

El Arish Egypt 1958-1959

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Like many before me and many after, I and my companion for the next year, Bob, climbed into the awaiting "North Star" Aircraft at RCAF Base Trenton for our long journey to El Arish Egypt. It was October 15th 1958.

We both knew that one year would be a long time away from home, but being 20 years old and full of P and V; we were looking forward to the adventure. We were very green at the time and we really didn't know why the UNEF was involved in such a faraway land. Oh, we knew from the Middle East Crisis of 1956. Because at that time all A/C maintenance personnel on the Base were subjected to the complete round of injections, inoculations etc., just in case we were required to go overseas at a moment's notice. In fact 4 or 5 of the 4-OTU boys that were engaged to be married at the time actually ended up getting married. They had been told that they may be required to ship out at any time. Surprise! Not one of them ever left RCAF Station Trenton.

Looking back now I can see that the biggest mistake that the RCAF made was to send men into these situations with absolutely no formal introduction or instructions as to the peoples, the language, the culture or religion of the area. We also had no training and no idea why Israel and Egypt were engaged in conflict that affected the whole world. I have regretted this situation ever since. We were totally ignorant when we arrived in Egypt and it's my understanding that the practice continues to this day. Just one week of formal instruction on the lands and the peoples in these circumstances would have given everyone a heads up.

But I digress. Our trip to Egypt was to take 6 days. Our stops were to include Gander Newfoundland, The Azores Islands, Shannon Ireland, Pisa Italy, Athens Greece and Egypt. Overnight at each stop. Now, in an unpressurized North Star at no higher than 12,000 ft. it is quite remarkable that we survived at all. We were supposed to head to RCAF Stn. "Langar England" but the weather was not suitable and the pilot diverted to Shannon Ireland. It was about 9PM when we landed and we were advised of a very early take off the next morning. Bob and I and a few Army types headed into town, and paid for a hotel. However we soon found out that the Pubs closed at 10 PM. So onto Plan "B": the pub at the Airport was open 24hrs. And so that we would be assured of not missing the flight, we took our luggage back to the Airport and spent the whole night in the Airport bar. Hey! That's what guys do!

Pisa Italy. At least here, we had a few daylight hours to look around. We saw the Leaning Tower and the Chapel and we learned a lot of history from the locals. It took several tries and a taxi ride to even find a "Pizza" place. Those were the days when there was no rail on the tower of Pisa and we were able to climb right to the top. One of the officers with us had his hat blown off and he had to go to the Chapel next door to retrieve it from the Church Officials. Wonderful food, wonderful people and again some nice Pubs.

Athens Greece. In all my dreams I would never have thought that someday I would be seeing all of these ancient cities which I had studied and read about in School. What a wonderful opportunity for a young lad. I sent post cards every day. Also I was dumb struck when I thought that they were paying me to do all this. Bob, my buddy, got into a little trouble in Athens. Apparently he was supposed to pay for that young ladies champagne before he left the bar? Strange custom?

Our arrival in El Arish was in itself a memorable occasion. First, when we were 15 miles out, the Egyptian Air Force met our aircraft with their Russian Mig 15'S and escorted us right into the base. This was to ensure that we didn't stray off course and take pictures of all the sand?? This escort was a weekly event as long as I was in Egypt.

As Gord Jenkins mentions in his Diary (see 115ATU diary) I also recall when the doors of the AIC were opened. The first thing I remember was the intense heat rushing into the plane and then the flies and then the strange odour! Never to be forgotten. To add to all this, my ears didn't stop ringing for 2 weeks. Shortly after arriving, I made it my one goal to kill every damn fly in the whole country.

We met some Airmen we knew from way back and were given a quick welcome and rundown of our situation. Then we were whisked off on the bus, 7 miles to the Marina camp. In that short ride I was awed by the topography, the people, and their homes. I had never seen men dressed in bed sheets before.

Our first chore upon arrival was to go to stores and get outfitted with our UN gear including desert boots (sure wish I could find a pair here). We were assigned to our rooms which were in what I understood to be an old British Hospital. Unlike the Army, we had 4 men to a room, bat boys to clean the rooms and make up the beds, waiters in the Mess Hall, and shoe shine boys outside of the fence. I thought I had gone to heaven.

