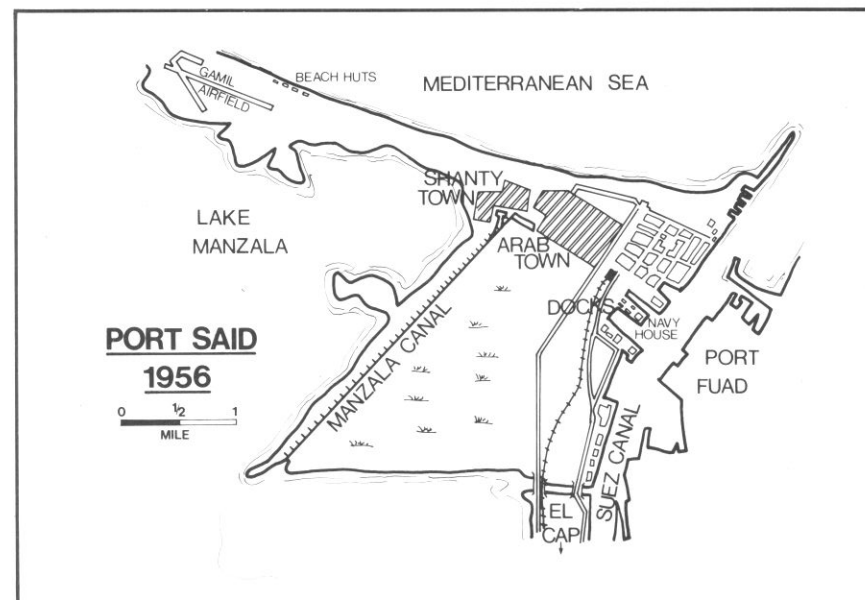
Meanwhile, the battalion's mortar platoon in the centre of the field was dropping a rapid succession of rounds on enemy positions in the sewage farm a mile away to the south-east. One group of paratroops was pinned down by highly accurate fire from an Egyptian anti-tank gun, firing from the beach, but this was soon knocked out by a 106mm recoilless rifle shell. Because some of the radio equipment had been damaged in the drop, there was some delay in establishing contact with the cab-ranks of Fleet Air Arm fighter-bombers circling overhead. Nevertheless, the paratroops were never without constant air cover. In fact, there were never sufficient targets available for all the Fleet Air Arm aircraft to use their devastating fire power and many pilots sought

out targets of opportunity in the surrounding area rather than return to their carriers with their bombs and rockets still on board.

Within 45 minutes, the paratroops had succeeded in overcoming all resistance on Gamil airfield. By noon the runways had been cleared sufficiently to accept the arrival of allied transport aircraft. In fact, the transports never came. Gamil had been built to operate Dakotas and its runways were not long enough for the Hastings and Valettas; this meant that reinforcements and supplies still had to be parachuted down.

Fifteen minutes after the British assault on Gamil, Chateau-Jobert's paratroops landed in their dropping zone south of the Junction Canal connecting the Suez Canal to Lake Manzala. On landing, the French came under heavy fire from Egyptian infantry dug in in slit trenches, and also from machine guns sited near the bridge and Bofors anti-aircraft guns which were able to rake the whole area. Fortunately, the dropping zone was heavily pitted with holes and craters in which the French paratroops could take cover. General Gilles, flying over the battle area in a Nord Noratlas transport converted into a flying command post (an idea first used by the French in Indo-China and which was now to prove invaluable), saw that the paratroops were meeting serious resistance and quickly called up flights of Corsairs from the carrier *Lafayette* and Thunderstreaks from Cyprus, which were soon hammering away at the Egyptian resistance. Gilles continued to circle overhead throughout the whole battle, braving anti-aircraft fire that was often heavy, directing the movement of the troops on the ground and the activities of the fighter-bombers as well as passing back a minute-by-minute report on the progress of the fight to General Beaufre, who was at sea in the cruiser *Gustave Zede*, and to the Expeditionary Force headquarters in Cyprus.

Once the enemy resistance had been overcome after some brisk hand-to-hand fighting, the French quickly reorganised and moved on towards their objective. The



eastern road bridge across the interior basin had been destroyed but the western bridge was the objective of No 1 Company which, during its advance, was heavily shelled by Egyptian tanks from the golf course behind the bridge. With a characteristic dash, the French raced through the fire supported by their fighter-bombers and by 0900 the bridge was in their hands.

The capture of the bridge, accomplished at a cost of 10 French casualties, meant that the break-out from Port Said was now assured. The French were now in control of the whole surrounding area and Chateau-Jobert set up his headquarters in one of the waterworks buildings. The waterworks itself was undamaged, for which the French were thankful. In the event of the waterworks being destroyed, there had been a plan to ship fresh water in by sea and impose strict rationing on the civilian population, which would have caused severe administrative headaches. At 1300, word reached the French that the British paratroops had cleared the Gamil area and were pushing eastwards. The first phase of the assault was over.

8 The Paratroops Consolidate

For Colonel Crook's airborne battalion at Gamil, reaching the middle of Port Said was no easy task. After clearing the airfield area itself the men had to negotiate ditches and fight their way through the thick reeds and swampy ground of the sewage farm, finally advancing through the cemetery and Port Said's slum suburbs before reaching the more modern built-up area.

The airfield's geographic location, with the sea on one side and the lake on the other, meant that the paratroops were unable to carry out any outflanking manoeuvres; instead, they had to advance straight along the road. After clearing the few huts and bungalows along the beach, they advanced up the narrow strip of sand to the line of tall reeds which marked the fringe of the sewage farm. It was now that they ran into the first really severe opposition; as they approached the reeds they encountered a storm of rifle and machine gun fire from Egyptian troops positioned along the edge of the farm. Beyond the farm itself, Russian-built SU-100 self-propelled guns opened up with a heavy barrage of shellfire, while from the docks area multiple rocket launchers also joined in. The latter were quickly silenced by the Fleet Air Arm's Sea Hawks and Wyverns, which also knocked out two of the SU-100s.

The task of clearing the thick, head-high reeds took the best part of an hour. Many Egyptian prisoners were taken and an SU-100, which had been lying hull down among the greenery and causing the paratroops a great deal of concern, was knocked out by a 106mm recoilless anti-tank rifle. Even when they at last broke out on to the open terrain of the sewage farm, however, the paratroops' problems were still not over. As they advanced on the right of the farm the men came under heavy fire from the cemetery, with enemy machine guns raking an exposed stretch of ground 400yd across. There was another nasty moment when the paratroops, advancing across this

exposed area, were strafed by a French Corsair which mistook them for Egyptian forces. Fortunately, no casualties were sustained.

On the edge of the sewage farm the paratroops regrouped and made plans for the assault on the cemetery, while allied air strikes on the Egyptian positions continued almost without pause. The paratroops quickly located the main enemy observation post from which most of the machine gun fire was being directed; this was sited in a tall block of flats behind the sewage farm, and heavy small arms fire was also coming from the coastguard barracks on the other side of the road. Several flights of Sea Hawks were quickly summoned by radio; they struck in rapid succession at the coastguard barracks, and a pall of smoke soon hung over the buildings.

At 1030, the ground attack aircraft were also called in to carry out close support as a preliminary to the assault on the cemetery. While Sea Hawks and Sea Venoms dived overhead, raking the enemy positions with cannon fire, the troops left the cover of the reeds and raced across the open ground as far as the cemetery wall. Pouring over it they became engaged in a short and bloody hand-to-hand encounter with the defenders before the latter were finally overwhelmed. The paratroops killed 30 enemy soldiers and captured an old Bren Gun Carrier for no casualties to themselves.

This action left the paratroops in command of the cemetery area, and they now pushed out patrols towards the flats and the coastguard barracks. The patrols reported no opposition; in fact, the road into Port Said appeared to be wide open. The only problem was that by this time the paratroops were running dangerously short of ammunition; they had only 50 mortar bombs between them, and although Colonel Crook was aware that a further arms drop from Cyprus was scheduled for later that day, he decided not to risk a further advance – particularly since the objective areas were due to be bombarded by the Anglo-French Naval task force before the end of the day.

The paratroops accordingly spent the afternoon digging in and forming defensive positions on the sewage farm and airfield. Secure in these, they spent an uneventful night, punctuated only by some highly inaccurate mortar fire. A number of casualties had been sustained during the morning's fighting; these were quickly evacuated by Whirlwind helicopters from the carriers *Bulwark* and *Albion*, which were on station 150 miles off the coast. The first helicopter – laden with beer and cigarettes, a gift to the paratroops from the ships' companies – landed at Gamil at 0930, and after that the fleet of rotorcraft carried out a steady shuttle service between the airfield and the ships. Another arrival at Gamil – while the battle was still going on – was a French Air Force Dakota, whose pilot made a hair-raising landing among the oil drums that were still dotted around the airfield. The aircraft carried Colonel de Fouquieres, a member of Admiral Barjot's staff, who had been sent to find out if it would be possible to fly French reinforcements into Gamil. For the medical team with the paratroops, the Dakota's arrival was a godsend; when it took off again it carried a number of more serious casualties, who could now receive urgent hospital treatment in Cyprus.

The medical staff at Gamil consisted of the 3rd Parachute Battalion's medical officer with a small staff of orderlies and stretcher-bearers, a section of the 23rd Parachute Field Ambulance, and a field surgical team comprising one RAMC surgeon, one anaesthetist and four orderlies. Two field ambulances, followed by two casualty clearing stations and a mobile general hospital, were to land in the wake of the seaborne forces.

It was thought that the medical team parachuted into Gamil would be adequate to cope with the anticipated casualties of the airborne battalion during the first phase of the ground offensive; these were expected to be some five per cent of the force involved,

a figure based on combat experience over a similar period in Europe during the latter part of 1944. During the Suez airborne operation, however, a number of factors combined to make the estimated casualty figure unrealistic. First of all, the French paratroops at Raswa lost a good deal of their medical kit during the air drop, which meant that the more serious cases among the 33 casualties sustained that day had to be sent to Gamil for treatment by the British doctors before being evacuated. There were also substantial numbers of Egyptian wounded to be considered – all of which meant that the medical team, operating under primitive conditions and sometimes under fire, had an overwhelming burden to bear. To complicate matters still further, the 3rd Battalion's medical officer had been hit in the eye during his parachute descent; nevertheless, despite very severe pain, he continued working for more than four hours. He was eventually relieved by the Royal Navy surgeon-lieutenant, who arrived with the first wave of helicopters.

Meanwhile, at Raswa, a detachment composed of men from the 9th Independent Squadron Royal Engineers and the Guards Parachute Company, who had dropped with the French Paras, were making an armed reconnaissance along the Suez road to investigate the possibilities of an advance in that direction. Because of the geographical location of Port Said, the routes leading inland were very limited from the tactical point of view, being exposed and highly vulnerable. Apart from the Suez Canal and the railway there were only two exits from the town, running parallel to the railway until one of them branched off 25 miles inland at Qantara. The Sweetwater Canal also ran along this narrow defile, between the railway and the minor of the two roads.

The Raswa bridges themselves presented the first potential obstacle to a drive on Suez, and the reconnaissance party's first task was to establish whether the bridges would be adequate for the flood of transport and armour that would soon be pouring across them. The engineers soon hit upon a snag; they found that the road bridge was two feet narrower than had been expected, which meant that it would have to be widened before it could be negotiated by Centurion tanks. Their inspection of the bridges was carried out with sporadic fighting still going on around them; as soon as it was over, and the bridges firmly in the hands of the Paras, the party set off along the Suez road to a point six miles south of Raswa, on the edge of the Anglo-French bomb line. They did not venture beyond this point for fear of being mistaken for Egyptians by the fighter-bomber pilots. The party found that the road was free from mines, although it was littered with a number of wrecked vehicles and there were some minor craters which later proved to be hazards during the advance towards Suez. Ample evidence was found that the Egyptians had in fact intended to destroy the road, but the allied attack had apparently taken them by surprise because the explosives they had amassed for the purpose were found in a building and captured.

