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Some Impressions of UNEF, 1957 to 1958

Memorandum by Capt J.A. Swettenham, R.C.E.

1. Attached as Appendix "A" is a record of impressions of United Nations Emergency Force prepared by Capt J.A. Swettenham, R.C.E., of Historical Section (G.S.).
2. Capt Swettenham was Second-in-Command of the UNEF Engineer Company from 14 Sep 57 to 28 Sep 58.
3. A sketch map to locate place-names mentioned in these impressions is attached to the accompanying memorandum.

J.H. Stacey, Lt-Col
for (C.P. Stacey) Colonel
Director
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APPENDIX "A"

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Some Impressions of the UNEF, 1957 to 1958:

Memorandum by Capt JA Swettenham, R.C.E.

1. It was not until September 1957 that I arrived in Egypt with the Second Canadian Contingent to the UNEF. These impressions therefore are based on the year September 1957 to September 1958. Due to my appointment as second-in-command of the UNEF Engineer Company and living as I was in the UNEF Maintenance Area mess at Rafah which was largely Canadian, my impressions of the UNEF are apt to be coloured by comparison with Canadian standards.
2. The force voted into existence by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 5 Nov 56 "to secure and supervise the cessation of hostilities between Egypt and Israel" was made up originally of ten nations. The Indonesians were withdrawn shortly before our arrival, leaving contingents from Brazil, Colombia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, India, Norway, Sweden and Yugoslavia. English was the official language of the UNEF but apart from this there was scarcely any common denominator. National uniforms were worn by contingents, and even berets of UN blue were not in general use, the Indian parachute battalion having insisted on wearing turbans and berets of traditional maroon. National ration scales were adopted which varied from contingent to contingent, leading to obvious complications in procurement and supply. Not all components were members of NATO so that there was a divergence in professional standards and procedures. Social customs were bound to differ in a force recruited from the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Despite these difficulties, it was easy to see on arrival that much had been attempted to obtain cohesion between the components of the force. Much remained to be accomplished.
3. Early in 1958 the Finns were recalled leaving eight nations to stand guard along the Armistice Demarcation Line, dividing the Gaza strip from Israel, and to patrol the International Frontier between Egypt and Israel. We Canadians were sorry to see them go. They were hard soldiers and hard drinkers who treated the inactive role of the UNEF as a joke. Nursed in the heroic tradition of their struggle against Russia during the early days of the second world war, they sought an outlet in feats which, though wild, were illustrative of their courage. At Sharm-el-Sheikh, for example, a soldier would plunge into the Red Sea and swim about until he attracted a shark. With the shark behind him, the human decoy would then head for the shore, attracting the fish within range of his comrades who, armed with rifles and automatic weapons, were lining the cliffs. To our knowledge the Finns suffered no casualties, although the same cannot be said for the sharks.
4. The Gaza strip is about 40 miles long and about five miles wide. It is bounded by Israel on the north and east, by the Mediterranean on the west and by the Sinai district of Egypt on the south. It is a part of the old Palestine, placed under Egyptian administration because of the thousands of Arab refugees who streamed into this area as a result of the war between Israel and the Arab nations in 1948. Its boundaries are defined by a narrow ditch but these have never been accepted by Egypt, as the very existence of Israel is denied by the Egyptian authorities. The village of Beit Hanun is situated to the north of the strip near the Israeli frontier. The coastal

town of Gaza also lies to the north of the strip, about ten miles from the Israeli Frontier. South of Gaza are the villages of Deir-el-Ballah and Khan Yunis, with Rafah on the southern border of the strip. Thirty miles south of Rafah is the town of El Arish which is the provincial capital of Sinai. During the year 1957/58 the eight remaining contingents of the UNEF were responsible for guarding sectors of the Armistice Demarcation Line from North to South as follow:-

- (a) DANOR* Bn based on Beit Hanun;
- (b) Swedish Bn based on Gaza;
- (c) Indian Bn based on Deir-el-Ballah;
- (d) Colombian Bn based on Khan Yunis;
- (e) Brazil Bn based on Rafah.

