Helicopters Over The Sinai

by Graeme Lunn

Fleet Air Arm Association of Australia
HERITAGE FEATURE

The Story of the FAA in the Anzac Rotary Wing Aviation Unit 1982-86

PART 1 - FORMATION

On Friday 19 March 1982 the southern Israeli port of Ashdod witnessed the unusual sight of 8 white painted RAAF UH-IH Iroquois helicopters being offloaded from the Landing Ship Heavy *Tobruk*. Departing Brisbane 18 February 1982 *Tobruk's* cargo, supplemented by a container and a half of XXXX beer, was for the Australians and New Zealanders joining the assembling Multinational Force and Observers. Their ANZAC presence was the culmination of the most contentious foreign policy debate of the 1980s. Among the personnel flown in by RAAF B707 to Tel Aviv 20 March 1982 were 10 members of the Fleet Air Arm led by Lieutenant Commander Ted Wynberg.

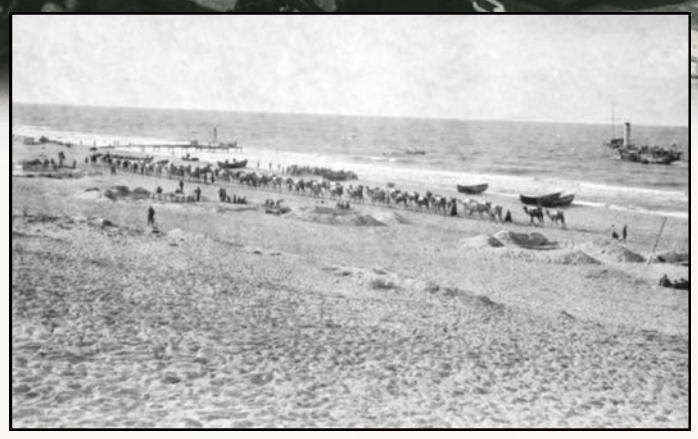
The RAAF, Army and RAN personnel were put in Rama Tour Buses and driven to the ex-Israeli Air Force Base Eitam in the northern Sinai desert. Renamed El Gorah it had been razed by the withdrawing troops. One of the first recorded comments was 'Big bloody beach, no bloody water!' As Wynberg formed the Air Operations Cell in Force Headquarters with RAAF and Australian Army colleagues the aircrew were returned the next day to Ashdod and ferried the helicopters in a single formation to Eitam. Ready for operations Monday 22 March 1982 the Anzac Rotary Wing Aviation Unit Sinai commenced it's varied tasking on the 23rd, immediately acquiring the nickname 'Anzac Airlines'.

A land bridge connecting Africa with Asia the Sinai Peninsula had seen some 50 recorded invasions and battles over millennia. A roughly triangular shape 390km long and 220km wide it covers 60,000 square kilometres. Consisting of a northern plain of sand dunes and gravel, a central wadi carved plateau and a rugged southern mountain region, it is one of the more inhospitable areas of the world - and made even more unwelcoming by also being the most mined area in the world. Subject to heat exceeding 50°C in summer with frequent sandstorms and winter fogs, the area is demanding of aircrew and harsh on airframes and engines.

This was not the first time the navy had operated in this geographic fracture point of conflict. After evacuation from Gallipoli the RAN Bridging Train had moved on to the Suez Canal Zone in January 1916. There they manned and controlled the tugboats and lighters keeping this vital waterway open and, untroubled by the infrequent German bombing raids, would form and break the pontoon bridges across the canal daily to keep the vital military shipping moving.

Every evening ratings of the Bridging Train would harness a wooden roller between two horses and smooth the sand along the canal bank between each bridgehead. At daylight an officer would gallop from one post to the next to ascertain by footprint or hoof print if there had been any incursions. Allowing for the technological differences of 66 years the RWAU primary task was essentially the same - the provision of an efficient and trustworthy barrier to allow life on both sides to proceed peacefully.

