

The Suez Campaign of 1956.... as remembered by **Pat McKeown** in 2010.
or, “Sir Anthony Eden and my part in his downfall” (with acknowledgements to Spike Milligan!)



Pat McKeown – outside the Loutfi Villa
and adjacent mosque, Port Said Nov. 1956

I was suddenly called up on deck of the troopship Empire Ken, and looking out to port, could see smoke rising from the city of Alexandria. British and French bombers had just delivered their loads as part of a feint attack to distract the Egyptians from their defence of Port Said where we then landed on a very crowded beach close to the port later that afternoon. Somehow it seemed appropriate that it was the 5th November (1956).

As Lieutenant Pat McKeown, Royal Engineers, called back to military service as a member of the Royal Army Reserve of Officers [RARO] and within 84 Regiment RE, (AER), I was in charge of a group of 50 port operating and maintenance engineers, landing 12 hours after the paratroopers and commandos. We had the remit to clear several quays of “sabotage” debris to enable barges to offload equipment and supplies from the offshore invasion fleet in this shallow-water port.

I was very fortunate to have with me as 2/ic, Lt. Tom Mather who demonstrated outstanding initiative and leadership; we were both novices in wartime activities. We also had four very experienced senior Warrant Officers who were highly supportive with their previous war experience, calm efficiency, hard work and natural authority.

This, the “Suez Crisis” or as I prefer to call it, the “Suez Escapade” was to be a very formative experience for a 26 year old whose wife, Mary, was pregnant with our first child and who had been in his first proper job for only two weeks when called back to military service in July 1956 and apparently known to his new work colleagues as “the two-week wonder”.

On leaving school, I did most of my National Service, 1949/1951, in the Royal Engineers at the military port of Marchwood opposite the main ocean liner quays in Southampton. After basic training at Farnborough and going on to officer training at Gillingham and Chatham, I was asked where I’d like to be posted. I said I’d like to do some real engineering but where I could also sail. I’d expected to be

sent to Gibraltar, Cyprus, Singapore or Hong Kong but it was Marchwood where, as it happens, the Royal Engineers keep their regimental yachts, at least two of which were “war reparations” from the Kiel Canal. There were some magnificent examples, especially “Overlord”, previously owned by the German Navy and seemingly built of fine hardwoods with no expense spared.

In the 173 Port Maintenance Squadron at Marchwood, we gained very interesting training in stevedore loading / unloading of ships, crane operation, sheet piling, deep sea diving (in old fashioned “Michelin man” diving suits, in totally opaque Solent estuary water but only about 2 to 3 metres deep, in mud up to the knees- very claustrophobic!) together with underwater oxy-acetylene flame cutting etc. With a lot of rugby, and yes, some very good sailing, both dinghy and large yachts, mainly at week-ends, life seemed bearable but in retrospect, was really pretty good.

At the end of National Service in 1951, I volunteered to join RARO and went to several training meetings in subsequent years. In 1955 I attended a summer training camp in southern Scotland; this added somewhat, to port operating and maintenance skills and proved very useful for what ensued the following year.

The roots of the Suez Crisis of 1956 lay in 72 years of British occupation of Egypt. In May 1952, King Farouk, the Playboy King” who had claimed to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, was the cause of a military coup ending 5000 years of monarchy, as Egypt became a republic. After much internal strife and a military coup, Col. Abdul Nasser became president in 1954 when in October of that year Britain ceded the sovereignty of the Suez Canal to Egypt in a new treaty in which several Western countries including Britain and France would be part of a new Canal Users Association for management of the canal. More than 25% of UK imports passed through the canal, especially oil from the Gulf. More than 60% of ships passing daily through the Canal were British. Britain had bought the Canal from Egypt and was a part owner with the original French constructors. The new treaty included a two year period for withdrawal of British forces of occupation. However, on 19 July 1956 the USA and Britain withdrew financial aid for the Aswan Dam project because of Egypt's increasing ties to the USSR, involving supply of military hardware. One week later Nasser announced his plans to nationalise the Suez Canal. Four days after that, Prime Minister Anthony Eden imposed an arms embargo on Egypt and told Nasser that he could not take over and have total control of the Canal. On 2 August 1956 Britain mobilised its Armed Forces including the Army Emergency Reserve of which 82 Port Regiment was a part.