After interrogating some Egyptian civilians, the reconnaissance party returned to Raswa. They reported that the road to Suez was apparently free, and that an armoured column should easily be able to push along the full extent of the Canal. In fact, if the column pushed on rapidly, with no hold-ups, it could be in Suez in six hours. However, according to other civilians, there was a large concentration of Egyptian tanks extending westwards along the beach from Port Said; if this were true the Allied armour would probably have a fight on its hands from the moment it landed, and an early breakout would be unlikely.

That afternoon, supplies, ammunition and reinforcements were air-dropped to the troops at both Gamil and Raswa. The French reinforced their troops at the southern end of Port Fuad with a further battalion, while the Gamil force received another company of the 3rd Battalion. The French drop successfully sealed the fate of the

Egyptian defenders in Port Fuad, many of whom abandoned everything and made frantic attempts to escape across the Canal to Port Said before they were surrounded. Those who stood and fought were quickly mopped up by the determined Paras as the latter closed in on the Canal ferry, isolating Port Fuad completely. The French were supported throughout the operation by Corsairs from the French carrier *Arromanches*, circling overhead in their 'cab-ranks'.

While the French and British paratroops consolidated their gains and took an inventory of the stores that had been dropped to them, new developments were taking place behind the scenes. Shortly after mid-day, a representative of Port Said's local government telephoned Colonel Chateau-Jobert's headquarters in the waterworks with the information that the Egyptian Commandant, General El Moguy, was prepared to negotiate a ceasefire if the allied air attacks were called off. Chateau-Jobert at once contacted Brigadier Butler, who was about to set out by helicopter to visit his paratroops at Gamil, and a signal was sent to the allied command ship *HMS Tyne* requesting a halt to the air strikes while ceasefire negotiations took place.

By late afternoon, Chateau-Jobert had jointly worked out a set of ceasefire terms; these were transmitted to El Moguy, the two allied commanders emphasising that they were of a temporary nature only and would have to be verified by higher authority. The terms, which among other points demanded that the Egyptian troops should lay down their arms and converge on designated assembly areas at Gamil and Port Fuad, were immediately relayed to Cairo by the Egyptian general. To his amazement, El Moguy was told that there could be no question of accepting any ceasefire; World War III had started, Russian aircraft had attacked London and Paris, and thousands of Soviet troops were on their way to Egypt. More pressure was put on the bewildered El Moguy by Comrade Tchikov, the Soviet Consul in Port Said, who told him that the town would become 'another Stalingrad' to be defended at all costs until the arrival of massive Russian reinforcements, who would sweep the Anglo-French aggressors into the sea. Tchikov was so convincing in his argument that he persuaded El Moguy to authorise Port Said's police to break open crates full of stored Russian 7.62mm rifles and distribute the weapons to anyone who cared to take part in the 'heroic defence'. This was to result in a considerable sniper problem for the allied forces who later occupied the Port, with anyone from soldiers to small boys taking pot-shots at them. Fortunately, the Egyptians caused far more damage to each other than to the soldiers, or for that matter to the 800 foreign civilians living in Port Said. For these it was a time of great anxiety, particularly as many of them lived in blocks of flats overlooking the invasion beaches. Soon after the beginning of the emergency, all foreign nationals were placed under house arrest; the Americans, Italians and Greeks were later allowed to leave and were evacuated from either Port Said or Alexandria by their own ships, but for the British and French who remained the prospect of being hauled from their homes and shot loomed larger with every passing hour. In many cases, privately owned radios had been seized by the Egyptians, and the civilians had no real idea of what was happening – although the loudspeakers that toured the streets, telling of nuclear attacks on London and Paris and the early arrival of Soviet troops – painted a picture that was hardly reassuring.

All they could do was hope – and wait. As it happened, they would not have to wait for long.



Top: Russian built T-34 tank with 120mm gun (SU-100) being recovered by 4 RTR from its dug-in position near the 'Flats' from where it had been used to shell El Gamil Airfield until the position was overrun by the paratroops.



Above: The cemetery at Port Said. Scene of vicious close combat fighting between parachute and Egyptian forces on 5 November.



Top left: Native quarters of Port Said. The 'Shanty Town' was completely destroyed by anti-tank gun fire when engaging Egyptian MG and infantry posts in the area.

Left: 3 Para mortar platoon dug in by the 'Flats' during fighting in Port Said on 6 November.

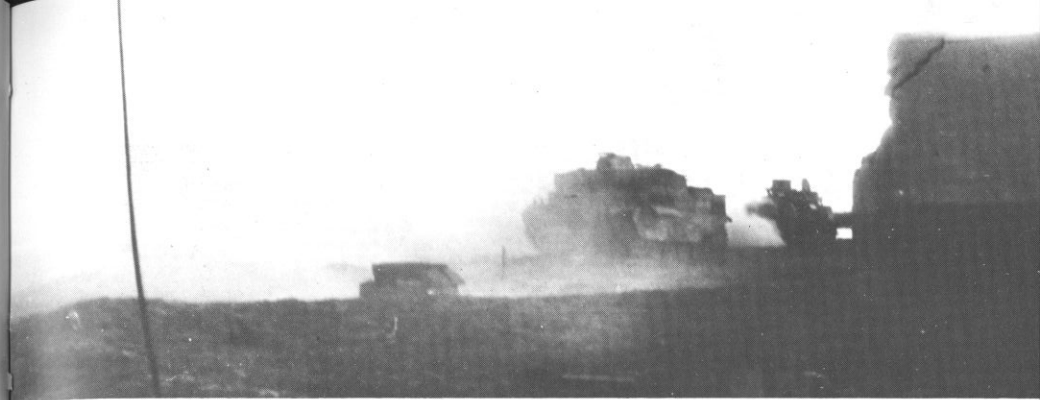
Top: Refugees leaving Port Said from Falcucca Harbour on 7 November.

Above: E end of cemetery area, Port Said, 'Flats' in the background.



Left: Captured Egyptian (Russian built) SU-100 self-propelled anti-tank gun outside 3 Para HQ in Port Said. This tank used to shell the airfield by the Egyptians, was overrun by the parachute soldiers and got into working order again by them. It is now in the RAC Tank Museum at Bovington.

Below left: Link up between 3 Para and RM Commando in Port Said at Coast Guard Barracks on 6 November. Left of photo is the adjutant of 3 Para, Capt Mullins (hands on hips) and Maj Scragg (pointing) talking to marine. Captured SU-100 on left and marine amphibian 'Buffalo' on right.



Above: 4 RTR engaged in the street fighting in Port Said, 6 November.

Below: Lt D. F. McCarthy, RN (centre) steps from the helicopter which has just rescued him and is welcomed back on board HMS *Eagle* by his Squadron (No 830) commanding officer, Lt Cdr C. V. Howard and (on right) Commander B. C. H. Nation. Surgeon Lt P. Bliss RNVR is on the right.





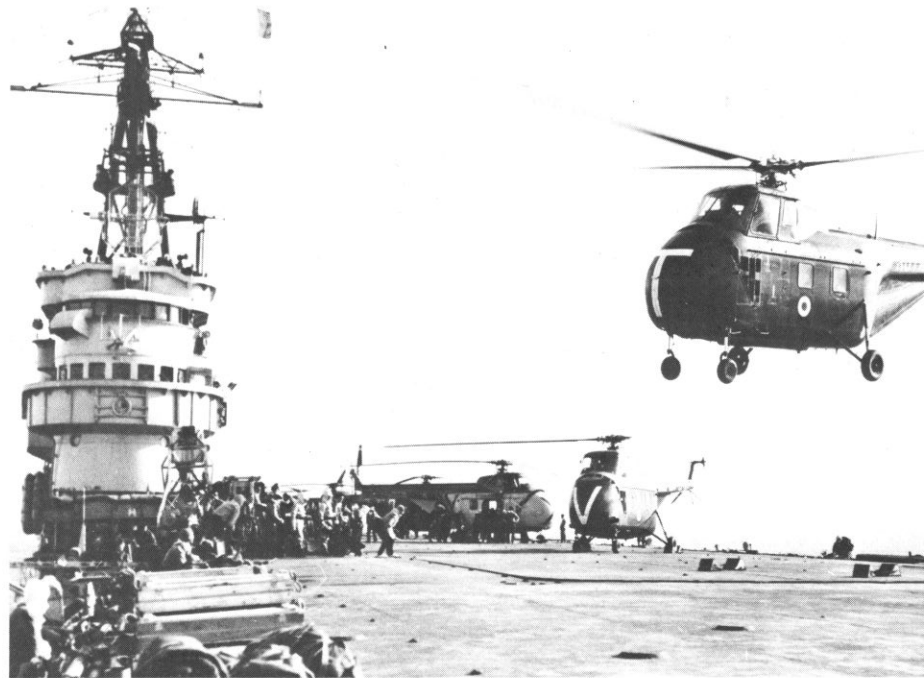
Above: Casualties brought from ashore by helicopter to HMS *Theseus's* flight deck, going down on the lift to receive attention in her fully equipped sickbay. The first Egyptian casualty to be brought on board.

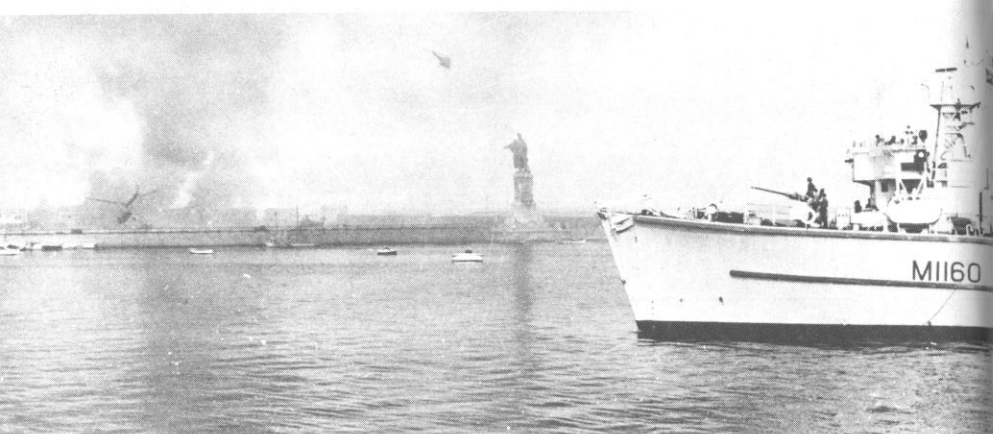
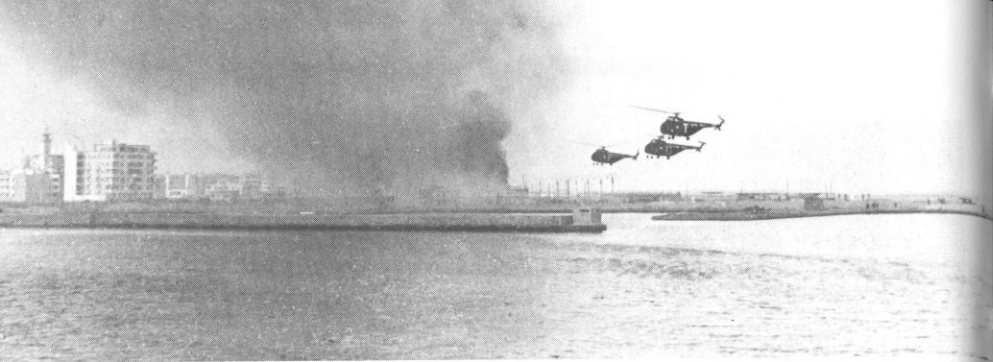
Below: A tank of 6 RTR leaving a Royal Navy Tank Landing Ship at Port Said.