The Marina was about the size of one city block, surrounded by barbed wire and secured by armed Yugoslav Guards at each of the 2 entrances. The guards rotated every 6 months (a different nation every time). These Guards were serious and one did not dare fool with them as they would shoot if protocol was not followed. In other words, don't try to sneak out at night!

Our barracks looked out onto the Mediterranean Sea which was another bonus. Just out the front gate, across the road and railroad tracks and into the Sea. Wonderful! We had our first meal that Sunday night with all our fellow Airmen. I don't recall the meal but I do know the food for the most part was great considering the circumstances. The mess Hall was actually a tent just behind our barracks as was the post office. And just up by the rear gate was our wet canteen tent. These last 3 areas mentioned became the focal point of our life in Egypt. The Mess because we were always hungry, the Post Office because this is where each Sunday the news and parcels from home would arrive. And of course the "Wets". Well, at \$0.10 per mixed drink or a beer who would knock it? Our social life revolved around the "Wets". We settled into a life of living, eating and working with the same people day in and day out for a year. We've all tried it. It's not easy. It became quite lonely at times in EL Arish and we were not allowed off base at night The thought of sitting in the room reading each night had no appeal. After a hard day's work(?) on the flight line, we would head for the "wets" if there was no movie that night.

Some of the guys decorated one of the Main tent Poles of the "Wets" with Panties and a Bra brought from Cairo. We called her (this pole) "Miss El Arish" and spent many nights dancing with this gorgeous (thing?). "Bob", our Armenian Bartender would keep the bar open until the last man i.e: 3AM. He really didn't care because he was stoned every night on Hash.

Our (RCAF) function was to service and maintain two DC3'S and four Otters. And we had to service the North Star that brought rotation troops in each Sunday. Our A/C were used mainly to supply the troops on the Demarcation Line between Israel and Egypt. This line ran from the Mediterranean Sea to Sharm El Sheik, at the bottom of the Sinai peninsula and the line was surveyed almost daily by our pilots and crew. I felt sorry for the Army types ("Pongos") that manned the outposts along this line. Being out there in that unforgiving heat must have been one of the toughest jobs in the UN. Each night or afternoon, (we only worked 1/2 days during the summer) we would secure all the A/C in the hanger. Two Otters, then a Dakota, then 2 more Otters, and then the last Dakota. Very neat and compact. Then we would leave the towing Mercedes Benz Diesel "Mule" parked under the belly of the last Dakota for easy access in the AM.

One morning when we opened the hanger doors we were shocked to find that a Yugoslav Guard had climbed on to the Mule, which had been left parked in reverse the night before, and I suppose that he was just fooling around to pass the time when he accidentally started the Mule. Well, the Mule backed up pinning the Guard between the steering wheel and the belly of the A/c. That Mule actually sat spinning the wheels, in reverse, until it ran out of gas. The poor Yugo was in pretty bad shape by the time he was released and rushed to medical aid. I never did hear whether or not he survived this ordeal.

A few weeks before our arrival in Egypt one of the Otter A/C had crashed in the desert with no loss of life thankfully. The plane was dismantled in the desert and brought back to the Base. With the wings securely strapped to the fuselage, we loaded the Otter onto a C119, "Flying Boxcar" for transport back to Canada. Unfortunately The C119 crashed and burned in France or Italy, (I can't recall where exactly) destroying both A/C. And I am also unsure of the fate of that crew.

Just 3 weeks after arrival in El Arish, I had the opportunity to make my first flight to Gaza. We were taking some dignitaries to meet at the UN headquarters there. The flight was great and gave me the opportunity to see the desert in all its glory and to see some of the destruction the Israelis' had left behind. Burnt out vehicles and damaged buildings everywhere. Upon arrival we all hopped into an open Deuce & a half, clearly marked with UN, and headed into town. This was my first introduction to hostilities. As we travelled through the town (and it was a small town at this time) we were greeted by several groups that had decided that they didn't like the UN and we were actually stoned. Everyone had to fend off the stones and duck to avoid getting struck if possible. I was actually afraid, yet no one was hurt. This was where I asked "What did I get myself into?" Ironically we made it safely into Headquarters, the meeting was held uneventfully and we returned to the airport via the same road only to be greeted by waving and smiling people along the route??

