

RAAF Participation in the Sinai 1976-79 & 1982-86

Israel occupied the Sinai, which was Egyptian territory, during the Arab-Israeli War 1967. The Egyptians failed to recapture it during the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 and although major fighting ceased the conflict continued until disengagement agreements were signed between Israel and Egypt in 1974-75. A United Nation peacekeeping force was established in the Sinai peninsula to supervise the redeployment of Egyptian and Israeli forces and to man and control the buffer zones established under those agreements

UNEF Sinai, 1976-79

On 10 June 1976 a 16-man forward party left Canberra to prepare for the arrival at Ismailia, Egypt, of the air unit committed by Australia to the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) in Sinai.



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The unit, referred to as AUSTAIR, was required to help monitor the 300-kilometre-long buffer zone separating Egyptian and Israeli forces after the 1973 war fought along the Suez Canal. At full strength, AUSTAIR comprised four Iroquois helicopters operated by 13 officers and 32 airmen—all drawn from the RAAF except four aircrew and maintenance personnel from the RAN. The first helicopter was flown from No 5 Squadron at RAAF Base Fairbairn by C-130 on 8 July, with the rest following in further C-130 flights that month, and the first mission in support of UNEF was flown on 1 August. The unit remained in Sinai for three years before being withdrawn in mid 1979.

Some Personal Observations

“.. Living accommodation for the AUSTAIR troops was at the Sinai Palace hotel downtown. A palace it certainly was not. Nevertheless, with typical Australian ingenuity, it had been turned into a comfortable home away from home.

Flying operations were always interesting and at times challenging (especially during the sandstorm season). The Unit’s main tasks were to provide the four UNEF battalions (from Finland, Ghana, Indonesia and Sweden) in the buffer zone on the eastern side of the Suez Canal with logistics and reconnaissance support as well as medical evacuation.

The Sinai desert over which we ranged was replete with wreckage from some of the biggest tank battles in history as well as that of many aircraft that had been shot down during the campaign. In addition there was the constant concern of minefields that seemed to be almost everywhere. One had to exercise great care if landing outside of known mine-free areas..”

A Situation Evolves

On 26 March 1979 a formal Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty was signed in Washington DC. This treaty normalised relations between the two nations and involved the complete withdrawal by Israel of its armed forces and civilians from the Sinai peninsula. As a result UNEF was no longer required and it was subsequently withdrawn.

On the ground, however, it soon became clear that the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai was itself a potential hot spot which could re-ignite the conflict if not conducted under the watchful eyes of an international force of observers. Australia was again able to contribute to this effort by deploying a RAAF Rotary Wing Aviation Unit (RWAU).

Multi-National Force Sinai, 1982-86



The Rotary Wing Aviation Unit of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) body—to which the RAAF contributed eight of the ten Iroquois helicopters required—flew its first mission from El Gorah on 24 March 1982. El Gorah was the unit's operating base in the north-eastern Sinai, situated about 20 kilometres from the Mediterranean coast.

The US-led MFO was established in 1981 to monitor arrangements for the return of Egyptian territory in the Sinai which Israel had occupied since 1967

After Australia agreed to take part, the RAAF helicopters were delivered to Ashdod, Israel, by the heavy landing ship HMAS *Tobruk* on 19 March 1982, and the 89 personnel drawn from the RAAF, RAN and Australian Army arrived by RAAF B-707 transport the next day. On 21 March, the aircraft flew to El Gorah.

Some Personal Observations

“.. My second peacekeeping operation in the Sinai has to be one of the best, if not the best, job that I had in my almost 33 years in the RAAF.

As the planning task grew and got more urgent, I sought permission to have other key contingent personnel nominated and posted to the planning team. This necessitated me drawing up an organisational diagram for a unit with an unknown number and type of aircraft and an unknown number of personnel! A further complication at this time was that it seemed that there would now be some New Zealand participation and that they would form part of a combined Australian/New Zealand aviation unit.

Most memorable moment – why? My arrest for espionage in Port Said. (I had taken a couple of photos where I apparently shouldn't have!).

Relationships with other contingents varied: Brits tended to be cool and rather condescending toward the 'uncouth' Australians and New Zealanders....Good with USA personnel. Dutch and Norwegians were polite but rarely friendly –New Zealand: very good, although they suffered from the national tendency to dislike Australians on principle; Uruguayans – very little contact; few spoke English and even less of us spoke Spanish.....Colombians – good working relationship with officers; otherwise, little contact..... Fijians – good working relationship with officers; generous and attentive hosts when I visited their contingent club, but largely kept to themselves.

Most memorable moment – why? I was responsible for hosting the Commanding Officer of the Fijian Battalion (FIJIBATT), one LTCOL Sitiveni (Steve) Rabuka, an impressive-looking man who had played rugby for Fiji and who had previously served with the UN in Lebanon. A couple of days later when I was chatting with MAJ outside the Tactical Operations Centre where we both worked, we eventually discussed the Australia Day celebrations. remarked "I think we'll hear more of Steve Rabuka in South West Pacific politics one day". I wonder if he ever reflected on that conversation or that statement?"

The RWAU contingent remained in the Sinai until March 1986, when Australia withdrew from the MFO to reduce its peacekeeping commitments.

Overall

The RAAF contingents to the Sinai during the 1970s and 80s were a vital tool that helped to strengthen Australia's international standing. It physically demonstrated our nation's commitment to global security and ensured that the international community knew that Australians were willing to risk their lives to maintain peace elsewhere. Although relatively small, these RAAF commitments produced considerable positive diplomatic effects.