Right: Royal Navy helicopters taking the first of No 45 Royal Marine Commandos into action from HMS *Theseus*.

Below right: Royal Marine Commandos embarking in a Royal Navy Whirlwind helicopter to be flown to the beaches from HMS *Theseus*.





Top left: Royal Navy Whirlwind helicopters flying into the smoke of Port Said.

Centre left: HMS Letterston, a Coastal minesweeper, entering Port Said Harbour as helicopters land in the smoke.

Left: Royal Marine Commandos with a captured Egyptian soldier.

Above: Centurion tank of 6 RTR coming ashore at Port Said.

Below: Men of 3 Para waiting to embark on MV Australia to return to Cyprus after end of hostilities at Port Said.





Above: Captured Egyptian weapons and equipment being stockpiled in Port Said after fighting ceased.

Below: Watching prisoners.



Above right: Business as usual; soldiers of the West Yorkshire Regiment chat to a friendly Egyptian street vendor.

Right: A British foot patrol in Port Said during the occupation.



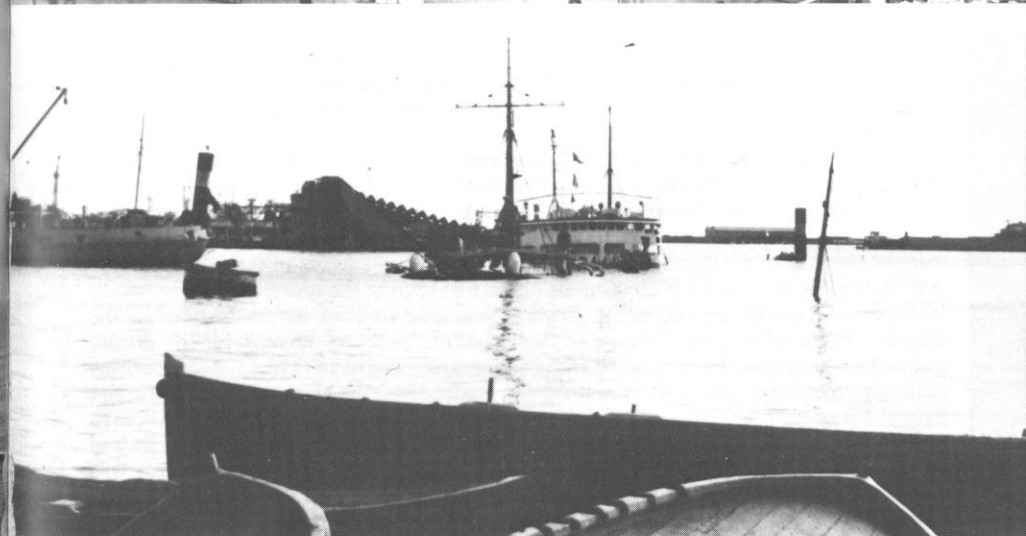
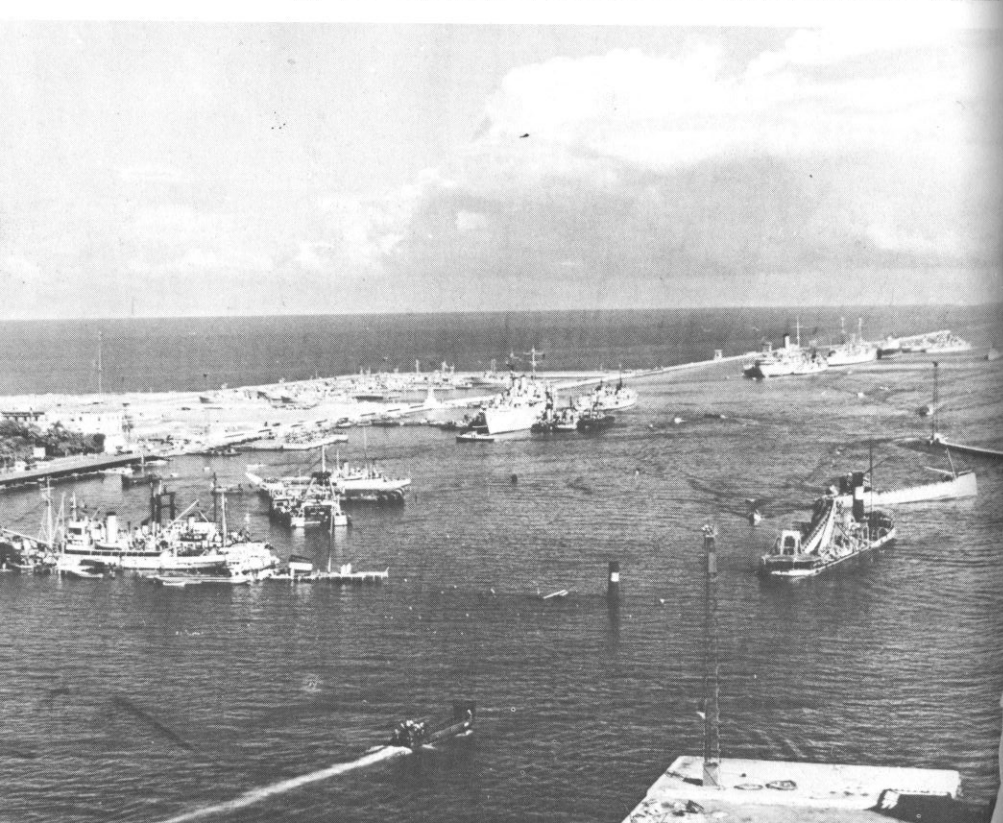
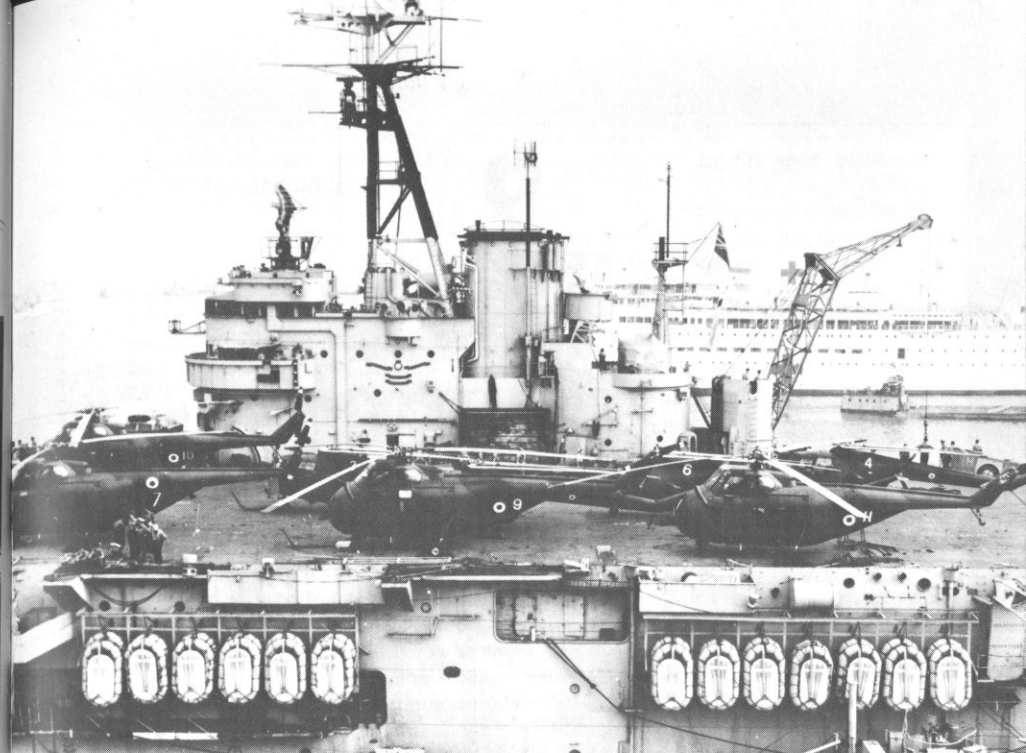
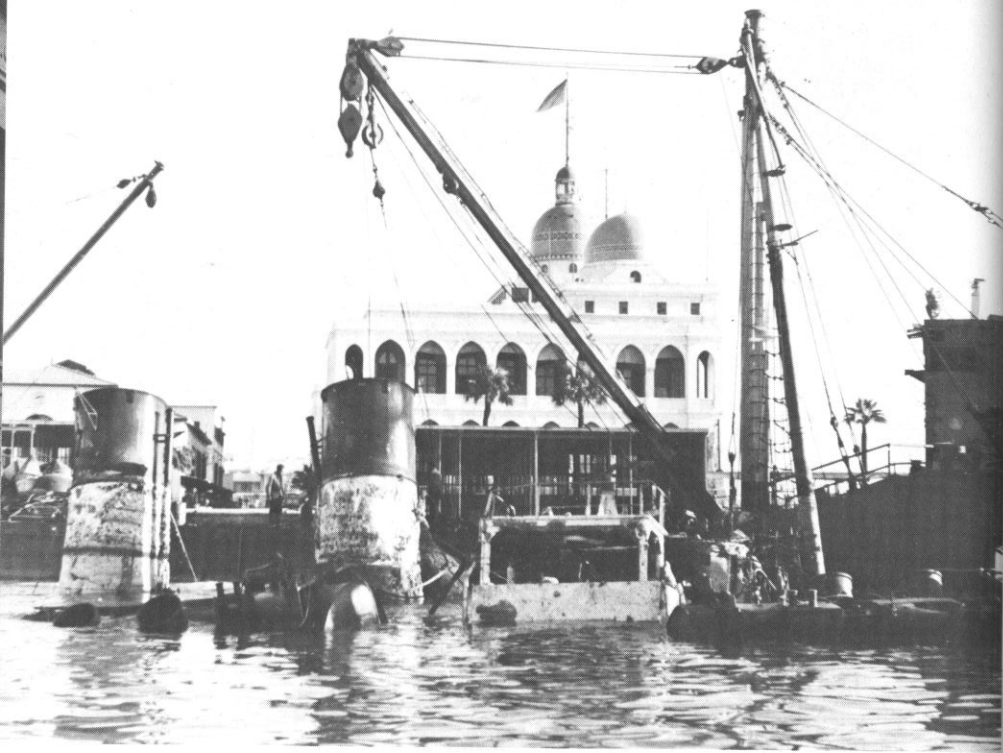


Top left: Troops stand by vigilantly outside an occupation forces HQ in Port Said.

Left: Occupation troops stand against a background of damaged buildings in Port Said.

Top: With occupation troops still very much in evidence, life in Port Said slowly returns to normal, December 1956.

Above: With the occupation over, United Nations salvage vessels begin the task of clearing the Suez Canal.



Top left and left: Dredgers and salvage craft at work in the Canal.

Top: HMS Ocean with French hospital ship in background, December 1956.

Above: View of Egyptian block ships in Suez Canal at Fort Said, November 1956.

9 The Seaborne Assault

The morning of 6 November 1956 dawned bright and clear. In Port Fuad and on the outskirts of Port Said, the French and British paratroops were in full control of the objectives they had set out to capture the previous day; the sporadic firing that had been going on throughout the night had at last died away, and an uncanny silence hung over the whole area.

At 0400 GMT, the silence was abruptly shattered by the scream of jet engines as Fleet Air Arm Sea Hawks and Sea Venoms whistled down to strafe Egyptian emplacements and installations on the beaches where the allied seaborne forces would soon be going ashore. The air attack was highly intense and lasted only 10 minutes; then, as the last of the fighter-bombers departed, the first salvos of naval shells came in from the sea, the smoke of their bursts quickly obscuring the shoreline.

