

THE SECOND UNITED NATIONS EMERGENCY FORCE

NAVAL AVIATORS IN EGYPT DURING 1977 - 1979

On 6 October 1973 fighting erupted in the Middle East when Egyptian forces surged across the Suez Canal into Israel. Simultaneously Syrian troops attacked Israeli forces, in the Golan Heights, in what became known as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War or the Yom Kippur War. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 338 (22 October 1973) called for a ceasefire and a second resolution (340 of 25 October 1973) established the second United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF II), of 7,000 troops to oversee the cease fire and the return of the warring parties to their own territory. By the time fighting had ceased Israeli forces had crossed the Suez Canal, capturing a significant portion of Egyptian territory and were within striking distance of the capital Cairo.

A peace conference was held in Geneva in December 1973, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), to discuss the disengagement of the warring forces. An agreement between Israel and Egypt was reached in January 1974 that saw a partial withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied territory and the establishment of a buffer zone controlled by UNEF II forces. A second disengagement agreement was signed by the two nations in September 1975. This saw the withdrawal of more Israeli troops from the Sinai and the creation of a larger buffer zone under UNEF II Control. The UN mandate was assessed regularly and continued until it formally ceased on 24 July 1979.

In early 1976 the Australian Government agreed to commit forces to UNEF II consisting of two army personnel serving in the UNEF II headquarters for a 12 month period and a 50 man detachment, from 5 Squadron RAAF, operating four UH-1H Iroquois helicopters for six month rotations. Included in the RAAF contingents during 1977 - 80 were RAN aircrew and aircraft maintainers.



Australian UNEF II helicopters take a break from patrolling the Sinai Desert. They were painted white overall with UN markings for easy identification (SPC-A Collection)

The Australian contingent was referred to as AUSTAIR and on 10 June 1976 a 16 man RAAF advance party left Australia for Egypt to set up the Australian facility at Ismailia on the western side of the Suez Canal.¹ There was already a strong UNEF II presence here and the Canadian Armed Forces provided substantial assistance to establish the Australian force.

This overseas deployment of Australian personnel was one of the few occasions in the post-Vietnam War/pre Gulf War I era (1973-1990) when ADF personnel were deployed on operations. The Liberal-Country Party Coalition, under Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (1975-83), also approved the deployment of army personnel to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) during 1979-80 as part of the Commonwealth Monitoring Force overseeing the end of the civil war and a later Sinai deployment (Multinational Force and Observers during 1982-86).²



Map of the UNEF II area of operations.

On 8 July 1976 a RAAF C-130, with the first Iroquois helicopter embarked as cargo, departed Australia. Subsequent flights that month delivered the remaining three aircraft and the first AUSTAIR mission was flown on 1 August. AUSTAIR's roles were varied ranging from patrols of the buffer zone to ensure the former warring nations were adhering to the cease fire through to the more mundane movement of personnel, equipment, stores and mail as required. In 1977 the first RAN personnel, from 723 Squadron, were included in the UNEF II contingent, due to shortages of some key skills within the RAAF.

723 Squadron, based at HMAS *Albatross* (Nowra, NSW) also operated the UH-1H Iroquois helicopter which allowed for the easy integration of RAN air crew and maintainers into the RAAF contingent. The first three RAN personnel (Lieutenant (pilot) Geoffrey Vidal, Petty Officer Aircrewman Ronald Macklin and Able Seaman Air Technical Weapons Electrical Gregory Morris) joined AUSTAIR in June 1977 for a six month deployment.

The AUSTAIR deployment rotation procedure followed the 'trickle' posting system with new personnel arriving each month (to complete a six month period of service) thus preventing a degradation of skills and knowledge that would occur with a complete changeover of personnel every six months. AUSTAIR deployed with aircrew, aircraft maintenance personnel, logistics & administration staff but medical support was provided by another UN unit.

The following 16 members of the RAN are known to have served in UNEF II (rank at time of service) and were awarded the Australian Service Medal (1975 -) with clasp 'Middle East' and the United Nations Medal for UNEF II:

Petty Officer Aircrewman Ronald Macklin (1 June 1977 - 17 December 1977)

Able Seaman Air Technical Weapons Electrical Gregory Morris (1 June 1977 - 17 December 1977)

Lieutenant Commander (Pilot) Geoffrey Vidal, RAN (27 June 1977 - 19 December 1977)

Able Seaman Air Technical Airframes Bernard Gelston (24 October 1977 - 29 April 1978)

Lieutenant (Pilot) Ronald Lawrence, RAN (5 December 1977 - 12 June 1978)

Able Seaman Air Technical Airframes Walter Vink (6 March 1978 - 4 September 1978)

Petty Officer Air Technical Airframes Leslie Bould (20 April 1978 - 7 January 1979)

Petty Officer Aircrewman Joseph Pollard (29 May 1978 - 8 January 1979)

Lieutenant (Pilot) Geoffrey Ledger, RAN (1 June 1978 - 2 December 1978)

Leading Seaman Air Technical Communications William Huntriss (19 June 1978 - 8 January 1979)

Lieutenant (Pilot) John Edwards (16 November 1978 - 16 April 1979)

Leading Seaman Air Technical Airframes Richard Serafin (28 December 1978 - 24 June 1979)

Leading Seaman Air Technical Weapons Electrical Stephen Tester (28 December 1978 - 24 June 1979)

Lieutenant Commander (Pilot) John Brown, RAN (22 March 1979 - 17 September 1979)

Petty Officer Aircrewman Terrence Crawley (2 April 1979 - 26 October 1979)

Leading Seaman Air Technical Airframes Glenn Taylor (28 July 1979 - 25 October 1979).

