

## **KEY NOTE ADDRESS** **By Wing Commander Daryll Topp (Retd)**

### **PEACE KEEPING – SINAI PENINSULAR**

Good afternoon distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be here with you to commemorate ANZAC Day and to remember those Servicemen and Servicewomen who gave the ultimate sacrifice and to thank those Navy, Army and Air Force personnel who continue to serve today. I would like to thank Rob Webster, President of RSL Victoria for his very kind invitation to talk to you.

The Australian Defence Force has been involved in over 60 United Nations and other peacekeeping missions since 1947. Today I would like to enlighten you about peacekeeping in the Sinai Peninsular where I was deployed to in 1983.

The Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal have been fought over since the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. Since 1949 there has been a number of conflicts between Egypt and Israel. On 26 March 1979 Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in which Israel agreed to withdraw all its armed forces and civilians from the Sinai Peninsula.

This withdrawal was conducted in several stages and ended on 26 April 1982. However, that was not all, Article IV of the treaty stipulated that the two countries have to accept the stationing of the United Nations personnel in Sinai on borders with Israel. In 1981, Egypt and Israel came up with the protocol to establish the Multi Force and Observers as an alternative to a United Nations force. That is because the United Nations Security Council refused to station a UN peacekeeping force in the Sinai.

The Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) is an independent international organization that is headquartered in Rome. The nationalities composing the MFO were selected by Egypt and Israel to assume peacekeeping activities. The funding of the MFO is equally paid by both states in addition to the contributions from other countries.

Teams of U.S. diplomatic, financial, legal and military officials held discussions with representatives of various European Community and British Commonwealth nations during late 1981 and early 1982. These discussions eventually led to the arrangements with Italy to provide and staff three coastal patrol vessels; with Australia and New Zealand for a combined helicopter squadron; with France for an air transport unit; with the Netherlands for military police and communication units; with Norway for staff; and with the United Kingdom for a Force headquarters unit. The other countries involved making up the MFO were Colombia, Fiji, USA and Uruguay.

The Mission of the Multinational Force Observers would begin operations on 25 April 1982, the day that Israel would return the Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty. The Mission for the MFO was to supervise the implementation of the security provisions of the

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Egyptian-Israeli Treaty of Peace and employ best efforts to prevent any violation of its terms. The Sinai was established into three security zones with limitations on military forces and equipment within each zone as stipulated in Annex I to the Treaty.

In March 1982 the first ANZAC contingent was established at El Gorah in North Sinai approximately 20 kilometres South of the Mediterranean coastline. The base covered approximately 2.7 square kilometres and comprised diverse facilities such as aviation support buildings, a gymnasium, a theatre, accommodation, laundry services, a fire station administrative building, clubs, a dining facility, a Force Exchange or PX, sports fields with no grass and a swimming pool. Also there were, clubs, medical facilities and libraries at both North Camp (Elgorah) and South Camp (Sharm el Sheikh). In addition, North Camp possessed a pool while South Camp boasted Herb's Beach, a section of the Red Sea coastline where it is possible to snorkel just a few feet into the water and see a variety of tropical fish.

The base was self-sufficient for operations and utilities support. Water was provided by on-site wells and a water purification unit. Electricity was provided by an on-site power plant using primary and back-up diesel generator systems.

Australia's contribution from March 1982 to April 1996, was the Force's Rotary Wing Aviation Unit which flew and maintained nine Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopters. The ANZAC contingent consisted of 102 Australian Defence Force personnel and 26 New Zealand Defence Force personnel of all ranks up to Wing Commander. I was posted to the Sinai from January 1983 to July 1983. Back then this was recorded as an X grade posting which meant that we were unable to take families.