In December '58, Bob and I decided to take our first UN leave over Christmas. The Air Force had a leave center in both Cairo and Beirut Lebanon. We opted for Beirut, the Paris of the Middle East. What a

beautiful place, especially when compared to El Arish. Wonderful beaches, great shopping in both the Americanized parts of the city and the Arab sections. We could actually buy Egyptian money here and if one had enough he could make a few bucks. We even got to tour a Russian TUI04 at the airport.

I suppose the Air Force did have a few more perks than the Army. We did get off camp quite often. Trips to Cairo and Beirut were frequent events. My next big trip away from the base was a 7 day road trip to Mount Sinai in the spring of 1959. This had to be a life time of memories in itself. In reality, I am not a religious person and I had no idea what the significant was when I signed up for this trip. All that I knew was that we were to be away from the grind for 7 days. We drove in a convoy of 4 or 5 Army trucks to Ismailia, down to Suez City where I got violently ill from "Gypo Gut"- the only time in my life that I really wanted to die. Some will remember this experience. Then to my utter surprise, we just headed off into the desert. There were no roads, just desert. We did pass a few Bedouin Camps along the way and all the people could do was stare at these strange invaders.

What an impressive sight to see the monastery. This HUGE structure out in the desert. It is situated right at the base of a mountain with the only sign of vegetation in what was actually a small garden plot outside the monastery. Also there was one lone tree on the hill just opposite the Monastery which the Monks cared for diligently. After we were assigned our rooms and a nice supper prepared by the Monks, several of the guys climbed the mountain opposite the Monastery to survey this awesome sight we had traveled to see. As I mentioned I am not religious. While we sat there, along came an Indian soldier from our group. It was not long before we realized that this gentleman knew a lot more than most of us when it came to the Bible. We must have sat there for 2 hours listening to him tell the story of Moses, the Bible and St. Katherine. This made the whole trip much more meaningful.

The next day we did the climb up to the top of the mountain(approx. 4hr round trip). A long hot hike. We did however sign the guest book at the top and our names appear right after "Cecil B. De Milles." I was unaware that our trip was shortly after the making of the film "The Ten Commandments."

Someday I'll go back although I understand that there is now a road in and a hotel right on site. That just may take away from feeling of total isolation that we felt.

We had a special visitor come to El Arish in the summer of 59. We knew something was up when a couple of bus loads full of Egyptians came rumbling into the Airport. They were herded off the buses and each one was given a small Egyptian flag on a stick. These flags were to wave for their glorious leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser flew in with his entourage only to be greeted by 50 or so flag waving patriots. It must have been a high level meeting (?) because he only stayed in the Egyptian Headquarters for minutes and when he emerged the flag wavers were at it again. He boarded the A/C and departed. Each Egyptian had their flags taken away, then were herded onto the bus and driven back to town. It is my understanding that these guys had been rounded up in town and forced to attend this little ceremony. Not to knock Nasser, he was one of the best things ever to happen to the people of Egypt in my estimation. At least he allowed women to attend school.

Upon my arrival in Egypt, I swore that I would never step onto another "North Star". My ears rang for weeks after the flight. However after a few short weeks I would have "Wing Walked" on that A/C just to

get out of the Hell Hole called El Arish. Harsh words but with very little meaning. If I had to do it all over again I would jump at the chance. All of these events plus the initial culture shock were a fact of life while living in Egypt. Each day was an additional element in an education that would last a lifetime.

I feel that our job in Egypt was very important and was carried out in most professional manner. Egypt had invited the UN into their country in an effort to stabilize the situation. We did our best, each and every one of us and yet the trouble in that part of the world remains still unresolved 54 years later. However, because of the UNEF forces, we were able to maintain the peace in the area for many many years. This at least gave a generation of kids a chance grow up without war and destruction and I'm very proud of that fact.

I salute all those men that were there before me and all those that followed.

The following is the last verse of a 3 verse song. There must have been many nights when some pretty scared Camels out in the late night desert heard the awful whaling of the drunken Airmen singing this song at the top of their voices. Sung to the tune of "Have you ever been across the sea to Ireland. "

*Oh God if I ever get a posting hereafter
No matter where in Hell it has to be
Please! Don't send me back to Egypt
The stink is just to "Bleeping" much for me.*

Author unknown

The other verses on request. In fact, it would be great to hear from anyone from that era.

Oct 1958 to Oct 1959 RCAF or ARMY

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