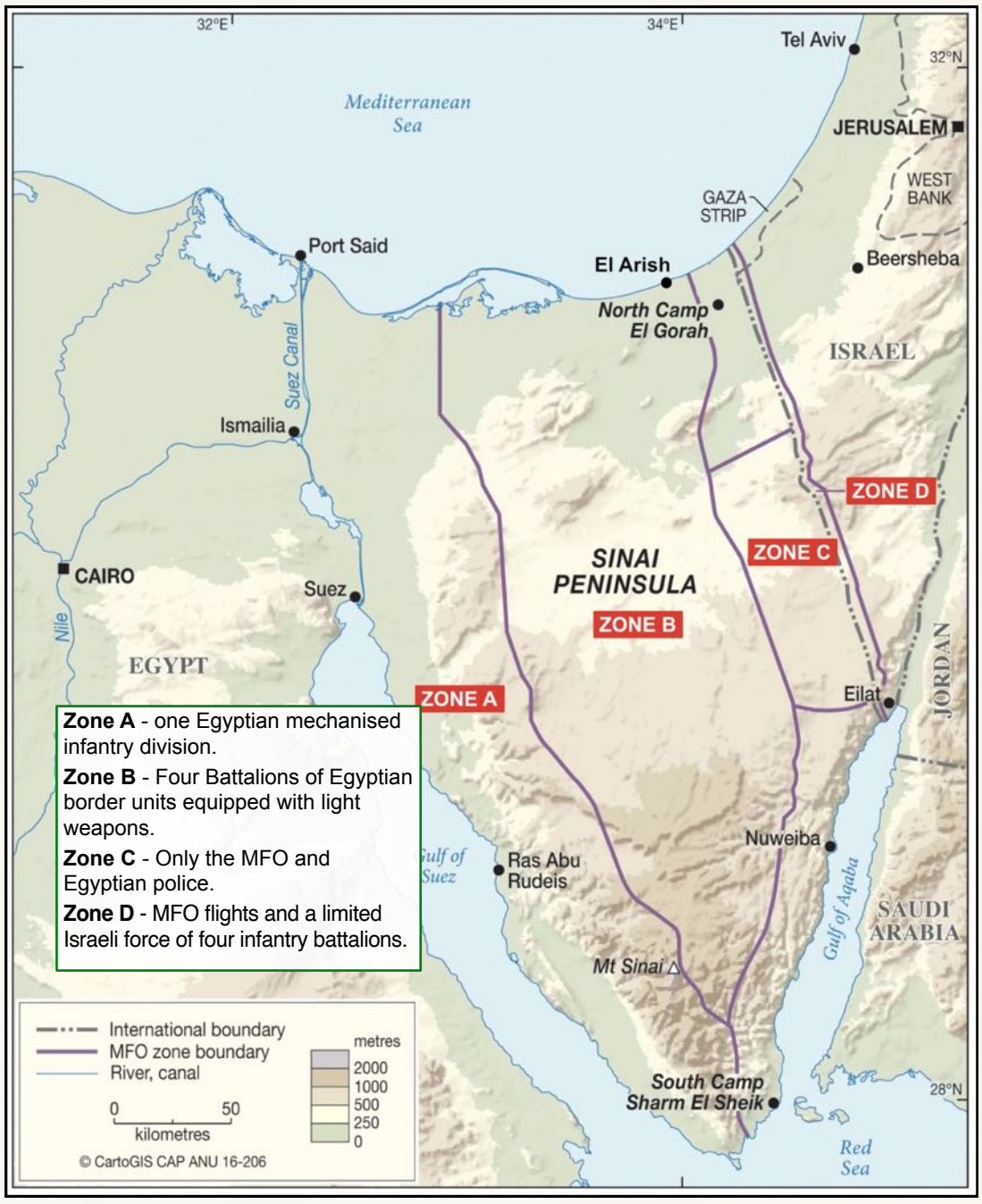
The Australian forces under General Chauvel advanced eastwards across the



The RAN was no stranger to being involved in operations in the Middle East. ***Upper:*** *The RAN Bridging Train, the last Australian unit to evacuate Gallipoli, monitored enemy incursions along the Suez Canal Zone in 1916 and kept the waterway open. In this image they have made an amphibious landing at El Arish, only a stones throw from where our Fleet Air Arm was based at El Gorah, some 66 years later.* ***Lower:*** *The RAN was also involved in the UN Emergency Force II in Ismailia following the Yom Kippur War of 1973.*

Why Was the MFO Necessary?