The International Frontier was patrolled from Rafah by a Squadron of the 1/8 (Canadian) Hussars R.C.A.C., based on Rafah, and by The Yugoslav Reconnaissance Battalion based on El Arish. From El Arish east to the Gulf of Akaba on the Red Sea, Officers of the R.C.A.F. based on El Arish undertook this task, aided by desert outposts manned by the Yugoslavs. There was a small garrison of the UNEF located at Sharm-el-Sheikh to guard the old Egyptian army installations there. The Headquarters of the UNEF was located in Gaza, while the headquarters of the Maintenance area was housed in an old British Army Camp at Rafah. The R.C.A.F. detachment was based at El Arish.

5. The newcomer arriving by plane at El Arish is immediately impressed by the barrenness of the place. Turning away from the airfield installation he sees nothing but the glare of sand stretching away flatly to where the horizon is bounded by a distant range of hills. It is hot and seems like the land of Genesis before the earth had cooled or life was created. Two miles away, however, there is irrigation and the flat-roofed houses of the town are surrounded by date-palms, figs and olives.

6. The road from El Arish to Rafah was built by the British as a main northern route from the Suez Canal Zone into Palestine. It requires maintenance but is still in a reasonable state of repair. It winds first through dunes criss-crossed by the tracks of camels owned by the Bedouins who are the nomadic inhabitants of this area. Here and there the dunes have drifted across the road and gangs of ragged natives are at work digging out the sand with crude shovels. They are barefooted and dirty and make derisive gestures as the white painted jeep drives by.

7. Farther north the sand gives way to a mixture of sand and clay which is sufficient to nurture scattered scrub and bushes. These bushes bear a red flower which develops into what looks like a miniature chestnut. Inside this is the kernel from which castor oil is made. Flocks of sheep and goats, together with a few camels, are browsing, tended by

*A composite battalion made up of Danes and Norwegians.

young Bedouin girls dressed from head to foot in loose black garments, who veil their faces as we approach. It is impossible to photograph them as this is a contravention of Moslem law and if the jeep were to slow down for this purpose, they would rapidly scatter into the desert.

8. In places, especially in the shallow defiles, the road has been broken by air-strikes, and crudely patched. Here the carcasses of Egyptian military vehicles lie rusting in the desert, as a result of the lightning Israeli campaign of 1956. These twisted and mangled wrecks are to be found lining every major road in Sinai.

9. Rafah Camp is a large camp of permanent buildings and was a major British Ordnance Depot in the Second World War. The UNEF Maintenance area is centred here, staffed by Canadians together with a few Indian administrative troops. There are large tank hangars used by R.C.E., R.C.A.S.C., R.C.A.M.C., R.C.O.C. and R.C.E.M.E. The camp is serviced by rail as well as by the main road from the Canal Zone, through El Arish, to Gaza. During the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, buildings were largely demolished or damaged by the Jews, so that rebuilding and renovation was a major task for the engineers of the first contingent, and was still continuing after the departure of the second contingent. New works included:-

- (a) The UNEF Hospital;
- (b) The BLUE BERET Recreational Hall;
- (c) Two churches, Protestant and Roman Catholic;
- (d) An electrical power house, together with distribution system;
- (e) Kitchen for Indian troops;
- (f) POL point with tanks and pumps;
- (g) Latrines, showers, urinals.

Renovations and maintenance are a continuing programme.

10. Driving north to Gaza, the land becomes more and more fertile, until at Gaza itself there are orange groves, cypress trees, mimosa hedges and masses of flowers. Irrigation from underground cisterns is possible and is practised in this area. Here the nomadic tribes give way to the villagers who live in mud-walled houses and cultivate crops. It is interesting to see oxen, canals and even donkeys pulling wooden ploughs which do little more than scratch the surface of the ground. Methods can have changed very little since biblical times, and it is a common sight to see long-robed, veiled women returning from the wells with earthenware urns balanced on their heads. All this is in great contrast to the mechanized agriculture practiced by the Israelis on the other side of the Demarcation Line.