After six days at sea the allied invasion fleet had reached its destination off the Egyptian coast on schedule in the early hours of the morning. Reveille for the assault troops had been at 0230, and at 0400 the commandos began to take up their positions in the assembled landing craft or helicopters, deafened by the continual roar of gunfire from the warships. The original intention had been for the whole armada of warships to lay down a heavy barrage using armament of every calibre; however, this plan was changed literally at the last moment because it was feared that a massive barrage would result in undue civilian casualties, with particular concern for the British and French nationals in Port Said. The warship commanders were therefore ordered to use only their secondary armament – mainly 4.5-inch weapons – which drastically reduced the effectiveness of the bombardment.

Nevertheless, to both the men on the ships and the paratroops at Gamil, who were waiting to cover the right flank of the seaborne assault, the barrage was a spectacular

sight. Salvo after salvo of shells erupted along a 3,000-yd stretch of shore, hammering the Egyptian defences – many of them already pulverised by the guns, bombs and rockets of the strike aircraft.

Also at the last minute, Admiral Lancelot ordered the warships not to fire on Port Fuad; it was not until after 0300 that the Admiral knew for certain that this objective was in French hands. During the bombardment, however, the French paratroops in Port Fuad protested that allied naval shells were in fact exploding among their positions; these were in fact ricochets from Port Said, an eventuality which had been foreseen by the British and which had led them to counsel earlier against too rapid an advance in this sector.

While the naval bombardment was in progress, the French at Raswa came under heavy and accurate fire from a SU-100 self-propelled gun. The French called up a flight of Corsairs, which quickly knocked out the SU-100; however, one of their rockets ripped into a nearby oil storage tank, which burst into flames and sent a massive column of smoke towering over Port Said. Seen from the ships, this gave the impression that the port was far more badly damaged than was actually the case.

The assault force waited patiently in the big LSTs – Tank Landing Ships – as the minutes ticked away towards H-hour. Then, at exactly 0430, the bow doors of the LSTs opened, disgorging a wave of LVTs – Tracked Landing Vehicles – each carrying 30 troops and their equipment. As the LVTs churned towards the shore at seven knots the naval barrage gradually lifted, to be succeeded by a new wave of air strikes.

The first assault force to hit the beach – Sierra Red, to the left of the Casino Pier – was No 40 Royal Marine Commando under Lt-Col D. G. Tweed. Their task was to advance along the Canal and link up with the French at Raswa. Five minutes later Lt-Col P.O. Norcock's No 42 Commando also landed on Sierra Green beach, on the right of the pier; their mission was to fight their way through the town and join forces with No 40 Commando, while the 3rd Paratroop Battalion moved up in turn from Gamil through Port Said's shanty town. The paratroops, in fact, were in a position to provide covering fire during the landings, which helped to reduce the volume of Egyptian small arms fire that greeted the commandos as they came ashore.

As the first wave of commandos fanned out over their respective beaches they found that most of the Egyptians had fled, often abandoning excellent defensive positions. Nevertheless, as the commandos advanced towards their initial objective – the buildings lining the main road beyond the beach – they came under heavy fire from enemy snipers occupying blocks of flats further to the rear, and a considerable number of casualties were sustained.

While the commandos were engaged in clearing the buildings that overlooked the beach, the 14 Centurions of C Squadron, 6th Royal Tanks, rolled ashore on the extreme left flank of the assault. The tanks, which had been specially waterproofed, had to churn through 150yd of water before reaching solid ground; as soon as they were safely ashore their crews set about removing the waterproof coverings, with enemy bullets kicking up spurts of sand around them. By 0530 the tanks were ready to go into action; four Centurions were attached to No 40 Commando and the remainder to No 42.

Now that armoured support was available the men of No 40 Commando set off along the waterfront towards the Arsenal Basin, Navy House Quay and the Abbas Hilmi Basin, where the remainder of the 16th Parachute Brigade would shortly be landing. The advance was not an easy task, as every road junction was covered by heavy Egyptian automatic fire. When the commandos found themselves pinned down they sent forward a Centurion, which nosed up to the junction and sprayed the roads

branching off from it with heavy machine gun fire; under its cover the men were able to dash across the exposed street ends.

The men of No 42 Commando, working their way through the narrow streets from the right, were also grateful for the Centurions' support. As well as automatic fire, they were assailed frequently by hand grenades, thrown from the upper storeys of blocks of flats. Despite this opposition the Marines pushed on steadily, capturing Port Said's cold storage plant and power station before finally reaching the gasworks on the southern outskirts of the town at 0745. At the same time, the 3rd Paratroop Battalion moved up from the cemetery, capturing the Coastguard Barracks and Ophthalmic Hospital before advancing into the Arab slum suburb. Here, the paratroops ran into severe opposition; the first patrol to enter the slums was pinned down by withering automatic fire and every man was wounded. Because of the close proximity of the opposing forces and the difficulty of identifying targets among the jumble of shanties, there was no possibility of calling down an air strike; instead, a 105mm anti-tank gun and one of the destroyers out to sea poured shells into the area, starting fires that were soon raging throughout the stifling, crowded streets. Even then, the paratroops had to contend with highly accurate sniper fire from buildings beyond the shanty town, which seriously impeded their advance.

Meanwhile, at 0540, No 45 Commando – who, seven miles out to sea on board *HMS Ocean* and *HMS Theseus*, had been standing by while the main assault force went in – had at least been informed that the beach areas had been secured by Nos 40 and 42 Commandos and that the way was now clear for them to follow in their helicopters. A few minutes later, a Whirlwind of No 845 Squadron carrying Lt Col Tailyour and Major De'Ath took off from *HMS Ocean* to carry out a reconnaissance of the projected landing zone. The original LZ selected by the Marines was close to the statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, but this was later changed because it was thought to be too far away from Brigade HQ. The new LZ, however, was found to be obscured by smoke, and when the helicopter flew overhead the crew also spotted some high-tension cables which would prohibit any large-scale helicopter landing. The Whirlwind pilot consequently picked the nearby Egyptian Stadium as a possible alternative, depositing his passengers there and taking off once more.

Almost as soon as they left the helicopter, Tailyour, De'Ath and the three other Marines who formed the reconnaissance party came under heavy fire from an Egyptian position on the far side of the stadium. They took refuge in the players' entrance and prepared to fight it out. The Whirlwind pilot, however, had seen their predicament as he circled overhead, and he now braved the enemy fire to land back in the stadium. The five men dashed across 200yd of open ground and scrambled into the machine, which got away safely despite sustaining 20 hits. The pilot was also slightly wounded, but he nevertheless managed to locate another landing zone – a rubble-strewn patch of waste ground to the west of the de Lesseps Statue. This was judged to be suitable for a landing, and shortly before 0600 Tailyour sent a radio message ordering the rest of No 45 Commando to take-off from the carriers.

The helicopters approached the shore in waves; on arrival each wave orbited while the aircraft broke away to land individually, disgorging their cargoes of Marines under continual sniper fire. One man was hit by a sniper's bullet almost immediately; he was hauled back on board the helicopter and was being treated in *HMS Ocean's* sick bay only 20 minutes after he had left the carrier. Each wave of helicopters picked up casualties at the LZ; one Whirlwind, badly hit by enemy fire, had to ditch in the sea 400yd away from *HMS Theseus*, but its crew and the three wounded Marines it carried were all picked up safely by a launch.

By 0630 the first wave of helicopters had landed No 45 Commando's E and Z Troops, Tactical Headquarters, anti-tank gun detachments and an Air Contact Team whose task it was to control the fighter-bombers which were providing close support. During the next hour and a half all the Commando's Rifle Troops, including the Support Troop and equipment – a total of 425 men and 23 tons of stores – were also brought ashore by the Whirlwinds and Sycamores. It had been the first assault of its kind in history, and it had gone off almost without a hitch.

As soon as they had landed, the commandos of E Troop, led by Major Leslie Marsh, set out to clear several blocks of flats adjacent to the LZ – the position selected for No 45's assembly area. The men worked their way through the buildings, killing several snipers with automatic fire and hand grenades, and by 0700 the flats were secure. An hour later E and Z Troops led the Commando towards the centre of Port Said, where it was to capture and hold the broad avenue of Shari El Mahrousa and the Governorate Building. This was a rambling, colonial-style structure set in magnificent gardens, which provided an excellent field of fire for the Egyptian snipers who now sheltered there. After a brief skirmish the latter were eliminated by E Troop, but more fire came from up the road almost immediately, halting the advance of Z Troop.

While E and Z Troops were shooting it out with the snipers, No 45's Tactical Headquarters, with A, B and X Troops following, were approaching the northern end of Shari El Mahrousa. As the men advanced cautiously, on the alert for snipers, there was a sudden scream of aero-engines overhead. Before the commandos had time to react, cannon shells were exploding around them in the street. Lt-Col Tailyour was hit in the arm and his signaller, Marine Michael Fowler, was fatally wounded. Lieutenant John Weston, No 45's Intelligence Officer, and 14 other ranks were also wounded. As the echoes of the gunfire died away, the dazed Marines looked up at the aircraft that had attacked them; it was a Westland Wyvern of the Fleet Air Arm . . .

It later transpired that the pilot of the Wyvern had been given an erroneous map reference for his air strike target. Even so, at the time of the attack the Marines had been well behind the allied bomb line. In addition to the casualties it had caused, the aircraft's fire had also damaged all the Marines' radio sets, and for a time wireless contact with the forward troops was lost. The casualties were evacuated to the landing zone in an ambulance provided by No 40 Commando, while No 45's Tactical HQ was hastily reorganised. Major Richard Crombie took over from the injured Tailyour, while Lt-Cdr Lionel Jenkins of the Royal Navy assumed the role of intelligence officer.

Meanwhile, in its sector, Z Troop continued to advance past the Governorate Building in the face of stiff resistance, as described in the Troop Report:

'Almost immediately 19 Section (Sgt Saxton) and 18 Section (Sgt Fellows) suffered casualties from snipers in a large white building. 18 Section had Marine K. Essau hit in the leg and L/Cpl M. T. Porter in the back. 19 Section had Marine Cyril Goodfellow killed and Marine Smith shot in the arm. 17 Section (Sgt Smith) had two casualties from an enemy on the top floor, Cpl J. F. Rutherford shot in the leg, and Marine Cowling. The luckiest escape was Marine McLeod who had the lion shot off the badge on his beret, but he was unhurt. E Troop then moved forward from the area of the gardens to give support.'

The fighting in the streets around Shari El Mahrousa was also described in the Commandos' Battle Report:

'The buildings along Shari El Mahrousa were in general seven storey blocks of concrete or brick flats, the ground floors consisting of shops protected by steel shutters.

Inside the buildings narrow stairways gave access upwards. The houses were occupied by civilians, with children. Egyptian army and police, many disguised in plain clothes, fought furiously. Some prisoners were found to have Benzadrine tablets in their possession. Many enemy wearing plain clothes fought until the last moment, and then discarding their weapons, posed as civilian refugees. In general the enemy defence was not coordinated, but groups of riflemen and machine gunners hotly contested any advance. In two instances enemy snipers committed suicide rather than be captured. To offset the lack of tanks a 106mm anti-tank gun was set up on a borrowed carrier and used to blast a way through steel shutters and concrete walls. By this means the assault troops were able to effect an entry . . .

'At 09.15 B Troop (Capt Richard Meadows) which had seven men wounded in the air strike, moved forward to assist the forward troops. The Troop reformed to four sections and remained in the first block on the west side of the Shari El Mahrousa from where they shot along the streets going west, thereby covering the movement of our own troops up the main axis of advance. Z Troop asked for assistance to clear a sniper who was preventing them from evacuating wounded. Sgt Cooper's section cleared the sniper with the aid of an Energa bomb (an anti-tank bomb fired from a rifle grenade launcher), which was very effective in this role, and then covered the removal of wounded. The Troop Sergeant-Major, Kennedy, and Marine Connelly . . . together with Marines Galley, Morris and Watson in the Bren Group, killed a considerable number of enemy moving 200yd along one of the roads going west from Shari El Mahrousa. The enemy were endeavouring to remove a small gun from its position in the middle of a road.'