- The 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt stipulated full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai.
- The Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty called for a monitoring force.
- Russia vetoed the proposal in the United Nations, thus ruling out a UN sponsored peacekeeping force
- America set about forming a Multi-National Force and approached Australia to join in.
- Eleven Nations committed to the MFO, who regarded the fragile treaty in the Middle East as bound up in world peace.
- Australia and New Zealand, two participating Nations, saw their involvement as part of the ANZAC legend.



Sinai towards the Battle of Magdhaba that December 1916. To keep the advancing forces supplied, the Bridging Train staged an amphibious landing at El Arish. Once ashore they constructed piers through the unswept minefield off the beach. In 1982 that beach was only 15 minutes flying from El Gorah and in clear view if flying one of the many medevacs into El Arish hospital.

The Sinai was thus no stranger to the RAN and, perhaps surprisingly, no stranger to its FAA. Australia committed to a complex web of Middle East peacekeeping missions in the decades after World War 2. Immediately preceding the MFO had been the United Nations Emergency Force II based in Ismailia following the Yom Kippur War of October 1973. Flying UH-1H helicopters the Australian Air Unit included 16 naval aircrew and maintainers between June 1977 and October 1979. Known as AUSTAIR they supported Swedish, Ghanian, Indonesian and Finnish troops in a Buffer Zone immediately adjoining the Canal and the Gulf of Suez. With only four airframes they were still able to provide adequate support since the UNEF II Area of Operations was less than 10% of that subsequently covered by the MFO.

Beginning with monitoring a ceasefire in the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia in 1947, UNEF II was the thirteenth time Australia had actively supported United Nation's security measures. There was a general recognition that while an Australian presence might not be necessary for strategic reasons it was both a middle power responsibility and in our diplomatic interests. At a prosaic level actively supporting UN forces helped keep conflict far from our shores, while the importance of the Suez Canal had been embedded in national consciousness since its opening when the Australasian colonies immediately became located 'East of Suez'.

The 1960s and 1970s saw regional commitments in Malaya and South Vietnam but by the early 1980s there were no imminent threats apparent to Australian security. Foreign affairs issues for the country had devolved to those of the western alliance generally, with the aim being to isolate and moderate the regional conflicts and trouble spots of others.

On 17 September 1978 the Camp David Accords were signed by Egyptian President Anwar al-Sādāt and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin under United States sponsorship. This called for a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai which Israel had captured during 1956, re-captured in 1967 and fought over the western section during the 1973 War. The subsequent Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty mandated a monitoring force but any expectation of that force being a UN one was vetoed by Russia at Syria's request.

Unwilling to allow a faction-ridden Security Council to derail the peace process Presi-

***Top**: Arrival of the eight UH1-Hs from Ashdod, off HMAS Tobruk. Scattered among the crews were LEUT Brand, SBLTs Fisher, Henschke and Hype and POA Mason. **Middle**: SBLT Al Fisher (right) with FLGOFF Murray Joel. **Lower**: SBLT "Miz" Henschke (front right) and FLTLT Brian Lugg (left) arriving in country. (Images Terry Wilson).*

dents Carter and Reagan committed their nation to assembling an acceptable Multinational Force. Australia, held in high regard for its UNEF II operations, was immediately approached. A leadership role was mooted if troops were committed, but acrimonious domestic political and public debates soon made obvious that there was no appetite for a major troop commitment. In any case battalions from Fiji, Colombia and the US had quickly been promised so the obvious next consideration for Australia was to provide a small skilled contingent.

Any force to have legitimacy in the Middle East needs a broad base of participating nations. This gains greater acceptance of their presence by the regional nations and helps ensure objective and independent peacekeeping. While Australia hesitated and debated the MFO Protocol was signed in London in August 1981. Mr Leamon Hunt, a retired US diplomat and former Director of the Sinai Field Mission was appointed the civilian Director General of the MFO and set up his HQ in Rome. Lieutenant General Bull-Hansen of Norway, a junior officer with the first UNEF in 1957, was nominated as the Force Commander.

