

The limiting factor was clearly the Commando and armour located at MALTA. As a result of previous preparedness and excellent work by all officers and men they were embarked on the night 30/31st October and directed to sail at full speed for PORT SAID, a distance of 936 miles by the shortest route. At the maximum speed of the landing craft this trip must take 6 days.

The aircraft carriers and HQ ships had been assembling in the CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN for Exercise BOATHOOK. This was in some ways an advantage and in some ways a disadvantage. Although it resulted in ships being reasonably concentrated they could not be briefed personally or easily for the operations in hand.

The Royal Air Force were the most easily prepared for action. It was clearly necessary to eliminate the threat of Egyptian air effort from being able to engage our landing craft as they sailed from MALTA along the Egyptian coast or our air transports from CYPRUS as they approached their dropping zones. Further, any action by the IL.28 bombers against our overcrowded airfields in CYPRUS would have done damage out of all proportion to the effort involved.

Although the effectiveness of the Egyptian Air Force was never overestimated, they had been in action against the ISRAELI forces and they had foreign technicians who were certainly capable of carrying out missions on the Korean pattern.

So my first objective was the Egyptian Air Force.

The plan for this was a combination of high level bombing with contact and delay action bombs to damage runways and discourage aircraft from taking off. This to be followed by daylight ground attacks.

It was estimated this would take 48 hours to complete.

The next problem was when to use our airborne forces.

We had a limited airborne effort but in particular our air supply lift and air supply resources were very restricted. The offensive power we had against the Egyptian anti-aircraft guns was from the Fleet Air Arm and fighters from CYPRUS, the time over target of the latter being limited to ten to fifteen minutes.

My final objective at this stage it may be remembered was SUEZ. My problem was therefore to prevent the Egyptians moving any of their armoured forces, which were concentrated in reserve, to the CANAL ZONE and especially on to the Causeway, that narrow strip of sand at places only a few hundred yards wide, on which the road runs from PORT SAID to ISMAILIA. Here even a few tanks might have caused a physical block which would have taken a very considerable time to clear. We hoped to do this by keeping them uncertain until the last moment whether our main attack was to be at PORT SAID or ALEXANDRIA. This, in fact, we succeeded in doing.

It was therefore decided to employ the airborne forces early enough to facilitate a quick run through of the armour but to avoid using them piecemeal whereby they might become immobilised.

Weather was also a factor to be reckoned with. At this time of year weather can deteriorate very suddenly and very seriously.

Apart from the start of air operations, the speed of operations was dictated solely by local factors. It was estimated that we would land our assault forces from MALTA by November 6th, have seized ISMAILIA by November 8th and SUEZ by November 11th. That would have completed the whole operation in 12 days from the start of air operations.

FIVE

The Operation

At 1615 hours GMT on 31st October, 1956, Valiant and Canberra bombers under the command of Air Marshal BARNETT began their attacks on Egyptian airfields at ALMAZA and INCHAS near CAIRO and at ABU SUYER and KABRIT in the CANAL ZONE. These attacks were continued with the aid of flares during the early part of the night and encountered a certain amount of anti-aircraft fire but no night fighters.

We had an anxious moment when I was instructed, after the aircraft had taken off on their first mission which included CAIRO WEST AIRFIELD, not to attack that airfield, since information had been received that American Nationals were being evacuated to ALEXANDRIA and were using the road close to the airfield. Since CAIRO WEST was a main bomber base for the Russian made IL 28's its sudden reprieve was a matter of concern. However, in the event, the Egyptians only used it to remove their IL 28's to LUXOR.

I was also instructed to be prepared to attack CAIRO Radio later after issuing warnings so as to avoid civilian casualties.

During the night HMS NEWFOUNDLAND encountered the Egyptian Frigate DOMYAT in the RED SEA and sank her after she had failed to reply to a signal: 68 survivors were picked up.

From daylight onwards Allied shore-based and carrier aircraft carried out highly successful attacks on aircraft on Egyptian airfields while French naval aircraft set fire to a Russian-built destroyer off ALEXANDRIA.

Two attempts were made to sink the old LST AKKA which had been identified as a prepared blockship. Anchored in shallow water in LAKE TIMSAH she was well placed for towing into the narrow channel at the southern end of the lake. Unfortunately the attacks were only partially successful and before the ship could be sunk she had been towed in a sinking condition to her blocking position. In view of the subsequent orgy of sinking carried out by the Egyptians the relative importance of the AKKA assumed far less significance than seemed likely at the time.

By the end of the day the Egyptian Air Force had been severely treated: a large number of aircraft had been destroyed or damaged on the ground and very few appear to have been airborne. Only one of our aircraft had been attacked in the air and suffered slight damage, while others had incurred minor damage from anti-aircraft fire.

During the night, bomber attacks from CYPRUS and MALTA were kept up against