The task of clearing the Shari El Mahrousa area was completed by 1100, and commandos were stationed in the principal buildings to deal with Egyptian infiltrators. The remainder now swung westwards towards the Arab shanty town, where they were to link up with Colonel Crook's Airborne Battalion. The marines moved off at 1500, supported by Centurion tanks. Initial progress was impeded by smoke and burning wreckage from a building at the northern end of Shari El Mahrousa, but the tanks battered a way through the debris and the advance continued steadily, the troops affording support for one another. By 1430 the marines had reached Shari El Sherrif, a road running laterally across their path.

Some of the strongest opposition was encountered by Z Troop, who had to ferret out a number of strongly fortified snipers' nests. In one instance, house clearance operations were halted by showers of grenades, hurled at the men of 17 and 18 Sections by Egyptians in the upper storeys of a building; not even phosphorus smoke grenades succeeded in dislodging the enemy, who only gave in when a Centurion fired shells into their position at point-blank range.

By 1600 the marines had reached their second main objective, the avenue of Shari El Ghazi Moukhtar. Here – with contact still not established with the 3rd Paratroop Battalion – they halted to consolidate and prepare defensive positions in case the Egyptians counter-attacked during the night. During the day's fighting No 45 Commando had killed an estimated 150 of the enemy; their own casualties totalled two killed and 31 wounded, of whom three were able to carry on with their duties.

No 40 Commando, meanwhile – who had earlier passed rapidly through the area which had now been cleared by No 45 – had reached their first main objective, the Commercial Basin, at 1500 and occupied the offices of the Suez Canal Company. The next objective, the nearby Customs Warehouse, was strongly defended, and in their attempts to take it the marines lost two officers killed and three men wounded. They

finally managed to ferret out the Egyptians after Centurions had shelled the building for several minutes.

The huge stone structure of Navy House next door – which had been the Royal Navy's headquarters in Port Said during the years of British occupation – proved an even more difficult objective. Surrounded warehouses were cleared fairly quickly, but Navy House itself was defended by 130 heavily armed Egyptian soldiers who showed every determination to fight to the bitter end. After several unsuccessful and costly attempts to take the building the marines withdrew and requested an air strike. Shortly before dusk a formation of Sea Hawks arrived, and each aircraft dived down in turn to launch its rockets into the building. Many of the defenders managed to escape after dark; 20 more surrendered to the marines the following morning, leaving 30 dead behind them.

The British and French close support aircraft had been kept busy all day, often braving intense light flak and small arms fire to provide the necessary firepower for the ground forces. Two Sea Hawks and a Wyvern were shot down. The pilot of the Wyvern – an aircraft of *HMS Eagle's* No 830 Squadron – bailed out at 8,000ft over the Suez Canal when his engine caught fire near Ismailia; while a flight of French Navy Corsairs circled overhead and discouraged any Egyptians with bursts of machine gun fire, he set out to walk towards Israeli territory – but before he reached it a Whirlwind helicopter arrived from *HMS Bulwark* and rescued him.

The Whirlwinds and Sycamores of the JEHU had also been operating at maximum effort throughout the day. After landing the men of No 45 Commando and their stores they were fully occupied with casualty evacuation; they also flew in an advance party of No 215 Wing RAF and part of No 48 Field Squadron of the RAF Regiment. The RAF personnel immediately set to work removing the obstructions from Gamil airfield and preparing it to receive allied transport aircraft; the first of these, four Valettas of RAF Transport Command, arrived in the early afternoon. The main body of No 215 Wing reached Gamil the following morning, having landed at Port Said.

In the French sector, everything had proceeded according to plan. Here, too, the landings were to have been preceded by a naval bombardment, but this was cancelled when it was learned that the Paras had occupied Port Fuad. The first of the French seaborne forces, the 1st Foreign Legion Parachute Regiment, went ashore without opposition at 0535, pushing quickly through Port Fuad and then eastwards along the coast. At 0615 there was a sharp battle for possession of a strongly defended police post; the French lost two men, but they killed or captured 72 Egyptians and took a large quantity of equipment, including six anti-tank guns. General Beaufre lost no time in ordering the French armour – AMX light tanks – ashore; they were badly needed to support the paratroops at Raswa, who, since the Egyptians had rejected the chance of a ceasefire the previous evening, had been under attack by T-34 tanks and SU-100 self-propelled guns. The Raswa bridges were the only means of escape for the Egyptian forces trapped in Port Said, and enemy forces from the south made determined efforts to recapture them; however, all their efforts were frustrated by air strikes, which left the area dotted with the burnt-out remains of armoured fighting vehicles.

The first tanks to arrive at Raswa, in fact, were the British Centurions of A Squadron, 6th Royal Tanks. At 0830 on the morning of the 6th, the first LST berthed at Port Said's Casino Wharf – following hasty clearance operations by minesweepers and diving teams – and unloaded the Centurions, which moved off through No 40 Commando's area to assemble at Raswa by 1200. B Squadron of the 6th Tanks and the Regimental Headquarters were also landed in the LSTs *Salerno* and *Puncher* during the day.

Before nightfall, a total of 14 LSTs had unloaded their cargoes of troops, vehicles and stores at either the Casino Wharf or in Port Said's Fishing Harbour, while more troops came ashore from troopships which entered the Inner Harbour as soon as it was pronounced clear of mines. Among the first reinforcements to land were the men of the 16th Parachute Brigade Group, who were scheduled to drive on to Ismailia. The 2nd Parachute Battalion led the way off the troopship *Empire Parkeston*, closely followed by an advance party of the Guards Independent Parachute Company and supporting vehicles. As soon as they were assembled the Guards Company set off in their champs to link up with the French at Raswa, the men of the 2nd Battalion also heading for the same rendezvous on foot. There was still a good deal of sniper fire, although for the most part it was inaccurate and much of it was quickly suppressed by the paratroops or vigilant marines positioned at various lookout points.

The paratroops arrived at Raswa at 1900 hours and assembled in readiness to push on towards Ismailia. Reconnaissance patrols had indicated that they were not likely to encounter any opposition, and in fact the Centurions of A Squadron 6th Royal Tanks, with a section of French Paras clinging to their hulls, had already rolled on down the Canal as far as the Canal Company's radio station at El Tina without meeting any resistance. There the tanks halted to await the arrival of the main force. The plan was to complete the drive to Ismailia the following morning, with the land column supported if necessary by two more French parachute drops; one by Colonel Bigeard's 3rd RPC at El Qantara, the other by Colonel Meyer's 1 RPC near Ismailia itself.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, forces were at work which, before many more hours had passed, were to disrupt the entire military operation. First of all, strong pressure was being brought to bear on the British and French Governments to order a ceasefire now that fighting had ceased between the Egyptian and Israeli forces; and secondly, a series of alarming intelligence reports, most of them in fact false, were inundating the Allied Expeditionary Force Headquarters at Episkopi. Most of the reports stemmed from an apparent massive build-up of Soviet arms in Syria; as early as 2 November, the CCFO (Commandant en Chef des Forces francaises d'Orient) had been informed by GHQ in Paris that the Syrian Government had declared a state of emergency, and that foreign aircraft were forbidden to fly over Syrian territory until further notice. This was quickly followed by another report stating that Soviet freighters had unloaded 100 tanks and 120 artillery pieces at the Syrian port of Latakia.

On 6 November, reports began to come in rapidly. At 1422 GMT, a signal reached Allied Command in Cyprus from NATO Supreme Allied Command in Europe, indicating that Soviet jet traffic, apparently heading for Syria or Egypt, had been detected overflying Turkish air space at high altitude. The Turkish Air Force was placed on full alert, and in the course of the afternoon Hunters from Cyprus were scrambled to identify a suspect radar contact 50 miles north of Cape Andreas. The fighters climbed to 60,000ft and their pilots picked out the unidentified aircraft still 10,000ft higher up heading towards the Turkish coast. It was a Lockheed U-2.

At 1500 GMT the French Defence Department received intelligence from 'a reliable source' that six Russian submarines had been sighted on the approaches to Alexandria, and at 1540 an urgent signal arrived at Episkopi from London stating that 'Russia may take part in Middle East with force'. At 1805, a top secret signal from Paris warned Admiral Barjot 'to prepare the Fleet for defensive and offensive action against Soviet aircraft and warships'.

Reports such as these undoubtedly played their part in influencing the British Government's reply to ceasefire demands by the United Nations Secretary General. At 1800 the British Government replied that, pending confirmation that hostilities had

ceased between the Egyptian and Israeli forces and that a United Nations force would be sent into the combat area, British forces in Egypt would be ordered to cease fire with effect from midnight unless they were attacked. Eden had already telephoned the French Premier, Guy Mollet, and announced the Government's decision; Mollet, despite pressure from his cabinet, refused to continue without Britain's support.

Although the allied commanders in Egypt had been alerted by signal that a ceasefire was in the wind, the first confirmation that it was to take effect came via the BBC news. The report was received with some scepticism; there had been word of ceasefires before, and all of them had come to nothing. Nevertheless, it was decided that the force destined for Ismailia should press on as quickly as possible; even if a ceasefire were imposed there was no guarantee that it would not be broken later, and if this proved to be the case neither Brigadier Butler, commanding the 16th Parachute Brigade, nor his French counterparts thought it advisable for their forces still to be sitting astride the narrow causeway leading southwards from Port Said.

By 2300 hours the column was on the move again, racing for the open ground beyond the causeway. The first objective was El Cap, at the far end of the causeway and some 25 miles from Port Said, and General Stockwell had in fact instructed Butler to make every effort to reach this point by the ceasefire deadline of midnight. Butler's aim was to push on as far as El Qantara, several miles further on.

It was moonlight, and although the column was showing no lights it made good progress, the Centurions raising an enormous dust cloud as they thundered along. Behind them, the paratroops requisitioned every vehicle they could lay their hands on and joined in the race, which was not without its casualties; some of the men were injured when their vehicles struck bomb craters and turned over.

At 2345 – only 15 minutes before the ceasefire was due to take effect – the leading Centurions rumbled into the small village of El Cap, closely followed by jeeps carrying the first party of paratroops. By the time the latter had cleared the area, midnight was only seconds away. As they washed the dust of the drive south from their throats with hot tea, the men wondered whether they had seen the last of the action. The more experienced among them knew in their hearts that there was more fighting to come; as it turned out, they were right.

10 Occupation

First light on 7 November found the paratroops at El Cap still digging in on either side of the 250yd wide causeway, flanking anti-tank rifles and machine guns which had been set up to cover the roads and the open ground beyond. The Centurions were deployed further to the rear, their 20-pounder guns trained on Egyptian defensive positions some distance ahead. These were unoccupied but apparently intact, and fears that the enemy would take advantage of the ceasefire to regroup and move up their troops were justified when, shortly before noon, a lookout posted on top of the El Cap signal station detected movement among some trees about a mile away.

With orders to fire only if they were attacked, the paratroops waited to see what would happen, giving no sign that the enemy had been sighted. The Egyptian force, which was about 50 strong and wearing civilian clothes, closed to within 50yd of the British positions and fired several shots, one of which wounded a member of one of the tank crews. The tank commander immediately ordered his gunner to open fire with the Centurion's machine gun, and two of the attackers were shot dead. The remainder fled and escaped in some lorries which had been waiting some distance away.

The threat, however, was by no means over. During the early afternoon, clouds of dust betrayed the movement of enemy transport in the desert south of the causeway, while a concentration of vehicles began to build up among the trees ahead of the paratroops' positions. A Whirlwind helicopter of No 845 Squadron was called in to carry out a reconnaissance – during which it was fired on – and this revealed that the enemy build-up included armour. The possibility that the Egyptians might be preparing to launch a strong counter-offensive, preceded by air strikes, could not be discounted, and the paratroops set about strengthening their positions with railway sleepers and any other material that came to hand. The likelihood of an Egyptian attack became

even stronger towards nightfall, when air reconnaissance indicated a build-up of T-34 tanks and SU-100 self-propelled guns north of Ismailia. Not for the first time, the allied commanders were having serious regrets about halting their drive to comply with the ceasefire deadline.