The momentous nature of the Treaty was reflected in the award of the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize to al-Sādāt and Begin. The precariousness of it was reflected in the assassination of al-Sādāt 6 October 1981 which also injured the Australian diplomat John Woods. Before his death al-Sādāt had personally asked Prime Minister Fraser for an Australian contribution to the MFO. With the UK (HQ staff) and Italy (Coastal Patrol Unit) now contributing to the force, and despite increasing public disquiet, Fraser addressed Parliament on 22 October 1981. Stating that stability and peace in the Middle East was bound up with world peace and was hanging by a thread he called the treaty a 'political miracle' and that it was 'in our national interest to progress peace in the Middle East'. Sinai Peacekeeping was once again squarely on the Australian agenda.

While the diplomats manoeuvred there had been quiet talks with New Zealand to have an integrated unit that would share logistics and lines of supply. In November 1981 Prime Minister Muldoon saw the force as "a true Anzac Force" and declared that experience over many years "show that we operate best with Australians". Further commitments to the MFO were France (fixed wing), Uruguay (transport and engineering) and the Netherlands (signals and MP's) making a total of 11 national contingents.

Defence had needed to move in advance of the 17 March 1982 formal Ministerial Statement of deployment if they were to achieve the difficult deadline of 20 March 1982. Wing Commander Terry Wilson AFC, who had served with UNEF II, had assembled a team in Canberra by 25 January 1982. He recalled that 'the first thing we did was dig out the old files'. With interim approval the Australian Contingent MFO formed 9 February 1982 at RAAF Base Amberley and trial loading onboard Tobruk took place only 3 days later. Planning was for a force of 10 helicopters able to operate independently and unsupported for 90 days. The commitment was for an initial two years - which was to be extended in early 1984 for another two years at the urgent representations of both Israel and Egypt.

Admiral Sir Anthony Synnot KBE AO, Chief of Defence Force Staff, in his Directive 3/1982 held Wing Commander Wilson responsible to him for command of the 99 man unit with an operationally integrated New Zealand contingent of two aircraft and 25 personnel. Operational control was to be delegated to the Force Commander on arrival in the Sinai. The RAN contribution was to be two aircraft crews and some ancillary personnel. On the initial deployment the FAA was represented by four pilots, two Air Traffic Controllers, a Petty Officer Aircrewman, two Able Seaman rated for Signals and Safety Equipment respectively, plus a staff officer Observer.

The other little known naval contribution was that the helicopters arrived in theatre on board *Tobruk* with a small rat icon painted on each nose above the airframe number - the ships 'Rats Off *Tobruk*' tag. The LSH had been named in honour of the Australian soldiers holding out during the German siege of the North African port of Tobruk in 1941, who were thereafter known as the "Rats of Tobruk". Lacking the Senior Service's historical perspective the rat was quickly erased once the RAAF regained control of their airframes.

Top. *The flight line at El Gorah/North Camp (the wrecked Israeli Air Force Base Eitam). The new hangar has been constructed so this is probably 1983.* ***Middle****: A UH-1H being carefully unloaded from HMAS Tobruk at the port of Ashdod, before being flown the El Gorah.* ***Lower****: Once the unit was operational one of the many rewarding features was the opportunity to work with personnel from other Services and Nations. Here, SBLT "Bear" Dickinson and LEUT Mike Galvin pose with Egyptian Liaison Officers prior to a verification mission. (Defence Images)*