Britain, France and Israel conspired to invade Egypt, the British and French under the pretext of separating the warring Israelis and Egyptians. Israel attacked

Sinai with 10 brigades and achieved immediate and total success. British and French forces attacked Port Said on the 5th and 6th of November.

The Suez Crisis split UK politics and public opinion down the middle. The former Labour minister Aneurin Bevan addressed a large protest meeting in Trafalgar Square saying Eden was mad. US President Eisenhower cabled him with the same message accompanied by financial and economic threats and demanded withdrawal.

The USSR threatened military intervention. Later, these threats included long range missile attacks on the Canal Zone if we didn't get out very soon.

Eden and his wife Clarissa fled to Jamaica for recuperation. Three weeks after Eden returned to the UK, he resigned and retreated further, this time to New Zealand. In came Harold Macmillan as Prime Minister, an Old Etonian and expert spin artist. In the meantime, the UK ran out of oil and money. Nasser sequestered all British and French banks in Egypt, a total of 15,000 enterprises. He quickly became the hero of the Arab world and of many other African countries. The whole escapade was a political and economic disaster, a complete humiliation for Britain and France.

I received my call-up papers and travel warrant with instructions to report within three days to the Royal Engineers' camp at Long Moor in Hampshire. I met several officers I had known during National Service and others at ER camps, including Lieutenant-Colonel Fletcher the C.O. of 82 Port Regiment and Major Harry Mooring, O/C 173 Port Operating and Maintenance Squadron to which I was attached. After kitting out and being vaccinated, we all moved to Marchwood for final preparations. Vaccination was amusing with big, strapping dockers going white at the thought of the needle and several fainting!

During this time we learnt that the invasion fleet of civilian transport ships was being assembled in the Solent. Owing to indecision by Eden's government, equipment was loaded, unloaded and reloaded several times in some cases. It was later alleged that some fork lift trucks were loaded so as to *come off last* at Port Said!

At the end of October we were told that an advanced party of 50 from 173 Squadron would be sent ahead of the rest of the regiment to clear four quays to enable Z-craft and barges to land equipment, ammunition and food etc. Col. Fletcher told me I would lead this party with Tom Mather as my 2 i/c. Major Mooring was not happy; he wanted to lead this party himself but the C.O. was adamant. We left RAF Lyneham airfield on 2 November and flew in a DC 3 Dakota to Luqa airport in Malta arriving there about midnight. As we flew over France at about 9000 feet the cloud eventually cleared so we could see the

beautiful lights of Marseille. Our pilot had to take two runs at landing; possibly he had never flown such a heavily loaded Dakota before and nearly overshot the end of the runway so at the last minute, put on full power and went round again causing more than a little consternation to his passengers. When we landed, our soldiers were taken to overnight accommodation in local barracks, whilst Tom and I, after saying that we would go to the same accommodation, were instructed by a senior RAF officer to go to the Officers' Mess. We washed, ate and were invited to a pyjama party which we politely declined in favour of going to bed.

