

Jean Alphonso

1957-58 UNEF Posting



I had been in the army with the RCCS (Royal Canadian Corps of Signals) for 2 years as a wireless radio operator when I volunteered for a one year tour of duty in Egypt (Gaza Strip) with the newly formed United Nations Emergency Force UNEF (Blue Berets). This was in September 1957. I had been stationed at Debert Army Base in Nova Scotia with a Signal Squadron attached to the RCHA (Royal Canadian Horse Artillery) for the past nine months. Life there was pretty boring with almost nothing to do except for a two month scheme in Gagetown NB. I wanted a bit of change and more action.

Around the 31st of October 1957, after a 30-day leave, 18 of us Signalmen ended at the Longueil Quebec Base where we boarded a very noisy and shaky North Star DC 4 Cargo plane (unfit for human travel) en route to Egypt for a 15 hr flight with 5 stop overs – refuelling in Gander, a 3-day stay in the Azores, one night in Naples, Italy, another refuelling in Athens, Greece and finally landing in El Arish, Egypt with plugged up ears tired, bodies, and surrounded by sand, sand and more sand.

On the 8th of November 1957 we were driven from El Arish to Rafah for a few days and then 3 of us were selected to join the Danor Battalion in Beit Hanoun, near the Israeli border, as radio operators. We were there for a little more than 3 months. Communications were made from a wireless Signal truck equipped with a no. 52 set and a smaller 19 set for back up. We used the smaller one to listen to music on the VOICE of America station. We usually received about 1 to 3 messages a day, sometimes none, and nothing else to do meanwhile. We had to cook our own meals and were more or less left to ourselves the whole time. Of course we lived in a tent and slept on canvas cots with no mattresses. We did not have much contact with our fellow Danes and Norwegians because of the language barrier. We more or less spent our time listening to music, writing letters, drinking a lot of Tuborg or Amstel beer, and trying to make the best of it. We sort of felt forgotten but all in all I did enjoy those 3 months.

Around January 15th, I was transferred to hell hole Rafah to work as a switchboard operator (the lousiest job for a Signalman) and remained there until the middle of April 1958. Rafah was the worst of the places as we had to do guard duty once a week or so. We had to patrol the Canadian camp perimeter on foot along a barbed wire fence at night armed with a flashlight and an old 303 which we were not allowed to load unless we were shot at!!! We were two Signalmen and patrolled each our half of the camp back and forth all night. Fortunately nothing much happened except for meeting with a lot of stray dogs looking for food.

While in Rafah one of our guys (Convoy Signalman Neil Edward Mason) was shot dead by a Brazilian guard, he was on his way back from the "Blue Beret Club" and was mistaken for a Bedouin, he was machined gunned and was hit with 2 bullets. Unlike us, the Brazilian did not have to do guard duty with empty weapons like we did. After that incident none of us went to the "Club" in the evenings. We even had to sing "Oh Canada" when we had to use the outside latrines at night just in case.

After 4 months I was very happy to learn that I was going to be transferred to Gaza HQ as a radio operator. I remained in Gaza for the rest of my stay. Gaza was not that bad as we had the mess hall in the same building and it was used a wet canteen in the evening, needless to say we visited that canteen almost every night to play cards, sing and drink a lot of beer. We worked 3 shifts and had 2 days off every four or five days. There were a lot of incidents while in Gaza and a couple of us got shot at twice by the Gaza Police. I have to admit that we were a bit to blame but it's a long story or stories. The most enjoyable thing about Gaza was the beach which we went to as often as we could.

During my stay in Egypt I went 3 times on vacation to Cairo with my 2 best friends, visited all the usual places and spent most of our time in "Night Clubs" with "Belly dancers" and "Champagne girls". Around the 20th of October 1958 it was time to leave the Gaza Strip and head for home. We boarded the same noisy and shaky North Star at El Arish for another 15 hr flight. This time we stopped for 3-days in Gibraltar and all the other spots to refuel.

We arrived back in Canada around October 26. After a very short medical we were paid and sent home for a 63 day leave. No welcoming party, no hand shake, no thanks, just the PTSD (which nobody knew about) and hearing problems from the flight (which the army paid for 50 yrs later after making a claim).

When back from Egypt we were supposed to have choice postings, I had asked for Gagetown or Quebec but they sent me 4,000 miles away in Calgary, Alberta. My home was in New Brunswick. My 3 years were up so I decided to go back to civilian life.

I never regretted my stay in the army and in the UNEF and the Gaza Strip experience. I am proud to have been part of all of this.



Convoy Signalman Neil Edward Mason (died May 15, 1958)