Meanwhile, street fighting continued in Port Said, where groups of Egyptian snipers – most of them unaware that a ceasefire had been announced – continued to resist the advance of the Commandos and the 3rd Parachute Battalion through the burning streets. Cairo Radio made no mention of the ceasefire, continuing to pour out its exhortations to fight. At dawn on the 7th the paratroop battalion finally linked up with No 5 Commando, and together the men set about clearing the remaining pockets of resistance and seizing enemy arms. By the end of the day, No 45 Commando alone had seized no less than 57 three-ton truckloads of weapons and ammunition. The weapons ranged from ancient British 1914-pattern Lee Enfield rifles to modern Czech carbines. Any Russian or Czech equipment was retained for evaluation; the rest was neutralised and placed in a compound for eventual dumping in the sea. A search of the Arab shanty town on the 8th revealed further quantities of arms, much of them smuggled into Port Said aboard fishing boats. The boats were also used in attempts to ferry Egyptian troops out of the Port Said trap by way of the Manzala Canal, but the British soon realised what was happening and instituted a regular search routine of the dhows plying this route.

While clearing operations continued, the first steps were being taken to restore Port Said's administration. In the afternoon of the 7th, Royal Engineers began work on the main power station and the waterworks at Raswa; the plants themselves had suffered only minor damage, but their distribution systems had been seriously disrupted and it would be at least a week before they could be brought fully into action again. The sewage system was completely unreliable and kept breaking down, causing a serious health hazard that was to represent a major headache for the British during the entire period of the occupation.

Temporary hospitals, staffed initially by the Royal Army Medical Corps, were set up in hotels and other prominent buildings to deal with casualties – both military and civilian – which had accumulated during the fighting. British and French army doctors were also soon at work in the Egyptian hospitals, which were allocated medical supplies as soon as these were brought ashore in sufficient quantities. On the 9th an American Red Cross train – the first of several – arrived from Cairo, having passed the point where the British and Egyptians were still in confrontation at Al Cap without incident, and evacuated some 200 wounded to the Egyptian capital.

In general, the British attitude to the occupation of Port Said was a cautious one. At first, once the mopping-up of fanatical resistance groups had been completed, there was little evidence of open hostility towards the occupation forces; indeed, many Egyptians came forward with offers of assistance. The British, however, had reckoned without the damaging propaganda effect of Radio Cairo and had underestimated the influence of subversive elements at work in Port Said itself, controlled to a considerable extent by the Soviet Consul. The latter, in fact, became such a nuisance that General Stockwell ordered a party of armed British troops to tail him wherever he went. Nevertheless, Egyptian acts of terrorism increased sharply; several people known to be collaborating with the occupying forces were murdered and their homes burned, with the result that civilian working parties employed in the docks and elsewhere refused to co-operate any further. Looting increased, and despite the efforts of foot patrols to enforce a curfew armed terrorists appeared on the streets and sporadic sniping once again became a

hazard. Arms also continued to find their way into the Arab town, an area that represented a continual source of trouble.

The French attitude to occupation was somewhat different, as General Beaufre later described:

'Working on the 1948 Geneva agreements, the legal basis for our occupation authority should have been a "proclamation", the terms of which had been under discussion at Commanders-in-Chief level for months. Owing to minor amendments it was not ready when we landed. Although agreement was reached urgently, the proclamation was still not published either on 5 or 6 November. On the 7th the ceasefire created a new situation and the Foreign Office decreed that the proclamation should not be made. In spite of our protests this situation persisted and we were eventually told that one could "do without it", although this meant that legally we now had no authority. No Egyptian was amenable to our courts and we were left only with rights of requisition and arrest.

'The first and most urgent requirement was re-establishment of law and order. In the French zone this was assured from the outset thanks to the agreement reached with the police by Lt-Col Fossey-Francois when Port Fuad was taken. All houses had been searched, suspects arrested and weapons confiscated. The Egyptian police remained armed and the shops reopened. There was not a single attack on persons. As soon as any minor incident took place, punishment followed at once. For want of the "proclamation" I decided that "resisters" should be regarded as combatants (in accordance with the Geneva Convention) and they were treated as prisoners of war; generally they were released fairly quickly but threatened with deportation to France. Since, moreover, electricity and water supply had been re-established from the outset and food supply was assured (we distributed it), the atmosphere was good, even cordial, in spite of Cairo Radio. Port Fuad was of course a far easier proposition than Port Said, but I am convinced that similar methods would have succeeded there also.'

On the morning of Saturday 10 November, the troopships *New Australia*, *Empire Fowey* and *Asturias* dropped anchor among the allied fleet five miles off the Egyptian coast. The vessels carried the leading echelons of General Churcher's 3rd Division, comprising the 19th and 29th Infantry Brigades and the 1st Royal Tanks; they had completed the voyage from England in eight days. The arrival of the occupation troops made it possible to start the withdrawal of the marine and paratroop units; in fact, the 1st Parachute Battalion had already sailed for Cyprus on the 8th, and two days later orders were issued for the withdrawal of the remainder of the Parachute Brigade Group. It was originally intended that the paratroops should return direct to the United Kingdom, but in view of the tension in the Middle East, and the ever-present threat of Soviet military intervention, their destination was changed to Cyprus. The belief that the fighting might not yet be over was strengthened by reports that the Egyptians were working flat out to repair airfields in the Canal Zone, which suggested that they might be awaiting Russian or Czech reinforcements.

On 11 November the 1st Battalion Royal West Kents disembarked and moved up to El Cap, where they relieved the paratroops. By this time the Egyptian forces in opposition had now occupied all their defensive positions and were sending out reconnaissance patrols right up to the allied line; they also sent over occasional burst of machine gun fire, to which the paratroops replied.

That afternoon saw one of the tragedies which form a part of every war. While the paratroops were in the process of handing over to the Royal West Kents, a sand-

coloured jeep drove up from the direction of Port Said in a cloud of dust. Ignoring the signals of the British troops, the driver of the jeep – who wore a red beret – drove straight through the Allied line and headed for the Egyptian positions, waving gaily. There was a second man in the vehicle; he waved too.

The jeep was 300yd from the Egyptian defences when a burst of heavy machine gun fire hammered out, shattering its windscreen. The occupants crumpled and the vehicle slewed off the road, toppling into the Sweet Water Canal. Egyptian troops ran up and recovered the two bodies. The dead men were Press photographers: Jean Roy of *Paris Match* and an American, David Seymour. Both had been in the thick of the action since the first allied landings, and for some days had been acting rather like Scarlet Pimpernels in Port Said and Port Fuad, rescuing Egyptian civilians from the ruins and feeding them with 'requisitioned' supplies. On more than one occasion, Jean Roy – indistinguishable from a French paratrooper in his camouflaged smock and red beret – had driven his jeep up to British supply depots in Port Said and emerged laden with dried milk and other foodstuffs to nourish a small army of Egyptian orphan children who had gathered around him, blithely signing the chits thrust at him by harrassed British officers with the name Philippe Petain. A born adventurer, he had been a liaison officer with the US 101st Airborne Division during World War II and had parachuted into Normandy with them. He had come to Egypt straight from the shattered streets of Budapest, where his assignment had been to cover the Hungarian uprising.

Although the Allied occupation forces went out of their way to cooperate with the war correspondents who descended on Egypt from all over the world, journalists and other visitors became a distinct nuisance to the troops manning the El Cap positions as the days went by. This was the only point at which allied forces were confronted by regular Egyptian Army troops, and quite naturally everyone wanted to have a look at the 'front line'. Those who had expected to see some action were in for a disappointment; the Egyptians obligingly refrained from sending over their token bursts of gunfire until the visitors had departed, and appeared to be interested only in sunbathing on top of their dugouts. All the visitors accomplished, in fact, was to disturb clouds of dust that clogged the throats and weapons of the cursing front-line troops, and to interfere with the genuine observations of allied commanders who were anxious to formulate tactics to deal with a possible enemy counter-attack.

Meanwhile, on 10 November, airlifting of the United Nations police force destined for Egypt had begun when 51 Danish soldiers arrived in Naples in a Douglas C-124 Globemaster of the USAF. Similar aircraft also picked up Norwegian troops in Oslo and brought them to Naples, where arrangements were made to ferry them to Egypt on board Swissair DC-6Bs. Several UN observers arrived in Port Said on the 11th, in advance of the main contingent, and travelled to El Cap where they visited both the Allied and Egyptian positions.

In Port Said, the 3rd Parachute Battalion was relieved by the Royal Fusiliers on 13 November, while control of No 45 Commando's area was taken over by the 1st Royal Scots. No 45, together with the Brigade HQ and No 40 Commando, embarked on the troopship *Empire Fowey* the following day and sailed for Malta, arriving on the 17th. On the 21st the Royal Fusiliers moved up to El Cap to relieve the Royal West Kents, and a week later they were relieved in turn by the 1st Battalion of the York and Lancaster Regiment. The York and Lancasters were still there when, on 30 November, two companies of Danish UN troops arrived in a train from Abu Sueir. The British troops finally left their forward positions on 7 December, having completed their handover to the Danes, and the next day they embarked on *HMS Theseus* for the return voyage to the United Kingdom.

The arrival of the United Nations force, however, did not necessarily mean that the Anglo-French military task was over. If no political compromise could be reached, there was always the possibility that arrangements would have to be made for a lengthy stay in Port Said, coupled with the occupation of the entire Canal Zone. It was not until 3 December that definitive plans were laid for a complete withdrawal.

At the beginning of December the Port Said garrison consisted of the Royal Scots, the West Yorkshire Regiment, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Royal Fusiliers and the Royal West Kents, the first three forming the 19th Infantry Brigade and the others part of the 29th. The British troops were assisted by 800 Egyptian police, while a further 350, brought in from Cairo, worked alongside the United Nations force. At Port Fuad, the French maintained one brigade comprising the 2nd Colonial Parachute Regiment, the 1st Foreign Legion Parachute Regiment and a squadron of AMX tanks.

The French-occupied areas remained generally quiet. This was far from true in Port Said, particularly in the Arab town, which lay in the Royal Scots' sector. Isolated grenade throwing incidents gave way to a spate of grenade attacks on British posts and shooting in the streets; although Radio Cairo had been jammed on General Stockwell's orders, the flames of unrest were fanned by a growing underground movement in Port Said, which continued to flourish despite a British proclamation threatening severe penalties for anyone caught intimidating Egyptians who were eager to cooperate with the occupying power. In the background, too, was the worrying fact that the Egyptians had taken full advantage of the ceasefire to consolidate their military position in Qantara and Ismailia; if the allied advance along the Canal had to be resumed for any reason, securing these objectives could turn out to be a costly business.

Since the Allied commanders were aware that street violence in Port Said was likely to escalate wildly as the date for evacuation approached, the latter was kept a closely guarded secret. Nevertheless, as December wore on the street attacks increased in their viciousness. On the 10th, a lieutenant of the West Yorkshire Regiment was kidnapped and murdered by terrorists. It later appeared that they had intended to hold him to ransom, but that he had suffocated when they locked him, bound and gagged, in a cupboard. In another incident an Egyptian policeman was shot dead, and a major in the Royal Scots fatally wounded when a patrol was ambushed. On 15 December, the biggest clash since the ceasefire occurred when a large band of armed terrorists roamed through the streets of the Arab town; on General Stockwell's orders troops went in to quell the disturbance, supported by Centurion tanks, and 30 Egyptians were killed or wounded in the ensuing skirmish.