Early next morning we flew on to Nicosia airport, Cyprus, still in battledress and sweating freely under the scorching sun. I was rushed away to be briefed by a brigadier whilst Tom organised the admin – strength returns, issue of malaria and salt tablets, 24-hour ration packs, gas masks and mosquito nets etc. The brigadier gave me a detailed briefing about our next movements and then I was driven at high speed to the British military base at Episkopi near Limassol where all unit commanders, mainly Lt. Colonels and Majors were gathered. After reminding everyone that we had all signed the Official Secrets Act, the operational plans for the landing import side were gone over in great detail and the various units were given their roles – including our small band of 50. I got back to the tented transit camp, at least 6 inches deep in fine white dust, at about 10 pm, briefed the team without disclosing that Port Said was to be our destination and paraded our group at 1 am. We reached Limassol harbour at about 7 am having marched the last half mile with weapons loaded and at the ready. EOKA “terrorists” (freedom fighters?) under General Grivas and, I’m sure, with Archbishop Makarios in strong support, were taking pot-shots at British troops. One came uncomfortably close to me during the truck ride. We boarded the Empire Ken at about 10:30 am from Z-craft and then had nearly 3 days of rest and good food on the ship. This was a good opportunity to brief our group in detail and develop closer bonding. Although there was some apprehension there was considerable fun and laughter. In talking about food, water and health precautions, one Sapper, a Thames lighterman who had served in Egypt before, asked, “Wot abaht them f-----g Wog chickens, Sah?” Somewhat bemused, I asked, “What about them?” “Well, Sir, can we catch the f---s in the street and cook them?” – all of this to hoots of laughter. [many will know that the British army can’t operate without extensive, nay, continuous use of the f-word!]

We landed on a beach area slightly to the West of Port Said harbour, 12 hours after the paratrooper and commando landings. I still have a vivid memory of the flickering lights from dozens of small spirits-stoves as our group and many others cooked food on the beach from 24-hour ration packs. I reported to the brigade

major who told us which building to take over as our billet and showed us again on well prepared maps which quays we were to clear as soon as possible. He told me that cranes and other equipment had been blown up and toppled into the shallow water at each quay.

At about 5 a.m. and with the occasional rattle of small arms fire, we marched in four single lines on alternate sides of the roads looking all round for any signs of snipers. I was leading the first line of 12 and very foolishly wearing my officer's hat instead of a steel helmet. A shot rang out and the bullet must have gone past only 6 to 8 inches from my left ear. We all threw ourselves flat on the ground and observed the conventional drill looking in all directions for the source of the shot. Then there was a volley of small arms fire aimed at the top of an adjacent three (or four?) story building accompanied by a voice of authority asking if we were OK and saying, "We've been waiting for that bastard to show us where he is. When we get him we'll let you know later today." It was a Royal Marine Commando lieutenant who kept his word and sent a message to us later that night confirming they'd got him. After overcoming the predominant feeling of anger flavoured with fleeting fear, I must admit I harboured some admiration for the courage of the snipers the Egyptian army had left behind, even if they were under the influence of hashish.

Shortly, we reached the magnificent villa that was to be our billet for the next few weeks and approached it very carefully. We threw open the side and then the main gates in the surrounding walls and went up the steps into the magnificent hall with its floor and fine staircase made of highly polished hardwoods. At the top of the stairs we saw a man in white Arab-like dress holding up his arms in surrender. I went up with two of my warrant officers and was pleasantly surprised to hear perfect English as he implored us not to use violence towards his family and staff – and please, would we try not to damage his house. I asked him if he was armed. He said, "Yes" and offered a pistol, handle first. He told me his name was Abdul Rahman Loutfi and with tears in his eyes, asked if he could keep the pistol, because, "they, (the mob) will loot my house and kill us". I probably committed a court martial offence in military terms and gave it back to him and told him to get all his servants working to put the most valuable furniture all stacked high into one medium-sized room. We went through the building quickly but carefully, looking for any arms, ammunition, booby traps or holed-up snipers, having told Mr Loutfi that his two families of servants must move into two small upstairs rooms.

In the meantime, Tom reported to the brigade major and leaving a small contingent at the villa, we marched to the port area from where there was still occasional gunfire. Our WOs soon had the boys working on clearing debris including

underwater oxyacetylene cutting of crane parts. This work went on without stop for what was probably about 72 hours, for many of us with very little or no sleep. I seem to remember that we got one quayside crane working to drag and lift debris out of the way. The Z-craft were soon delivering their cargoes onto the quays.