11. Headquarters of the UNEF is in a modern, single-storeyed block in the new part of town. From here, Lieut-General E.L.M. Burns, a Canadian, commands the UNEF. It is staffed by representatives of all contingents and in addition contains civilians from UN Headquarters in New York. Some of these civilians are women of various nationalities and competition to escort them is undoubtedly severe. Accommodation for the staff is found in villas scattered throughout the town, numbering about sixty in all.

12. Battalion accommodation throughout the Gaza Strip and in the desert outposts is largely tented, though use has been made of permanent buildings where they exist. Much was done by the Canadian engineers to improve tented accommodation during the year I was there. A "National Contingent Programme" was carried out, virtually completed in March 1958, which provided tent-kits for all tents, fly-proof kitchens, showers, latrines and urinals. Tent-kits afforded wooden and fly-screened walls, and floors of concrete-tile.

13. The overall picture can be summarized by saying:-

- (a) The headquarters of the UNEF is at Gaza.
- (b) From Gaza General Burns commands about 5000 men, drawn from eight countries, whose role is to guard the peace along the armistice line between Egypt and Israel.
- (c) This force is maintained by Canadian administrative units and Indian administrative troops at Rafah.
- (d) The force is supported by R.C.A.F. aircraft based at El Arish.

14. In conclusion, I should like to include some random thoughts and impressions under various headings:-

(a) Headquarters of the UNEF:

- (i) The Commander. A grin, colourless personality who seemed singularly lacking in a sense of humour. He was very deliberate. He dealt with all contingents impartially as was illustrated by his wearing a UN uniform believed to be of his own design as opposed to Canadian uniform, and the meticulous way in which he attended all contingent functions. He seemed to be the right man to command a force committed to an inactive role, and hedged around with political booby-traps.
- (ii) Staff Officers. Recruited from all contingents. Insufficient knowledge of English and staff procedures led to the promulgation of ambiguous orders, some of which it was impossible to implement. Canadian procedures, due to the lack of any others, were largely adopted as a result of vigorous representations by the Canadian Maintenance Area Staff, but these were not always best for local conditions. For instance, a Logistics Policy Instruction was forced through dealing with the operation of the UNEF Engineer Company on similar lines to the Army Works Services in Canada. The unit was reorganized to fit this instruction, whereas it might have been better to draw up instructions to fit the peculiar role of the unit. In September 1957

there were no scales of issue, and few were promulgated by September 1958. It was very difficult for the Ordnance Company to function without these, and lack of firm scales of accommodation led to a good deal of unnecessary work for the engineers. Every request had to be treated individually, leading to friction and jealousies between battalions.

(iii) Civilian staff members.

There is no doubt that the real power lay in the hands of certain key civilians who were sent over from United Nations headquarters in New York. The Chief Administrative Officer was one of these, and he controlled the purse strings. Very little could be done without his authority. In general, civilians lacked knowledge of army procedures as is instanced by the refusal of a civilian to authorize visits at United Nations expense by a Canadian C.O. to his detachments working on the docks in Port Said. Civilians served with UNEF for periods of six months, and the resultant taking-over and handing-over jobs led to reduced efficiency.

(b) Procurement

This vital branch was not efficient. Catalogues should have been held by Procurement and by requisitioning units such as Engineers and Ordnance. In the absence of these, items were requisitioned by description and it was left largely to the whim of the procurement officer as to what quality of item was procured. There was also room for error in transposition from the requisition to the order. As an example, a request for rat-tail springs produced rat-traps. Lines of supply were long, a great many items being procured from the U.S.A. Any ambiguity in description led to interminable delays. In my opinion, this branch should have been located at Rafah with the Maintenance Area units so that questions could have been ironed-out on the spot. It was always frustrating to know that some 40 miles north of Rafah was a dynamic western-type state, Israel, which could have supplied the bulk of our needs. As Israel had refused to allow UN troops to be stationed on its soil in the autumn of 1956 no dealings with Israel were permitted except in case of dire emergency.