Life in the Sinai for MFO members was difficult due to the remoteness and desolation of the region as well as security concerns. The force had its own bimonthly and bilingual magazine named the Sandpaper. Sporting events were held as regularly as possible

We had our own ANZAC Bar which was for all ranks and the bar was stocked with Australian and Israeli beer, different spirits, especially Bundy and soft drinks. Every six weeks a C130 would arrive with stores and equipment, of course beer supplies, and a change-over of personnel. To farewell the members returning home a cricket match was played on the bumpiest of sand wickets I have ever seen. On one team the members returning home were called next, because they were the next to return to Australia or New Zealand and the opposing team was called the pinkies as they had not yet gained their tan. That night a farewell function or Egyptian style Maa'salaame was held to say goodbye.

Members were encouraged to take visits to Israel and Egypt, usually on organized trips. Also, there were trips to Mount Sinai, Luxor, Cairo, Jerusalem, and other sites within Egypt and Israel. In 1985 a bicycle competition was set up and this was known as the Tour de Sinai.

The conditions of service in 1983 for members posted to the Sinai was very different to the current conditions of service for peace keeping missions. Back then we received \$17USD per day which equated to around \$17.06 Australian. Members deployed on

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Operation Mazurka (which is the current Sinai deployment) are currently receiving \$160AUD per day. In 1983 there was no internet and we had to pay for our own postage and phone calls. If we called home from the base, we had to book a reverse charge call to Australia and this cost approximately \$3AUD per minute or even more if you called from Egypt or Israel.

Postal clerk was part of my duties and I had to attend a three-day course at the International Mail Exchange in Sydney prior to proceeding on posting and this was to learn about the postal system as we were set up as an official PO Box. I managed the post similar to a Post Office in Australia, selling stamps to members for postage back home. Families paid the normal post for sending letters and parcels to members in the Sinai. Receiving mail is the biggest morale booster no matter where you are deployed. I recall that we went for three weeks without receiving any mail bags and then one day 10 bags of mail arrived. Once everyone heard that the mail was in, I had to lock the orderly room door to give me time to sort it for distribution. I had plenty of offers for help that day.

News from Australia took up to three weeks before we received it in the Sinai. It was not until the middle of March that we had heard about the Ash Wednesday bushfires which caused much devastation in South Australia and Victoria. The Australian Commanding Officer was approached by a few members to seek approval to run a casino night to raise funds for the bushfire victims back home in Australia. Approval was given and we raised over ten thousand dollars on the night. The American contingent was the biggest gamblers. Also to raise funds, we conducted a relay run from St Catherines Monastery to Sharm el Sheikh which is approximately 211 kilometres.

In January 1983, I joined 35 other members at RAAF Base Fairbairn for a four-day familiarisation training prior to departure for the Sinai. Our travel to Egypt was on a C130 Hercules aircraft via Darwin, Singapore, Columbo in Sri Lanka, Bahrain in the Kingdom of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf and the shortest day was six hours from Bahrain to Elgorah. When I deployed to Iraq in 2008, we flew overnight from Sydney to Kuwait on an Airbus A330. On landing at the base that we were calling home for the next six months we were met with a tandem bicycle with a flashing sign advising the C130 to follow along the taxi way. The first thing we saw once the door was opened was two guys dressed up as a camel saying welcome.

In April 1986 the Australian contingent, consisting of all Rotary Wing staff and helicopters withdrew in the course of the Australian Governments reduction of its peace keeping commitments. They were replaced by the Canadian Rotary Wing Aviation Unit equipped with nine CH135 Twin Huey helicopters.

In January 1993 Australia replaced the British contingent and Operation Mazurka continues today with 27 Australian Defence members. From 2012 to 2016, the MFO's North Camp was under threat from Islamic State of Iraq attacks and also experienced periods of water and fuel shortages, and a near-total cut-off of internet access and mobile and landline phones during persistent Egyptian military operations. By September 2016,

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the MFO's northern camp Elgorah was reorganized and relocated to the South at Sharm el Sheikh.

Again, it has been an honour talking to you today.

**Lest We Forget.**