II

Evacuation

By 20 December the total number of United Nations troops in Egypt stood at 6,000, made up of contingents from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Colombia and India, under the overall command of the Canadian General Burns. Their first task was to provide a buffer between the Egyptian and British forces at El Cap, enabling the British to pull back along the causeway. The United Nations force would then begin to assume gradual responsibility for Port Said, providing guards for vital installations and ensuring, as far as possible, that the administration of the area continued to function while the allied evacuation took place. The plan was for the British and French forces to assemble within a perimeter close to the entrance of the Canal, separated from the rest of the port by a barbed wire fence.

Because of the size of the allied force, working out a timetable for the evacuation presented a great many problems. During the first week of December there were some 22,000 allied troops in Port Said and the surrounding area, together with 4,800 vehicles and over 10,000 tons of stores and equipment, and it was estimated that about three weeks would be needed to evacuate them all. To add to the problem, several hundred Allied nationals would also have to be evacuated.

Eventually, it was decided that the rearguard of the allied force would consist of the 19th Brigade, a squadron of the 6th Royal Tanks, two battalions of the French Foreign Legion and a squadron of AMX tanks, together with a French Naval detachment. The evacuation began in earnest on 7 December, and by the 14th more than 11,000 British troops had been taken out of Port Said on *HMS Theseus* and the troopships *Ascania* and *Dilwara*, priority being given to reservists and time-expired National Servicemen. They were closely followed by the contingent of Allied nationals, many of whom had been released by the Egyptians at the very last moment in exchange for 250 of their own who had been held by the British and French.

The final evacuation was to take place on 22 December, by which time the remaining British and French forces had withdrawn behind their perimeter. The occasion was not without its emotion; the Union Flag still flew defiantly over prominent buildings as the last British troops to leave took their stations near the Casino Palace Hotel, while over in Port Fuad the French troops marched past their commanders in full battle order, with colours flying, before making their way down to the main pier. In both Port Said and Port Fuad, the last troops embarked at 1700, and the codeword Lobster advised Allied HQ in Cyprus that the Anglo-French forces were now clear of Egyptian soil.

Operation Musketeer was over. But for some Anglo-French units, there was still a great deal of work to be done in Egypt. These were the Naval salvage teams which, operating under United Nations control, now set about the task of clearing obstructions from the Suez Canal. The British and French salvage operations, which in fact had begun soon after the Allied Expeditionary Force landed, were restricted to that part of the Canal which had been occupied and under Anglo-French control after the ceasefire; it was a monumental task, for in Port Said harbour alone there were 24 scuttled vessels of up to 3,600 tons, and the bottoms of most of them had been ripped out by explosions. The Egyptians had scuttled a further 27 vessels along the length of the Canal between Port Said and Suez; these included tugs, dredgers, barges filled with concrete, salvage vessels and a tank landing craft. A few were completely submerged. The Egyptians had also blown the 165ft railway bridge at El Ferdan, halfway down the Canal, and a pontoon bridge at the southern end of Lake Timsah. Sixteen freighters and tankers had been trapped in the Canal by the wrecks.

It was fortunate that the planners of Operation Musketeer had had the foresight to include a number of salvage craft among the invasion fleet; it meant that work on removing obstructions could begin without delay, and by the end of November the salvage teams had cleared a 25ft deep channel as far as El Cap as well as opening Port Said harbour to vessels of up to 10,000 tons. The larger wrecks were cleared by two German heavy-lifting vessels, the *Energie* and *Ausdauer*, which were chartered by the British Admiralty from a Hamburg company.

In the middle of December the Anglo-French Salvage Command, under Rear-Admiral Jean Campion, consisted of 40 vessels, 19 of which were at work in the Canal Zone and the remainder standing by in case the go-ahead was given to begin clearance operations beyond El Cap. Proposals to this effect, however, were rejected outright by the Egyptian Government, which insisted that any further clearance must be undertaken by neutral salvage teams organised by the United Nations. But for this objection, the Anglo-French Salvage Command – which had already demonstrated the efficiency and speed with which it was capable of operating – could have cleared the whole of the Canal by the end of January 1957 at the latest. Instead, clearance work was to drag on for a further three months.

The United Nations finally undertook not only to clear the Canal, but also to raise the 40 million dollars or so that it would take to pay for the operation. The work was to be supervised by a 71-year old American, General Raymond A. Wheeler, who as an engineer had been responsible for several major harbour clearance operations during World War II. After setting up his headquarters in Ismailia the general issued a timetable for the clearance operation, which turned out in practice to be greatly over-optimistic. As a first step, he envisaged the extension as far as Suez – to be completed by early in March – of the channel already cleared up to El Cap by the Anglo-French Salvage Command, allowing passage to vessels of up to 10,000 tons. This task would mean the removal of nine wrecks, none of which could be salvaged; they would have to

be dragged or floated clear of the projected shipping channel and dismembered at a later date. Some of the sunken vessels – those filled with concrete, for example – would have to be cut up under water, as would the El Ferdan railway bridge.

Once the 25ft channel had been pushed through to Suez work could begin on dismantling the wrecks and dredging the whole of the Canal, so that sea traffic of pre-October 1956 proportions could start to flow through it once more. Provision would also have to be made for a new fleet of tugs and maintenance vessels, for most of the original ones had been sunk by the Egyptians. At the same time, the UN salvage teams would set about restoring the harbour facilities in Port Said and Suez.

The assembly of Wheeler's salvage fleet took much longer than had been anticipated, and indeed it would probably not have been possible at all had not the Egyptian Government finally agreed, under strong pressure from the United Nations, that 18 British and one French salvage vessels be retained to assist in clearing Port Said. The Egyptians, however, insisted on a number of conditions; among them that the crews of the British and French ships wore civilian clothes and did not venture ashore, that the vessels flew United Nations flags and that UN troops patrolled the banks of the Canal in the area where they were operating.

At the end of December General Wheeler's fleet comprised 19 vessels, including the two German heavy lifting craft whose charter had been taken over by the United Nations. Their crews were a mixed bag, coming in the main from Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany. On 24 January the British and French salvage ships departed, having completed their task of clearing Port Said; together they had cleared a total of 17,000 tons of wrecks, despite the difficult conditions and the un-cooperative atmosphere in which they had been forced to work.

By 1 February the United Nations salvage fleet had succeeded in clearing about half the wrecks congesting the Canal between El Cap and Suez. Further operations were held up for some time by the LST *Akka*, which was crammed with concrete and firmly embedded in the side of the Canal, with much of her submerged under 40 feet of water. The German crews of the *Energie* and *Ausdauer* finally managed to work steel cables under her and hoist her on to an even keel, but it was two and a half weeks before her bulk was finally raised and removed.

The Canal clearance operation was completed on 7 May. The first British and French ships had already passed through the waterway in April, a few days before Nasser submitted a proposal to the United Nations promising the 'unimpeded use of the Canal by ships of all nations'. The United Nations accepted the proposal with some reservation, as there were still many loopholes in it; reservation or not it represented a political victory for the Egyptian Government, and the final seal was set upon it when, in July 1958, the Suez Canal Company recognised Egyptian ownership of the Canal.

The 'unimpeded use of the Canal by ships of all nations' was an invitation that did not extend to Israel, although the latter's victory in Sinai and the capture of the Straits of Tiran had given her access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Even Israel's freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran was bought at a heavy price; the withdrawal of her forces from Sinai and their replacement by a United Nations Expeditionary Force.

The inability of such a force to impose any kind of guarantee was to be amply demonstrated 10 years later, when it packed its bags and departed in the face of a massive Egyptian military build-up in Sinai. On 5 June 1967 Israel, to ensure her survival, once again attacked; this time her troops advanced to the edge of the Suez Canal, and the might of the Egyptian armed forces, built up painstakingly with Russian help over a decade, was shattered.

12

Aftermath

In terms of human life, the cost to the Allies of Operation Musketeer had been small. British casualties totalled 22 killed and 97 wounded, some of them as a result of attacks by Allied aircraft; the French lost 10 killed and 33 wounded. Altogether the Allies lost 10 aircraft, including the Canberra shot down over Syria; three of these aircraft were destroyed as a result of accidents. Egyptian casualties in Port Said totalled 650 killed and 2,100 wounded, 900 seriously, with a further 100 killed and 250 wounded in Port Fuad. Taking the Sinai Campaign into account, the total number of Egyptian dead was estimated at 3,000.

The financial cost of the operation has never been satisfactorily established. According to the Conservatives it was £100 million; the Labour Party, on the other hand, arrived at a figure of £328 million, taking into account loss of exports and the increase in the cost of imports resulting directly from the operation.

The Suez Expedition was, in all probability, the last great amphibious assault in history. It was also the last time that Imperial forces attempted to impose their will on a weaker nation by armed might. It was an anachronism, and its failure as a political bludgeon is legendary.

As a military operation, despite the logistical problems that dogged it and the many differences of opinion among the British and French commanders, it was a success as far as it went, it would in all probability have been an even great success had it not been for the ceasefire that brought it to a premature halt. In the final analysis it is surprising that the operation unrolled so smoothly, taking into account the fact that its planning had been ponderous and that it had been launched too late, and also that the plan itself had been subjected to last-minute changes. General Beaufre summed up the position clearly:

'The first error was to change the plan less than a fortnight before the first planned launching date and substitute Port Said for the Alexandria landing. Even if the Alexandria operation was less good, we would have done better to adhere to it at that late stage rather than involve ourselves in the vacillations of which we all know. At that time we ought to have insisted on launching the operation on 15 September, even if everything was not ready. The Egyptians were even less ready than we were and the Canal was still intact. Finally, by moving on Cairo, we should have made the object of the operation clear, which later it was not.'

A surprise attack on the Canal, without the lengthy preliminary of air bombardment, might have prevented its blockage. An airborne thrust from Cyprus on Port Said and Ismailia, supported by the hundred or so tanks for which landing craft were available and preceded by an air offensive lasting 24 hours or less, might have done the trick. Supporting vehicles could have been landed very quickly from half a dozen or so freighters, enabling the paratroops to operate until the arrival of a major convoy. Their operations could also have been supported by helicopters from the Royal Navy's carriers, which would in any case have been providing air cover from the outset.

The Canal might still have been captured intact had the Allied shipping not been subjected to so many loading delays after the decision to launch Musketeer was taken on 18 October. If the convoys had been ready to sail on that date, or even shortly afterwards, the first landings could have taken place on 1 November instead of five days later, by which time the Anglo-French operation had become inextricably linked in the eyes of the world with the Israeli offensive in Sinai. Apart from that, by 5 November the Israeli offensive had resulted in large numbers of Egyptian troops being withdrawn across the Canal; had they still been on the other side they could have been taken neatly in the rear by a rapid Allied thrust along the waterway.

What would have happened if the Allies had ignored the ceasefire and progressed to the end of the Canal? What would have happened if they had attacked first, before Israel launched her offensive? What would have happened if Operation Musketeer had not taken place at all? These are questions which can never be answered. What does emerge from the unhappy affair, however, is a clear pointer to the development of conventional tactics and strategy within the military structures of France and Britain over the two decades that followed. To put it bluntly, Musketeer was worthwhile if only because it helped to sort out the muddled military thinking that had characterised the postwar years in both countries. Even in the nuclear age, armed forces must be geared towards fighting a conventional war. This was the lesson hammered home by Musketeer, even if the conflicts in Korea and Indo-China had not already done so. Unfortunately, the Americans – with all their hardware – were still learning it 10 years later, in Vietnam.

As far as the British were concerned, Musketeer was followed by a thorough streamlining of the armed services, with emphasis on the fast movement of air and surface forces to any part of the world in the 'fire-fighting' role. One of the early results was the re-equipment of the RAF's strategic transport squadrons, and a recognition of the fact that the type of aircraft used by them needed to keep pace with the times. Musketeer ably demonstrated, too, the value of helicopter assault, and not long afterwards the carriers *Theseus* and *Ocean* were converted to this role. Later, the larger carriers *HMS Bulwark* and *HMS Albion* were completely rebuilt as commando carriers; they were subsequently to prove their worth in Kuwait, Malaysia and the troubled Arabian Gulf states.

