

Suez 1956: a lesson in air power

PART 2

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WHILE THE INTENSE air activity described in Part I of this article was taking place the two fleets, French and British, were heading for Egypt from Cyprus and Malta respectively. The British fleet was the larger, comprising one hundred warships plus two rapidly converted "assault" carriers and three aircraft-carriers, as compared with the French fleet of thirty warships and two carriers. Some twenty requisitioned merchant vessels were also involved. The Eastern Mediterranean was patrolled in the path of the invasion by Shackletons of 37 Squadron based in Malta, and as the fleets neared the Egyptian coast they were provided with Hunter and Thunderstreak escorts from Cyprus.

The intervention plan was that troops would be landed at Port Said, first by parachute from bases in Cyprus and then from ships of the invasion fleet. The troops

were to move southwards to hold the whole of the Canal, then westwards to Cairo.

Just after 7 a.m. on 5th November 1956 over 750 men of the British 16th Parachute Brigade and the French 2nd Parachute Regiment were dropped on key points around Port Said. The British troops were flown from Cyprus by three squadrons of Hastings and three squadrons of Valettas and were dropped on Gamil airfield. The French were dropped, by a mixed wing of Noratlasses and Dakotas, near a twin-bridge which connected Port Said with the road to the south over a subsidiary canal. The British troops met considerable resistance. From the time the first men touched ground, an excellent liaison existed between the Army and the Fleet Air Arm. *Bulwark* was withdrawn for refuelling and aircraft from *Albion* and *Eagle* then had to share the burden, which was made heavier by the

Activity aboard H.M.S. Albion on 1st November 1956 as she turns into wind to fly off a strike force. Ammunition boxes surround 802 Squadron's Sea Hawks which, in common with No. 809's Sea Venoms, sport half-painted stripes

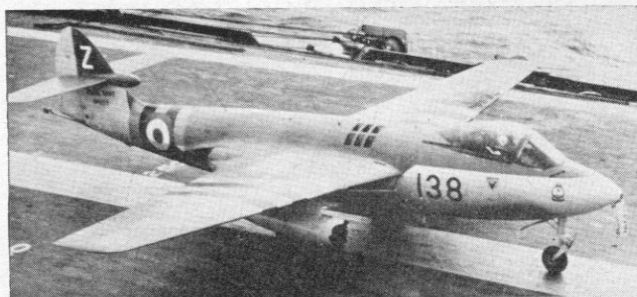
fact that the Wyverns were held back because they had been found vulnerable to ground fire. "Cab-rank" patrols were flown, mainly by Sea Hawks, and the aircraft could be called down at short notice to attack individual targets. Gamil airfield was taken after several hours of fighting, not without casualties, and a further drop of men was made in the afternoon.

Meanwhile, the French had had trouble taking the twin-bridge and worked a similar system to the British. Naval Corsairs were called in to attack defensive gun emplacements, after which little difficulty was experienced. By afternoon, when a further batch of paratroops had been dropped on Port Fuad on the other side of the Canal, the French had captured not only the bridge but the vital waterworks.

Canal blocked

Throughout the night shots were heard as French and British troops consolidated their positions in preparation for the naval landings that were to take place the following day. By that time over a dozen ships belonging to the Suez Canal Company had been sunk by Nasser in order to block the Canal. It was erroneously reported by newspapers throughout the world that Port Said had surrendered.

Heavy naval bombardment of Port Said had been considered but rejected since the paratroops and civilians would suffer, and when the armada approached the shore at dawn on the 6th it was preceded by fire from light guns on destroyers only. Troops, tanks, vehicles and equipment were landed



Sea Hawk WM995 "Z/138" of 802 Squadron touches down on Albion after a strike against Egyptian airfields. Note the damaged starboard drop-tank

from the fleet with minimal losses, while men of No. 45 Royal Marine Commando were flown in from the "assault" carriers *Theseus* and *Ocean* by the midnight-blue Whirlwinds of 845 Squadron and camouflaged Whirlwinds and Sycamores of the Joint Experimental Helicopter Unit respectively. The "Experimental" was temporarily dropped as a morale booster to the marines. The helicopters were later used for casualty evacuation.

The ground forces advanced steadily into the town, although some pockets of resistance were met. These were dealt with by either calling in a Centurion tank or a Naval strike fighter. One such pocket, the Admiralty building at Port Said, was desperately held by Egyptian sailors against considerable opposition and was finally put out of action by rocket attacks from Sea Hawks. Two Sea Hawks and a Wyvern were shot down during support operations on that day. In the afternoon rumour of a cease-fire was circulating and a quick push southwards was made as far as El Kantara, led by British Centurion tanks. The cease-fire was officially announced just before midnight and came as the result of concerted national and international opposition and pressure in the United Kingdom.