The combined RAN/RAAF maintenance staff were kept busy servicing the Iroquois helicopters which, despite being a rugged and robust aircraft, were operating in a harsh desert environment with frequent sandstorms and high temperatures affecting aircraft performance.

Additionally the Australians worked closely with their Canadian counterparts helping to man the Canadian Forces Middle East radio station and taking part in its daily broadcasts.³



The United Nations Medal for service with UNEF II

By mid-1977 the Australian contingent was housed in the Sinai Palace Hotel; known locally as the 'Sin Palace'. The detachment was housed in the top four floors of the hotel with the top floor being the mess and bar with the lower three floors being accommodation.



The non-commissioned officers dining facilities at the Sinai Palace Hotel in Ismailia, Egypt (AWM)

A visiting journalist, in 1979, however described it as: *a squalid, fifth rate Egyptian hotel ... it is a herring-gutted, grubby, run down, infinitely depressing old building with a narrow dark entrance. There are no lifts - to reach the makeshift Australian mess one has to climb six flights of dingy stairs. The plumbing is primitive and frequently gives up all together. When I visited the unit there were buckets of water standing by the lavatories to flush them. The rooms in which the officers and men have to live are tiny, crude and bare without amenities of any kind except those introduced by their occupants.*⁴

The Australians made the best of the crude conditions and created a bar, on the top floor, known as the 'Lackanooky Bar'. Due to an erratic power supply to the hotel a block of ice was delivered to the hotel daily and broken up in the street. The crushed ice was then carried in buckets to the sixth floor to keep the drinks cold.



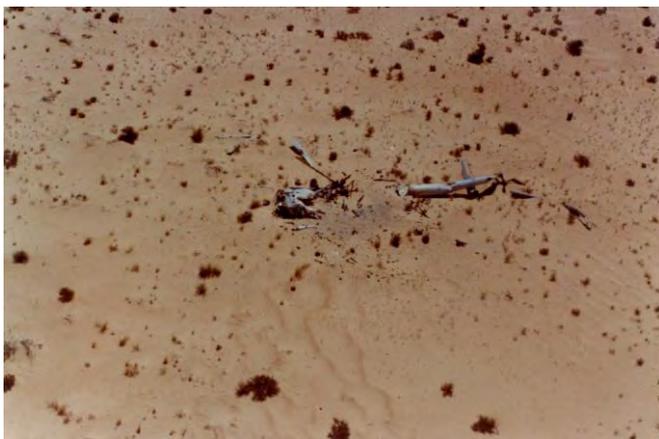


An AUSTAIR Contingent in the Middle East. The RAN personnel are distinguishable by their beards and clothing (i.e. not wearing white shirts) (AWM)

A Treaty of Peace was eventually signed by Israel and Egypt on 26 March 1979 and the UNEF II mandate formally expired on 24 July 1979. The UNEF II forces, however, remained in place for several months as the transition to a new peacekeeping force was negotiated.

The United Nations chose not to formally consider a new mandate for peacekeeping in the Sinai. Instead the President of the United States (Jimmy Carter), following on from the Camp David Accords of 1978, committed to maintaining the United States Sinai Field Mission on the peninsula to carry out some of the peace treaty verification tasks. Over the next two years the United Nations attempted to create a new United Nations peacekeeping force and observers but without success; due to the threat of the Soviet Union vetoing the motion at the request of Syria.

On 18 May 1981 the President of the Security Council formally advised that it was not possible for the United Nations to provide a peacekeeping force in the Sinai.



The wreckage of war - a destroyed Israeli helicopter in the Sinai Desert (SPC-A Collection)

As a result of this impasse Egypt, Israel and the United States set up a peacekeeping organisation external to the United Nations. On 3 August 1981 a protocol to the Treaty of Peace was signed thus establishing the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) consisting of three infantry battalions and supporting units.

The MFO is governed by the US State Department and has its headquarters in Rome. The Australian Government committed forces to the MFO rotary wing aviation unit, based at El Gorah, from 9 February 1982 until 28 April 1986. The ADF force consisted of eight UH-1H helicopters (delivered into theatre by the heavy lift ship HMAS *Tobruk* on 19 March 1982) and operated by RAN and RAAF personnel on six month rotations.

The New Zealand Government also committed forces and 25 RNZAF personnel were attached to the Australian force. This operation was to last until 1986 when the Australian force was withdrawn. On 6 January 1993 a small Australian contingent of 26 personnel (mainly army) was attached to the MFO and the mission is ongoing under the auspices of Operation MAZURKA.



An Australian UNEF II helicopter conducting a patrol over the buffer zone sights Egyptian tanks destroyed during the 1973 war. (AWM)

- 1 This was a former Royal Air Base at Al Gawiya.
- 2 Horner, David *The Good International Citizen – Australian Peacekeeping in Asia, Africa and Europe, 1991-1993*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2014, page 6.
- 3 5 Squadron Association Website (5sqn.com.au/unefii-and-mfo.html).
- 4 Sydney Morning Herald 30 June 1979. *Our forces in Egypt live in pigsty conditions* by Guy Harriott.