The operation also pointed to the value of retaining an independent nuclear

deterrent. At the climax of *Musketeer*, when the Soviet Union made thinly-veiled threats of atomic retaliation against London and Paris, Britain's nuclear weapons were still in the testing stage and France had still to detonate her first atomic device. Even a nuclear force only fractionally as large as that of the Soviet Union still represents a powerful insurance against nuclear blackmail, and it should not be forgotten that the situation where such blackmail could be used might one day arise again, in the absence of a deterrent.

The most serious consequence of *Musketeer* for both Britain and France was the terrific blow the outcome of the operation dealt to both military and civilian morale. Even before the occupation ended, the morale of the troops was, quite understandably in the circumstances, visibly affected. This was particularly true of the French, who had already suffered the trauma of their defeat in Indo-China only two years earlier and who were now embroiled in the bitter conflict of Algeria. General Beaufre, in fact, was of the later opinion that the experience of Suez was in no small part to blame for the subsequent attitude of the French Army in Algeria, culminating in the revolt there of the 3rd Parachute Regiment in 1961 when the country was moving towards independence.

Even before the last Allied troops had withdrawn from Egypt, Colonel Nasser was already using his powers of political oratory to turn his defeat into a victory in the eyes of the Moslem world – a world in which the former great powers of Britain and France, whom the Suez adventure had shown to be incapable of taking successful large-scale military action on their own initiative, had been seriously discredited. Discredited, too, in the eyes of the rest of the world – not primarily because they undertook the venture, but because they hesitated and wavered for so long before finally launching it. The Allies could have attained their objectives if they had acted with the audacity and speed that had always characterised their previous military operations; that this did not happen was the fault mainly of the British Government, anxious to preserve its treaties with Jordan and to prevent its relations with the rest of the Arab countries from deteriorating still further.

In France, one man saw the possible future implications of *Musketeer* from a military standpoint perhaps more clearly than any other. In his temporary retirement at Colombey-les-deux-Eglises, General Charles de Gaulle was kept fully informed of events as they developed by an officer of the French General Staff, acting on the government's authority. De Gaulle in no way disapproved of the Allies' initiative, although predictably he came out strongly against the leadership of the operation being vested in the British; he did, however, recognise that the Suez adventure had produced damaging undercurrents within the structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, of which both France and Britain were member nations. Within the NATO alliance, attitudes were sharply divided; some countries saw the Suez operation as simply a temporary quarrel in the strong Anglo-French-American relationship, others as a germ of dissent which, if it was allowed to grow, could lead to the destruction of the plans for joint military action which had been so painstakingly laid by NATO over the preceding eight years.

At this point de Gaulle's doctrine vis-à-vis the Atlantic Alliance was already firmly established, but the Suez affair was to provide him with a justification, or a pretext, for his later actions leading up to the French withdrawal from NATO. Announcing his country's decision to pull out of the Alliance at the beginning of 1966, de Gaulle stated:

'In 1956, at the time of the Suez affair, neither France nor Britain had been attacked by Egypt. When Marshal Bulganin, in the name of the Soviet Union, threatened to send

rockets on Paris and London, the United States showed evidence by their attitude that their obligations to NATO did not enter into the matter.'

De Gaulle went on to apply this precedent to a hypothetical situation: if the danger of a world war were to result from an attack on Communist China by the United States, and if the Soviet Union were dragged into the conflict in the process of escalation and launched an attack on the United States, France should show no more concern than did the United States at the time of Suez. He concluded: 'We wish to retain the right to refuse to become involved in any conflict, just as the Americans did at Suez.'

The Suez Expedition, then, produced repercussions and undertones in both the military and political sense which are still being felt today, over two decades later. For two great colonial powers who had once ruled over half the world between them, it gave impetus to the Great Homecoming; an escape from the burden of imperialism and a return, in the process, of some of that prestige which had been lost.

If there is to be a last word about the Suez Adventure, let it go to one of the men who took part; an officer of the Royal Fusiliers, for whom the final sentence of the chapter was written in an unexpected manner as he disembarked from the troopship that had brought him back to England:

'There was a small boy on the quayside; he can't have been more than 10 or 11. As we filed past him towards our waiting transport, festooned with rifles and equipment, he came up and asked me where we had come from. I told him Egypt.

"Oh, yes," he said, "You were the lot that got kicked out, weren't you?"

'And it hurt. Because it was true.'

Appendices

1. Disposition of British and French Air Units

| <i>Base</i> | <i>Squadrons</i> | <i>Aircraft</i> | |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Luqa/Hal Far | 9 | Canberra B6 | |
| | 12 | Canberra B6 | |
| | 15 | Canberra B 2 | |
| | 37 | Shackleton MR2 | |
| | 101 | Canberra B6 | |
| | 109 | Canberra B6 | |
| | 138 | Valiant B1 | |
| | 139 | Canberra B6 | |
| | 148 | Valiant B1 | |
| | 207 | Valiant B1 | |
| | 214 | Valiant B1 | |
| | Nicosia | 1 | Hunter F5 |
| | | 10 | Canberra B2 |
| 15 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 18 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 27 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 30 | | Valetta C1 | |
| 34 | | Hunter F5 | |
| 35 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 44 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 61 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 70 | | Hastings C1/2 | |
| 84 | | Valetta C1 | |
| 99 | | Hastings C1/2 | |
| 114 | | Valetta C1 | |
| 115 | | Canberra B2 | |
| 511 | | Hastings C1/2 | |
| Tymbou | | 61eme Escadre | Noratlas |
| | 63eme Escadre | Noratlas, C-47 | |
| Akrotiri | 6 | Venom FB4 | |
| | 13 | Canberra PR7 | |
| | 32 | Venom FB4 | |
| | 39 | Meteor NF13 | |
| | 73 | Venom FB4 | |
| | 249 | Venom FB4 | |
| | 543 | Valiant B(PR)1 | |
| | 1903 Flight | Auster AOP6 | |
| | 3eme Escadre | F-84F Thunderstreak | |
| 33eme Escadre | RF-84F Thunderflash | | |
| Israel | 1ere Escadre | F-84F Thunderstreak | |
| | 2eme Escadre | Mystère IVA | |
| | 64eme Escadre | Noratlas | |

| <i>Aircraft Carrier</i> | <i>Squadron</i> | <i>Aircraft</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <i>HMS Eagle</i> | 830 | Wyvern S4 |
| | 831 | Wyvern S4 |
| | 849 A Flt | Skyraider AEW 1 |
| | 891 | Sea Venom FAW 21 |
| | 893 | Sea Venom FAW 21 |
| | 899 | Sea Hawk FGA 4 |
| <i>HMS Albion</i> | 800 | Sea Hawk FGA 4 |
| | 802 | Sea Hawk FGA 3 |
| | 809 | Sea Venom FAW 22 |
| | 810 | Sea Hawk FGA 6 |
| | 849 B Flt | Skyraider AEW 1 |
| | 894 | Sea Venom FAW 21 |
| 895 | Sea Venom FAW 21 | |
| <i>HMS Bulwark</i> | 804 | Sea Hawk FGA 4 |
| | 897 | Sea Hawk FGA 4 |
| <i>HMS Theseus</i> | 845 | Whirlwind HAS 22 |
| <i>HMS Ocean</i> | JEHU | Whirlwind, Sycamore |
| <i>Arromanches</i> | Flotille 14F | F4U-7 Corsair |
| | Flotille 15F | F4U-7 Corsair |
| <i>Lafayette</i> | Flotille 9F | TBM-3 Avenger |

Note on Colour Schemes and Markings

| <i>Type</i> | <i>Squadron</i> | <i>Representative aircraft</i> | <i>Colour Scheme</i> |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Canberra B2 | 10 | WH667 | Silver overall. White pheasant, insignia of Honington Wing, on fin and red winged arrow on tip tanks |
| Canberra B6 | 12 | WH970 | Silver overall. Red 'leaping fox' insignia on fin |
| Canberra PR7 | 13 | WE137 | Sea grey/light slate grey upper surfaces; PR blue under surfaces Silver tip tanks |
| Valiant B1 | 148 | XD814 | Silver overall Although it has been stated that no Valiants in the Suez operation carried invasion stripes*, these were in fact displayed on several aircraft of 207 and 214 Sqns |
| Hunter F5 | 34 | WP185 | Dark green/dark sea grey upper surfaces, silver under surfaces. Arrowhead-shaped sqn. checkerboard marking on nose, with wolf and crescent moon sqn. badge superimposed |
| Venom FB4 | 6 | WR476 | Dark green/dark sea grey upper surfaces. Red 'flying canopener' sqn. marking on tip tanks |
| Meteor NF13 | 39 | WM313 | Dark green/dark sea grey upper surfaces, medium grey under surfaces. Sqn markings on fuselage |

**Note:* The invasion stripes carried by the aircraft participating in Musketeer were to be, according to the official order, one foot wide, two black on three yellow. Most of the RAF and FAA units complied with this, although some Sea Hawks and Sea Venoms carried yellow stripes only. French Navy aircraft and FAF F-84Fs carried no stripes, although six inch wide stripes were applied to the FAF's Mystères before the latter left France.

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|---------------|---|
| Sea Hawk | 802 | WM995 (Z/138) | Dark sea grey upper surfaces, sky under surfaces. Sqn badge on nose |
| Sea Venom | 809 | XG613 (222/Z) | Dark sea grey upper surfaces, sky under surfaces. Sqn badge on nose (Gold phoenix) |
| Wyvern | 830 | WN325 (373/J) | Dark sea grey upper surfaces; sky under surfaces |
| Skyraider | 849 | WT947 (422/Z) | Midnight blue overall. Code letters in white on rear fuselage |
| F-84F | 3eme Escadre | 29079 (3-VX) | Natural metal overall. Code in black on nose. 2-ft wide yellow band with black border around fuselage aft of wing root. Escadre badge below cockpit |
| Mystère IVA | 2eme Escadre | 2-EG | Silver overall, with red 'lightning flash' along fuselage. Code in black aft of cockpit |
| Corsair | Flotille 15F | 15F.II | Midnight blue overall. Code in white aft of cockpit; 15F's mermaid insignia on fin |
| Avenger | Flotille 9F | 9.F15 | Midnight blue overall. Code in white aft of cockpit and on fin |

3 Egyptian Air Force Order Of Battle, 29 October 1956

| Base | Squadron No | Equipment | Strength | Remarks |
|------------|-------------|----------------|----------|------------|
| Abu Sueir | 30 | MiG-15 | 15 | |
| Fayid | 2 | Vampire FB5 | 15 | |
| Fayid | 5 | Meteor 4 | 12 | |
| Fayid | 40 | Meteor 8 and 7 | 20 | |
| | | Vampire FB5 | 10 | |
| Kasfareet | 31 | Vampire FB5 | 15 | |
| Kabrit | 1 | MiG-15 | 15 | |
| Kabrit | 20 | MiG-15 | 15 | |
| Cairo West | 8 | Il-28 | 12 | Organising |
| Cairo West | 9 | Il-28 | 12+ 5 | in reserve |
| Almaza | 3 | Il-14 | 20 | |
| Almaza | 7 | C-46 | 20 | |
| Almaza | 10 | Meteor NF13 | 6 | |
| Almaza | 11 | C-47 | 20 | |

Note: Miscellaneous types on the EAF's inventory at the time of the Suez crisis included one Lancaster, six Hawker Furies, a small number of Spitfires, Chipmunks, Harvards, Fiat G55Bs, Yak-11s and Egyptian-built Bücker Bestmanns. Two Halifaxes had been used for transport work, but these were scrapped before October 1956.

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