(c) The Battalions

Their job of guarding the Armistice line was boring. There were no major incidents to the best of my knowledge during the year I was there. Men would sit in observation posts training their binoculars on Israel. Occasionally a few sheep would violate the border. Troops were rotated

frequently, and from every battalion headquarters beaches were near. Morale was generally high, accounted for by the facts that their strengths contained a high percentage of conscripts who might as well be in Egypt as at home, pay was higher than the national scales, tour of duty in many cases was for only six months, and their light tasks enable them to make full use of leave quotas and welfare trips to Jerusalem in Jordan.

(d) Maintenance Area

Rafah Camp housed the headquarters of Maintenance Area, which consisted of the Commander of the Canadian Contingent, Deputy Commander, DAA&QMG, Staff Captain A, and Staff Captain Q. who also doubled as Canadian Quartermaster. A H.Q. Company, containing a major and Welfare Officer, worked directly under this headquarters. There were the following units:-

- (i) 1/8 Cdn Hussars R.C.A.C. This was an operational unit.
- (ii) The UNEF Engr Company R.C.E.
- (iii) 56 (Canadian) Signals Company R.C.C.S.
- (iv) 56 (Canadian) Transport Company R.C.A.S.C.
- (v) The UNEF Hospital (Consisting of R.C.A.M.C. personnel and a Norwegian Medical Company).
- (vi) The UNEF Ordnance Company R.C.O.C. (with an Indian Section attached).
- (vii) 56 (Canadian) Infantry Workshop R.C.E.M.E.
- (viii) The UNEF Base Post Office.

In addition there was a Dental Section, Pay Office, Medical Stores, Chaplains, and a Public Relations Officer, all Canadian. There was also a Provost detachment of mixed nationality. The Indian Administrative Troops supplied personnel to run the Supply Depot and POL point and a transport platoon which worked in conjunction with the Canadian transport company. They also operated the PX. All major units were responsible administratively to HQ Maintenance Area. Operationally they came directly under HQ UNEF. The busiest units were the engineers, signals, ordnance and the R.C.E.M.E. workshop. An air of frustration could be sensed at Rafah as a result of lack of policy and direction from Gaza. To take one instance, it was estimated by R.C.E.M.E. that as many as thirty different types and models of vehicles existed in the Force. Sandy conditions, combined with a low standard of unit maintenance in the contingents, led to blown head gaskets, broken rear springs, worn brake drums,

severe tire wear, as well as transmission and exhaust system repairs. Situated at the end of a long supply line, spares were always a problem.

"Major Cox* and his RCEME Mechs
Have a compound full of broken down wrecks.
They're not moving on, They're not moving on.
It breaks our hearts
But there are no spare parts.
They're not moving on."

R.C.E.M.E. pressed for standardization, but in June 1958 new light personnel carrying vehicles were procured. They were Citroens, a model hitherto unknown to the force.

(c) Locally recruited Civilians.

The engineer unit employed the largest number, approximately 500. The key civilians, clerical assistants, foremen of works, and store-keepers were largely Greeks, who had previously been trained and employed by the British. They were Christians. Tradesmen and labourers were Arabs, and mostly Mahomedans.

Public holidays were complicated by this as on Christian holidays we had a labour force without supervisors, while on Moslem holidays we had the supervision, but no labour. Ramadan, a Moslem period of fasting which lasts from one noon to the next during March and April, is a very delicate time. A Mahomedan is not permitted by his religion to either eat or drink during daylight hours for a whole month. At the setting of the sun he gorges himself, smokes his water-pipe and drinks coffee into the night. The next day, and especially after a few days of this, he is not a very effective worker. It is hot and he is parched with thirst. Tempers become ragged. Christian foremen are circumspect in their dealings with workers at this time, as no man wishes to invite a blow over the head with shovel or crowbar.

