

Operation Musketeer

Major-General Edward Fursdon was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in early 1945. He served with West African Engineers in India, Burma and the Gold Coast. Thereafter he held a variety of Regimental and Staff appointments in the UK; the Far, Middle & Near East; Cyprus; Africa; Borneo; BAOR; MOD and finally Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

On retirement, from 1980-86 he was *The Daily Telegraph's* Defence & Military Correspondent.

Major-General Edward Fursdon relates his first-hand experiences in Port Said in 1956 before the Suez Canal was forcibly nationalised by President Nasser.

Having driven up from Colchester, the staff car stopped outside Hatchards bookshop in Piccadilly. Brigadier Harry Grimshaw DSO, OBE – Commander 19 Infantry Brigade – went inside to collect a book, leaving his Brigade Major and me in the car.

them and our heavy equipment into merchantmen lying off Barry Docks in South Wales. Delaying the operation meant us having to put small unit maintenance parties on board all the ships – first, to check and replace pilfered items and, second, to ensure that all the equipment and vehicles, especially their batteries, remained battleworthy.

Commencing the campaign

Early on 5 November 3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment from Cyprus dropped and captured Gamil Airfield just west of Port Said, and then fought its way through the Sewage Farm and the Cemetery into Port Said. The Royal Marine Commando Brigade quickly followed with an assault landing on Port Said proper; and the French dropped near Port Fuad on the east side of the Suez Canal to secure two vital bridges.

After a short delay in Malta, we arrived off Port Said at dawn on 10 November to join the milling medley of British, American and French vessels offshore. Infuriatingly, an American voice kept blasting through on my radio net with 'Bedbug calling ... Bedbug calling ... are you there?'

The initial British Force – especially A Company 3 Para – had advanced as far as El Cap some 20 miles south of Port Said before the well-known huge international row erupted and imposed a cease-fire on the whole British/French operation. It was ironic that thereafter, throughout Operation Musketeer, the extent of our southern front was simply that of the dug-in position of one rifle platoon – initially of The Royal West Kents and later of the York and Lancaster Regiment, which eventually handed El Cap over to the UN.

It seemed even more bizarre in retrospect when, years later, a senior Egyptian officer told me that at the relevant time there were no Egyptian forces whatsoever between El Cap and Suez; and that, if it had not been for the cease-fire, we could have raced down and captured the whole Suez Canal in a couple of hours without firing another shot!

Within seconds of landing, we were whisked away for a quick call on our GOC Major-General J B Churcher CB, DSO, before moving on to meet Brigadier R W Madoc OBE, ADC,



Top: Disembarking at Port Said from the troopship *Empire Fowey*
Above: 19 Infantry Brigade Headquarters in Port Said

Dressed in combat smocks and boots – wearing revolvers and with live ammunition in our belts – we watched everyone outside going about their normal business of shopping and window gazing. The whole situation seemed so utterly bizarre that I was very tempted to get out and yell at everyone, 'Don't you know? Don't you care? We're just off to fight a war for you!'

The Brigadier finally arrived back and, in what seemed no time at all, we were in Southampton embarking on the troopship *Empire Fowey* ready to implement our GOC 3 Division's orders. 'Now you, Harry, will arrive on D plus 4 and initially your task will be to look after Port Said.'

It was now early November 1956 and we were at last embarking on what had been a long, drawn out, on-and-off, hanging about, waiting-to-go sort of operation. One moment we were told that the plan was to land at Port Said and head for Suez; then a rumour said we would land at Alexandria and head for Cairo; then it was Port Said again, heading for either Cairo or Suez.

Getting ready to move included painting a large H on the side of our vehicles – 'Haitch for Hgypt' the soldiers called it – before loading



whose Royal Marine Commando Brigade we were to relieve. Areas, boundaries and times of take-over were quickly agreed before we briefly adjourned to the elaborately gilded and crimson chairs of his improvised mess anteroom.

Before nightfall we had established our Brigade HQ in a highly uncomfortable local school building and our units had deployed. The 1st Battalion The Royal Scots (Lt-Col W T Campbell CBE) had responsibility for Arab Town; the 1st Battalion The West Yorkshires (Lt-Col H E Boulter DSO) the canal waterfront, docks and the business quarter; and 1st Battalion The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (Lt-Col B Pearson DSO) for Shanty Town, the Manzala Canal and the arc of islands stretching round to El Qabuti. HQ 29 Infantry Brigade and units had also landed and were responsible for the more southern part of Port Said.

Valuable vigilance

The success of the British occupation was very largely due to the high standard of junior leadership and private soldier alertness. It was the young corporal, sometimes a private soldier, who led a patrol and got to know his area as well as a local village policeman would have done at home.

It was a passing Royal Scot who spotted a grenade on an Arab Town café table. The printing press that produced most of the anti-British leaflets was discovered by L Cpl Furniss of The West Yorkshires – all because he noticed that only two out of four shop shutters had been padlocked. Corporal Armour of the Argylls became suspicious of two Arabs carrying baskets from a rowing boat. He gave chase and, as a result, unearthed a large dump of ammunition and explosives smuggled in from the Nile Delta. Sometimes it was a junior officer like 2nd Lt Tony Moorhouse of The West Yorkshires who,

by patience and observation, succeeded in capturing seven Egyptian fedayeen in a house on the day before he himself was abducted and never seen alive again.

Confronting the challenges

The main residential and business area buildings in Port Said were light in colour, many-storied and all the windows had shutters. On their street side, first floors were often built out on pillars, creating a shaded colonnaded pavement underneath them. In Shanty Town, however, there were no streets – only gaps between dwellings: like a honeycomb, little low passages traversed the squalor of the corrugated iron, timber and beaten oil drum living spaces. Everywhere fleeting pairs of eyes watched from the darkness of within – large ones, brown ones, sometimes just whites-of-eyes, just staring, following you round like a portrait on a wall.

It was always refreshing to drive out towards Gamil Airfield and its nearby sports stadium whose oasis-like green turf had miraculously survived the initial British attack. Beyond it I recced a deserted block of flats as possible billets for a battalion. Inside the door was a large collection of primed Egyptian mortar and anti-tank bombs – spanking clean and oozing all the attraction of new toys. Upstairs the smell was appalling: there was no water; no one had cleared up anything; the dust and debris lay thick on the upturned brass bedstead and splintered chair that blocked my way. I was surprised to see the large kitchen sink was a deep yellow colour until, getting close, I realised that it was full to the brim with huge heaving cockroaches half hiding a large sexually alluring photo of Ava Gardner.

As in Basra today, the problems of returning Port Said to normality were huge. The military authority – especially using 323 E and M Squadron under Major Harry Kline RE – had to sort out the problems in conjunction with the Egyptian governor and his staff. Sewers were damaged, leaking or blocked; the electricity supply was spasmodic. There was water, but only where mains were intact. Digging defences unearthed bodies; Egyptian anti-personnel mines had to be cleared; jails had been thrown open. There had also been free arms and ammunition for all and in their HQ building the West Yorkshires found a huge quantity of hashish and opium worth a fortune!

After three weeks the first Arab woman appeared on the streets and a few of the bolder traditional Port Said street traders – well known to Canal Zone soldiers of a few years previously – came out trying to sell their cleverly sealed bottles of gin that actually contained water; their brilliantly sealed bottles



Above: Entering Port Said from Gamil Airfield Above left: Port Said's Shanty Town area

'The initial British Force had advanced as far as El Cap before the well-known huge international row erupted and imposed a cease-fire on the whole British/French operation'