Adjacent to the centre quay was a large warehouse and a day later, one of the sappers with welding and cutting kit was working with one of the WOs cutting up debris. When I walked up to them, he said, "What do you think is in there, Sir?" When I said I didn't know, the WO asked "Would you look like to look inside, Sir?" They promptly cut the hasp off the door and we rolled it back just enough to squeeze inside. It was like an Aladdin's cave, with boxes of canned fruit, breakfast cereals, tinned milk and butter but overwhelming all of this inside a wood and steel netted cage, was a mountain of beer, Amstel lager, wine and spirits. I told them not to say a word to anyone as we closed the door and fitted a new padlock. I ordered our 15 cwt truck to the site and with only six men we loaded it, one "layer" only and covered the 'evening's dinner' with a tarpaulin. At the end of their shift, several men sat in the back of the truck and we drove through the port gates back to our villa. A good night and following breakfast was enjoyed by all those off duty.

The rest of the regiment arrived so Tom and I asked Col. Fletcher if we could have a regimental celebration with good food the next night to which he appeared to agree. The advanced party were then very popular! When the milk ran out some resorted to lager on their cornflakes, quite a sight.

We now had nearly 400 men sleeping and eating in the villa where only 25 had lived before, 17 of whom were servants. We erected barbed wire entanglements between the villa and the adjacent town buildings and their lean-to shacks. The flush toilet system immediately became blocked by the use of toilet paper. Arabs wash themselves with their left hand and don't use it. The M.O. ordered latrines to be dug in the garden inside the wall, of course, but the smell of sewage flooding the area, fortunately outside the walls, was obnoxious for a few days before it was cleared.

We were called on to help put some Egyptian harbour tugs into use, one of which we used to land and reconnoitre an island in the harbour which had cranes and, we thought, probably chains, cable, wire, tools, etc that might be useful. As we landed a pack of some 12 to 15 starving, slaving dogs rushed towards us. A few shots kept them at bay; thoughts of a painful death from rabies were foremost in several minds. On one of the other requisitioned tugs, swanning about in the harbour, was an RE officer, Geoff Folley, with whom I had joined up for NS in 1949. He and his

crew were all smoking like chimneys on the free issue cigarettes that we were not aware of; they threw us a big box-full which we took back to our billet for the many smokers in our regiment.

After the first ten to fourteen days, life started to be boring. There were few technical jobs to be done and when off duty from the port area, only routine inspections, occasional drills and physical training were implemented. In the evenings we played cards and chess; Joe McMaster had found a small chess set which was a boon. The photograph of the drinks in the officers' mess in the villa was taken on the evening that I received a letter informing me that I had been



promoted to acting captain.

From left to right:

Joe MacMaster, Doc Smith, Eric Allen, Ken Sawyer (Regimental Quartermaster), Bob Smith, David Carrick, Tom Mather, Maurice Hulme, Pat McKeown, Eric Neilson, Paddy Davidson (Major and 2 i/c 82 Regiment)

[I am greatly indebted to Ken Sawyer for the photo; we met by chance in a holiday hotel in Menorca in 2003; he found that he had two copies and kindly sent me one]

Well after a cease-fire was implemented, a group of four or five of us drove down by the side of the Canal to the “front line” where British infantry were entrenched. We could see “enemy” troops walking about. The infantry major we met, expressed his intense irritation that we had been stopped from driving on “like a knife through butter” to Cairo! (I now wonder if that had been part of the strategy, if there was a strategy?)

We stopped to watch some British soldiers swimming in the Canal; they scrambled out very quickly when someone shouted that there were sharks in the Canal. Someone else claimed they had seen shark fins moving quickly following a tug. We learned that a soldier had fallen in the so-called Sweet Water Canal that ran parallel to the Suez Canal and took fresh water to Port Said. It was regarded as so noxious, e.g. full of bilharzia, that the victim was transported by helicopter immediately to a hospital ship moored offshore.