Few labourers could read or write, and pay sheets were a work of art, "signed" in blue by spatulate thumbs.

It was found that supervisory personnel and tradesmen, despite their primitive tools, were good workers and craftsmen. Labourers were inclined to idle in the nearest patch of shade and required strong supervision.

*CO of 56 Cdn Inf Wksp, R.C.E.M.E.

(f) Egyptian authorities.

Relations at our level were neither close nor cordial. The Governor of Rafah, an Egyptian army captain, insisted on supplying labour, but this was circumvented wherever possible, as it was found that workers supplied acted as his spies to keep him informed of UN activities. Police aid supplied by him to prevent raids and thefts in Rafah Camp was ineffectual.

Egypt is very much a police state and a close watch is kept on individual movements. Permits are issued before an Egyptian may enter Sinai, although Sinai is a part of Egypt, and another permit is required to enter the Gaza strip. Thus a worker employed at Rafah needed only a Sinai permit. He could not be diverted to a job further north without a Gaza permit. This hampered the flexibility of our labour force, and issues and renewals of permits was a long drawn out procedure.

Movement Orders and road permits were required before a UN vehicle could proceed south of El Arish. There were five armed check posts between El Arish and the Suez Canal, where permits were scrutinized. At Kantara, on the Suez Canal, customs authorities examined every UN vehicle proceeding in or out of the Suez Canal Zone. As both this Zone and Sinai are part of Egypt, the procedure appeared to be somewhat unnecessary. No compliments were ever paid to officers of the UNEF by Egyptian soldiers. We had the feeling that we were in Egypt on sufferance, that we were a useful buffer between Israel and Egypt for the time being, but that when the Egyptian army was re-equipped after the catastrophe of 1956, it would be a different story. This foreboding was fulfilled to a small extent in June 1957 when the Egyptians requested the return of the buildings housing the DANOR Battalion headquarters at Beit Hanun. A new battalion headquarters was built at short notice, evacuation into the new camp was completed in August 1957, and the old camp was taken over by the Egyptians. It was the same story at the rifle-range in El Arish. This was used by all UNEF troops until the Egyptian Army moved into El Arish area during 1957, when use of it was immediately curtailed.

(g) Israel.

This was the side of the fence where the grass very definitely grew greener. No travel into Israel was possible without specific authority from HQ UNEF. Authority was rarely given, apart from emergencies such as medical evacuation to the hospital at Tel Aviv. Stories told by the

drivers on their return, of bronzed amazons, dressed in brief shorts and open blouses, working in the fields were distinctly tantalizing to desert troops.

(h) Canadian Welfare.

In this fertile field a good deal more could have been done. Welfare branch at HQ UNEF organized leave centres at Cairo during the winter months, and at Alexandria during the summer. Welfare trips to Jerusalem were also arranged from Gaza. The UNEF Welfare Officer obtained concert parties from Scandinavia, USA, Yugoslavia, and Italy, but no Canadian concert party was ever forthcoming. Canadian welfare consisted largely of films, newspapers and magazines. There was no music in the Recreational Hall, and few facilities at the beach, where a raft to dive from and a soft-drink stand would have been appreciated. In my opinion, an imaginative programme at Rafah would have relieved the monotony of the tour. As it was, units were left much to their own devices and obtained strong support from the men. The RCEME "Bingo night" and Camera club were both successful.

(i) Climate.

During the summer months, the average temperature was about 110°. It was a dry heat, and not unpleasant. Hours of work at Rafah during the summer were from 0700 hours to 1300 hours six days a week with a half-hour coffee break. After the midday meal, the majority would go to the beach until approximately 1600 hours in recreational transport found by units. The period between the beach and dinner was usually employed in writing letters. After dinner, the messes and canteens showed movies daily, in the open, and of course drinks were cheap. HQ UNEF at Gaza started work later, and went back for two hours in the evenings.