Total Allied losses incurred during the two days' fighting were 30 dead and 150 wounded, British losses amounting to twice those of the French. Some idea of the size of the operation may be gained from the following figures regarding H.M.S. *Eagle's* aircraft: in six days 72 x 1,000-lb. bombs and 157 x 500-lb. bombs were dropped; 1,448 x 3-in. rockets fired and 88,000 rounds of 20-mm. ammunition were used. A total of 621 launches was made although one catapult was unserviceable.

On 7th November the United Nations decided to establish a peace force, the first contingent of which, ninety-five Danish soldiers, arrived by Swissair DC-4 and DC-6 aircraft at Abu Sueir airfield on the 15th. In the meantime, the only air activity over Egyptian territory comprised Allied communications, reconnaissance and supplies flights. A large variety of aircraft began sporting the invasion stripes previously worn only by aircraft maintaining the offensive and included such types as an Auster 6, Lockheed Harpoon, Hurel-Dubois HD-321, Halifax, Avenger (R.N.) and Sea Vampire. Aircraft providing the Cyprus base with supplies comprised Comet 2s of 216 Squadron and Breguet 763s and Constellations from France.

After the cease-fire the British and French troops maintained patrols in the Port Said area, frequently exercising considerable restraint against snipers and an insulting civilian population. They remained after the arrival of the U.N. troops, co-operating with them to the fullest extent, and the last British troops left Egyptian soil on 23rd December. The last bombers returned to English airfields in January

Dekheila being attacked by 830 Squadron Wyverns, led by Lt.-Cdr. C. V. Howard, from H.M.S. Eagle. Note bomb crater at runway intersection, bottom right



Whirlwind 4s of the JEHU at Gamil airfield, near Port Said, on 6th November. In the foreground are discarded parachutes and containers

1957. Legend has it that British officers ran the Union Flag up a pole beside the statue of de Lesseps at the entrance to the Canal, after which the pole was well greased. Egyptian attempts at removing the flag failed and eventually the pole had to be sawn through—not, however, before the last British ships had left.

Lessons of the campaign

So ended what has been described as the shortest war in history. In seven days the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy completed over five thousand sorties with a negligible accident rate. Serviceability was excellent. Despite this, the Suez affair offered the British Government many lessons, some of which do not appear to have been digested, even after nine years.

The most important point arising out of the campaign was the need to have an independent nuclear deterrent under this country's sole control. This was highlighted when, at the height of the landings, the Russians threatened to send atomic rockets on London and Paris. At that time Britain's nuclear weapons were only at an advanced testing stage. Although the final

push did not come, Britain would have been in no position to have replied to the threat had she been dependent on American goodwill. America had no direct financial interest in the Canal, and it did not matter to her who controlled it.

The campaign did, to an extent, form the basis for the future of Britain's forces, ground, sea and air. Rapid deployment of men and equipment was considered to be of prime importance and the strategic transport squadrons have steadily increased in number. The type of aircraft used by these squadrons has, generally speaking, kept pace with the times. The tactical transport squadrons have been expanded and No. 38 Group has been formed with its own Hunter support squadrons, including No. 1 Squadron which was involved in Suez. For the future, equipment will include the V/STOL Hawker Siddeley Kestrel fighter/ground-attack aircraft and Lockheed C-130E transport.

The conversion of the carriers *Ocean* and *Theseus* for assault duties paved the way for the development of this type of operation. Since then two larger carriers, *Albion* and *Bulwark*, have been rebuilt as commando



Suez . . .

ships, and have both spent much time "East of Suez". *Bulwark* was involved in the highly successful Kuwait operation five years after Suez, in 1961. Both the Suez campaign and Kuwait proved the importance of the Cyprus base and the need to retain it despite internal unrest.

Another need is for a tactical bomber and recce. aircraft to replace the Canberra. Sophisticated anti-aircraft missile systems are available to all comers, and sophisticated aircraft are needed to combat them. In this connection it is, to say the least, unfortunate

that the TSR-2 has been cancelled and acquisition of even the F-111 as a substitute is still not certain. Britain's commitments overseas are extensive and varied and a wide range of military equipment and training is necessary to uphold them.

The experience gained at Suez was invaluable and although the affair was a political failure, its success as a military operation is unquestionable.

Notes on aircraft stripes

The official order stated that the stripes should be 1 ft. wide, two black on three yellow. The Royal Navy conformed to this

pattern as did, with one exception, the Malta R.A.F. squadrons and the Cyprus Hunter, Thunderstreak and Thunderflash units. The exception at Malta were the Shackletons of 37 Squadron which wore 2-ft. stripes. The remaining units at Cyprus used black and white stripes, and on some of the Cyprus-based Canberras the stripes were painted 2 ft. wide, as were the wing stripes on the Hastings. The stripes on Sea Hawks of 899 Squadron, Sea Venoms of 891 and 893 Squadrons and Wyverns of 830 Squadron obliterated the latter part of the underwing serials. The French Navy did not apply stripes to any of its aircraft.

