

RMMGS 51: SUEZ 1956

On 26 July 1956 President Nasser of Egypt seized the Suez Canal from the Anglo-French Company which administered it. The British had maintained a military presence in the Canal-Zone since 1953, and had only withdrawn some eight weeks previously. After much political manoeuvring, a military plan, code named "Operation Musketeer", was put together in order to regain control. The plan involved a series of bombing raids, mounted from Cyprus, designed to destroy the Egyptian Air Force, followed by a full scale sea and airborne assault on the city of Port Said situated at the northern end of the canal. The 6th November became L-Day (Landing Day), which had now replaced the term D-Day. Due to the fluctuating political situation in the preceding weeks, the naval bombardment to cover the sea-borne assault was not authorised until an hour before H-hour, and then, to limit possible civilian casualties, could only involve guns up to the calibre of 6 inches. The French capture of Fort Fouad further restricted naval fire for fear of hitting friendly forces. During August and September 40 and 42 RM Commandos had the opportunity to train with 6th Royal Tank Regiment, whose Centurion Tanks were to be waterproofed for the sea-borne landing. Three new Landing Ship Tank (Assault) would be used as mother ships to deploy the Commandos in Landing Craft Assault and amphibious Landing Vehicle Tracked. The armour and supporting units would be landed by a further eleven landing ships and craft.

Although the RM Commandos had started to experiment with the new 120mm Battalion Anti-Tank (BAT) gun, the ammunition had not been passed for use in hot climates, so 17pdr weapons and their crews were borrowed from the Somerset Regiment. Difficulties were experienced in waterproofing the towing vehicles. To make up further shortages, a number of American 106mm recoilless guns that were lighter and more portable than the other weapons, were drawn from NATO stocks, although carriages had to be improvised for some of them whilst the expedition was sailing. After the operation, it was recognised that Commandos required, at least, an assigned Artillery unit to support their Brigade operations, but it was not until 1962 that 29 Commando Regiment RA was formed exclusively for the task.

The RM Commandos also had to leave their new FN 7.62 Self-Loading Rifles in Cyprus, and re-equip with Second World War weapons. They therefore faced an Egyptian Army that was better equipped, technically, with new Soviet automatic weapons, including the AK47.

After Naval Venom jets had bombed and strafed the coastal defences, and the supporting barrage had lifted, the Commandos landed. They over ran the abandoned Egyptian gun emplacements before fighting their way through the city with armoured support from the Royal Tank Regiment on their left flank.

Meanwhile, some twenty Sycamore and Whirlwind helicopters rose from the decks of HMS *Ocean* and HMS *Theseus* to land 45 Commando ashore by de Lessep's Statue in what was the first ever helicopter assault operation. In a

day of street fighting Port Said was seized and contact made with the 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment which had dropped earlier to take Gamil Airfield. Political pressure from the USA, the Soviet Union and the United Nations, (combined with a less than enthusiastic British public), resulted in military operations being suspended after the objectives had been achieved. After the cease-fire the Royal Marines were withdrawn and a UN force took over.

The only major ship-to-ship action during the Suez operation had been at night in the Red Sea between the Egyptian frigate *Domait* and the cruiser HMS *Newfoundland*. The *Domait* was found with her engines stopped south of the Gulf of Aqaba, and as *Newfoundland's* searchlight picked her out, she started her engines and moved in to attack. One of her Bofors' shells clipped the support of a director, leaving its crew in some suspended animation for the next few hours. But the *Newfoundland* could fire her 6 inch guns in salvos every 10 seconds, and her aft Bofors shot away the Egyptians' bridge and wrecked her fo'c's'le before she sank a few minutes later. After due precautions against submarine attack, *Newfoundland* then picked up survivors. The Marines in the shell room of their 6 inch turret remained at action stations, in their boiler suits and gym shoes. Their Corporal checked that the correct rounds of HE, star shell etc. were loaded into the hoist, whilst keeping an eye on the NAAFI beer stacked nearby. A few days later the crew were again called to action stations and opened fire at what appeared on the radar screen to be three Egyptian torpedo boats. A good number of rounds were fired, melting the pitch over the armoured deck and warping the teak planking, but the radar blips proved to be a fault in the scanner.

The Suez operation of 6th November 1956 remains the largest deployment of Royal Marines since the Second World War; 178 Officers and 2,300 NCO's & men. Four RN carriers and three cruisers of the naval force also had RM and RM Band detachments. The Royal Marines suffered 9 dead and 60 wounded, many of the latter surviving due to the speed with which they received medical treatment by being returned to the carriers by helicopters. The British helicopters had also managed to land a large formation in a battle area, with 415 men and 23 tons of stores put down in 83 minutes.