From November to February it is cool, averaging about 45°, and tent - stoves are necessary. Heavy rain occurs in November and December and desert "wadis" (the usually dry gullies) rise suddenly and become foaming torrents, interrupting communications with outposts. The water subsides almost as rapidly and collects in natural cisterns underground. It is sufficient to supply drinking-water throughout the hot season.

Dress in summer was bush-trousers and open-necked shirts with sleeves rolled up. Battle-dress blouses were worn with bush trousers in the winter.

(j) Local inhabitants.

The inhabitants of the area are Arab, Bedouins in the South and villagers and townspeople in the north. In addition, about half a million Arab refugees from the old Palestine are crowded into the Gaza strip. These refugees are maintained at a bare subsistence level by a branch of the United Nations, the United Nations Work and Relief Association (UNWRA). The arrival of the UNEF has been of benefit to the local population as before little opportunity of employment existed.

The Arab is emotional, irresponsible and volatile. He is easily swayed by political agents. The original party-line appeared to be pro-UNEF, but latterly agitation against the UNEF was apparent, and there were some incidents involving the stoning of UNEF vehicles. Numerous public holidays were proclaimed from Cairo during 1958 to celebrate amongst other things Egyptian Independence Day, the formation of the United Arab Republic, the rebellion in Iraq, and the "defeat" of the Israelis in 1956. No unessential movement of UN vehicles was permitted at these times.

Rafah Camp, with its stock-piles of stores was the scene of numerous thefts. Break-ins and raids were frequent.

(k) Social Activities.

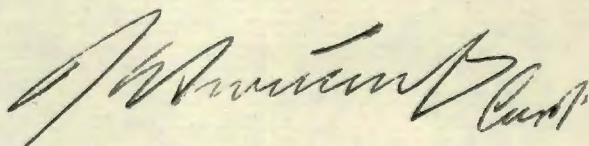
To relieve the monotony of daily routine, opportunities were made to visit other contingents. Every Saturday the Brazilians held a "Gauche night" complete with barbecue and music from guitars. There were functions on all "national days" some of which were impressive. The Norwegians, on the occasion of King Olav's birthday, obtained infantry uniforms dating from the early nineteenth century from their military museum in Oslo, and dressed a guard-of-honour in these. The events were always colourful, the Indians in "blues" with coloured turbans, the Brazilians, Canadians, Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes in khaki, and the Colombians and Yugoslavs in grey. The pipe-band from the Indian parachute battalion, in scarlet and tartan, playing "The road to the Isles" and other Scottish airs seemed incongruous but was effective. The accent in the UNEF was on co-operation, and social affairs such as these promoted tolerance and understanding.

(l) Conclusion.

A future historian should carefully examine the structure of command in UNEF. Was it effective? The UNEF as it was organized bore little relation to the Army, Corps, Division, Brigade structure as we know it, or to the Army, Command and Area organization. The headquarters of the UNEF was

unwieldy for what was virtually a Brigade Headquarters, but it should be remembered that in many matters it exercised powers normally reserved to higher echelons.

Has the force achieved its purpose? This may be too early to say. In General Burns' words addressed to the officers of the Canadian contingent towards the end of 1957, "The UNEF is a force interposed between two nations Israel and Egypt, to keep the peace." While the peace has been kept in the south, early in 1958, Egypt and Syria became one nation, The United Arab Republic. Thus, although the "front door" is guarded, Egypt now has a common frontier with Israel in the north, and this, combined with Egypt's avowed intention of driving Israel into the sea, may be of interest in the future.



(J.A. Swettenham) Capt

17 Dec 58

U.N.E.F. AREA OF OPERATIONS

1957-1958

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MILES