REPRESENTATIVE AIRCRAFT, SQUADRONS, SERIALS AND COLOUR SCHEMES

Type	Speed (m.p.h.)	Range (miles)	Armament		Colour Scheme		Representative Serials and Codes	Remarks
			Guns	Bombs, etc.	Upper Surfaces	Lower		
Canberra B.2 and 6	540	2,750	—	6,000 lb.	Silver overall		9 Sqn.: WH974 12 Sqn.: WH958 27 Sqn.: WJ732 35 Sqn.: WH910 44 Sqn.: WH717 61 Sqn.: WH915 101 Sqn.: WH948 109 Sqn.: WJ780 139 Sqn.: WJ776 10 Sqn.: WH665	Most Canberras carried their squadron badge, and some (e.g., from 10, 101 Sqn.) also carried a station badge. 27 Sqn. aircraft had a red line along the fuselage. 10 Sqn. aircraft had a white pheasant on the fin (station marking) and a white-winged red arrow on silver tip tanks (unit marking)
Canberra PR.3 and 7	540	3,750	—		Sea grey/light slate grey	P.R. blue	13 Sqn.: WE137	Squadron marking on silver tip tank
Valiant	567	4,500	—	21,000 lb.	Silver overall		138 Sqn.: WP220 148 Sqn.: WZ393 207 Sqn.: WP219 214 Sqn.: WZ395	No stripes carried
Shackleton 2	272	4,200	4×20 mm.	Not disclosed	Dark sea grey overall		37 Sqn.: WL785	2-ft. stripes
Venom 4	597	700	4×20 mm.	2,000 lb.	Dark green/dark sea grey	P.R. blue	6 Sqn.: WR476	Squadron markings on tip tanks
Hunter 5	730	600	4×30 mm.	—	Dark green/dark sea grey	Silver	1 Sqn.: WPI88 34 Sqn.: WPI36(N)	Squadron markings on nose
Meteor 13	520	1,000	4×20 mm.	—	Dark green/dark sea grey	Medium grey	39 Sqn.: WM313	Squadron markings on fuselage
Hastings 1	348	1,690	—		Silver, with white top fuselage		511 Sqn.: WD475(GAQ) 99 Sqn.: WD495(GAN)	Code in black 5-ft. letters on fuselage
Valetta 1	294	1,290	—		Silver, with white top fuselage		30 Sqn.: VX576 84 Sqn.: VX562	
Auster 6	127	246	—		Mid-stone/dark earth overall		1903 Flt.: WJ370	
Sycamore	91	268	—		Dark green/dark earth overall		JEHU: XG507(3)	Code in 1-ft. white numbers
Whirlwind 4	110	435	—		Dark green/dark earth overall		JEHU: XK969(10)	Code in 18-in. white numbers
Sea Hawk Mks. 3, 4 and 6	580	500	4×20 mm.	500 lb.	Dark sea grey	Sky	800 Sqn.: XE437(102/J) 802 Sqn.: WM938(131/O) 804 Sqn.: XE394(165/O) 810 Sqn.: XE335(234/B(Z)) 897 Sqn.: WN115(466/B) 899 Sqn.: XE364(485/J)	Codes in large black numerals, various styles, immediately forward of air intake. Letter denoting carrier white on black or red fin, except 810 Sqn. black on sky. Nose markings: 800 Sqn., red/white chequers flanking squadron badge; 802 Sqn., badge only; 804 Sqn., black leaping panther; 810 Sqn., red lightning flash through squadron badge; 899 Sqn., black and white puffin's head with orange beak
Sea Venom 21 and 22	630	680	4×20 mm.	2,000 lb.	Dark sea grey	Sky	809 Sqn.: XG613(222/Z) 891 Sqn.: WW188 893 Sqn.: WW264(095/J)	Codes in large black numerals, various styles on nose (e.g., 893 Sqn.) or fins (e.g., 809 Sqn.). Letter denoting carrier in white on black or red fins except 893 Sqn. black on sky. Nose markings: 809 Sqn., gold Phoenix; 893 Sqn., sky lightning flash through code. Tip tanks variously decorated—e.g., 809 Sqn. white stripe and fins on black tanks
Wyvern 4	383	904	4×20 mm.	3,000 lb.	Dark sea grey	Sky	830 Sqn.: WN325(373/J) 831 Sqn.: WN334(386/J)	830 Sqn. maroon spinner and finlets. Codes on cowling
Skyraider 1	340	1,500	—		Midnight blue overall		849 Sqn. (A Flt.): WT954(417/J) 849 Sqn. (B Flt.): WT947(422/Z)	2-ft. code white behind roundel
Whirlwind 22	110	435	—		Midnight blue overall		845 Sqn.: WV205(W)	3-ft. white code on nose and 4-ft. behind wheels
Whirlwind 3	110	400	—		Dark sea grey	Sky	Eagle Guard: XJ399(974/J) Albion Guard: XG578(980/Z)	Code on cabin side