In some off duty periods during the day, it was tempting to walk from the villa to see parts of the town which were essentially unoccupied by our forces and parts of which had been damaged. This went no further when it was announced that a 2nd Lieutenant Moorhouse had been abducted when going alone to visit a Dr Geude, whether officially or not, I don't know. There were extensive and frantic searches for him. It was announced later that he had been stuffed into a cupboard and suffocated.

Lester Pearson, the Canadian Minister for external affairs suggested the creation of a UN emergency force to separate the combatants and on, or about, the 15th November, a contingent of blue helmeted Swedish and Norwegian soldiers arrived and marched close to our villa on their way to their new camp. This brought out hundreds of cheering and waving Egyptians, mostly I would say in their 20s, all shouting “Aye, Aye, Abdul Nasser” Some were carrying sticks but I saw no firearms. We were asked to form a single file barrier of armed troops to protect the UN soldiers, not an entirely sensible and practical idea. One man in his late 20s or early 30s, foam flecked around his mouth and possibly high on drugs, threatened me and tried to push through our line. Two of my colleagues turned to support me as I had to threaten to shoot him in the foot if he didn't back off. He did, but I suspect ran behind the crowd to keep up with the UN parade, still foaming and screaming.

It was certainly clear by then that our time in Port Said was coming to an end. It was demoralising to realise, that as many of us had suspected from the outset, that we were not going to succeed in regaining control of the Suez Canal and that in

effect, as a nation we had been defeated. I learned much later that sixteen British servicemen had been killed and 96 wounded, none from 82 Regiment, fortunately; this was very many fewer than the thousands of Egyptians who were killed, wounded or captured (the latter by the Israelis in Sinai).

From now on it was a waiting game to learn whether we could be home for Christmas whilst some clearing up was done in the port area and RAF helicopters took raster scan aerial photographs of the whole city presumably to record the damage done during the assault. On the 10th December, I wrote to my wife Mary, to tell her the good news that I expected to be home for Christmas. I had learned that 110 of us and four officers of the squadron would shortly embark on the RN aircraft carrier Theseus and would get to Portsmouth on December 21st. That duly happened, but on the way I suffered dysentery and spent most of the voyage in the ship's hospital, except for some four or five hours lying out cold on the steel floor of the adjacent "heads". I was just strong enough to look out of a starboard porthole to see Gibraltar in the morning sun – spectacular. Although still feeling very weak, I went with the others to Longmoor to hand in equipment, pick up a travel warrant and take the train to Bristol. Mary's family called the doctor and I spent Christmas in bed, recovering but very relieved to be home.

Although I had deep misgivings about the sense and rightness of the Eden Government's intentions and discussed this in detail with Mary and many others, when I was called back to military service, I felt, on balance, that it was my duty to go. Naturally, this was a topic of much discussion amongst the regimental officers and I found that less than 40% agreed with my perspective. The senior officers were much more gung-ho and discouraged discussion but this did not seem to sour relationships. Generally, throughout the whole campaign, the esprit de corps of 82 Port Regiment was very high, a great tribute to Lieutenant-Colonel Fletcher in particular.

After starting back at my new job, I resigned my RARO commission and later on sent the campaign medal to the BBC's Blue Peter appeal, still somewhat angry that our democratic system could allow a morally weak Prime Minister to lead us into an illegal war that would heavily undermine the moral standing and economy of the UK.

On a much larger scale, of course, it has happened again, with Tony Blair attaching us to the coat tails of the intellectually challenged George W. Bush and his morally bankrupt cabal of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rove and Rice, in the invasion of Iraq. (How do they sleep at night with the blood of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi

civilians on their hands?) In terms of lives lost, this was a much more serious mistake but the Suez debacle can be seen as an historical turning point. It marked the end of Britain's imperialist policies and accelerated 'our retreat from Empire.'

However, for me it was an intensely formative experience and certainly brought home to me how dangerous life can be and how lucky one is to survive, especially relevant to the Territorials and Regulars currently engaged in Afghanistan today, a much more dangerous campaign.

This personal report document has been welcomed and accepted by archivists at the Imperial War Museum, London.

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