PART 2 - THE OPERATION

Image: MFO Force Photographer CPO Keith Sturge RN

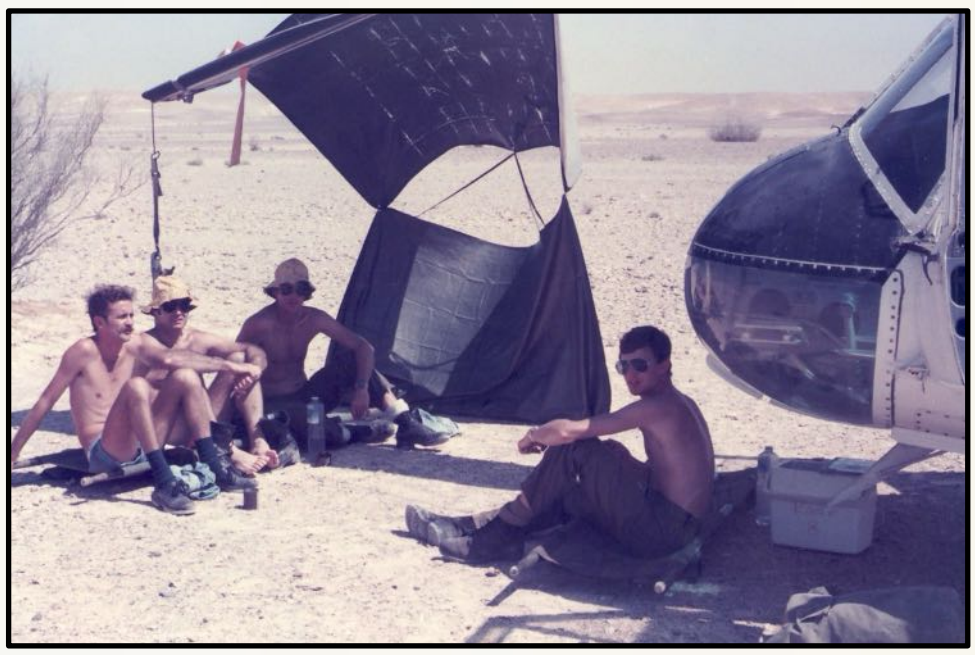
With the final withdrawal of the Israeli Defence Forces in early 1982 the Sinai reverted to Egyptian territory for the first time since the 1967 War. The peninsula was divided into four zones, A to D, within which there were graduated limitations on Egyptian and Israeli forces with the MFO troops being a barrier force between them in Zone C. Ensuring compliance with this graded demilitarisation, while also providing battalion support for the Fijians and Colombians, were the main missions for the ANZAC Rotary Wing Aviation Unit and tasking commenced 23 March 1982. That afternoon the unit experienced its first sandstorm.

Tasking, passed to the RWAU from the Air Adviser at HQ, was initially hampered by Israeli inflexibility on flight clearances. When the helicopters did fly they were harassed by Israeli Air Force aircraft on numerous occasions. While currency, emergency and night proficiency checks were completed the time was put to good use with familiarisation flights for aircrew and a large number of Force maintenance/construction missions. Concurrently the Unit maintenance, administration and logistics personnel settled into their roles. Full integration of the Kiwi contingent and their two borrowed airframes was achieved by 31 March 1982 with normal RAAF programs being applied to maintenance, pilot categorisation and Instrument Ratings.

Within Zone C only MFO forces and Egyptian civil police were allowed. The zone was 360 km from north to south and 40 km at its widest. In its northern sectors it was immediately adjacent to the Israeli Border and the 3km territorial strip of Zone D. There were some 40 remote sites constructed within Zone C with numerous access tracks from the Main Supply Route. Between North Camp at El Gorah and South Camp at Sharm El Sheik were sectors patrolled respectively by FIJIBATT, COLBATT and USBATT troops. These three infantry battalions were the operational arm of the MFO. The troops would man dozens of Sector Control Centers, Observation Posts and Checkpoints throughout Zone C and conduct mobile foot patrols.

The leased NZ aircraft were flown in from Tel Aviv on 2 April 1982 as FIJIBATT and COLBATT first deployed to their OPs and CPs. Also commencing a 24 hour Search and Rescue/Medical Evacuation standby the unit was given a 60 minute response time to be airborne. That night was the first to occupy the ANZAC Surf Club (Sinai). On 10 April 1982 a destructive fire raged through the tented maintenance area. Fortunately there were no casualties but the hangar, armament, radio and instrument sections as well as the metal workshop and technical publications library were gutted. The operational tempo of the unit, even at this early stage, can be judged by the fact that not a single tasking mission was missed in the fires aftermath.

The Air Traffic Controllers manned a 24 hour Flight Following section while the annual flying plan was set at 4800 hours (400 hrs per month including 50 hrs training) with an aircrew complement of one crew per airframe. The maintenance personnel, despite lacking a permanent hangar initially, were to service up to D level with much of that maintenance taking place on the flight line whatever the weather



***Above**. Precautionary landings were rare, but on this occasion a Chip Detector light necessitated a wait in the desert for a relief aircraft carrying a maintenance crew. Land Mines were a constant consideration and a touch down outside of the extensively shaded red areas on maps was prudent. SBLT Murray Lindsay is seated under the nose, although the other names have been lost in time. (Dennis Eagle)*

A birds' eye view of the Sinai taken from space. The peninsula, framed between the Mediterranean and Red Seas and the two fingers of the Gulf of Suez (left) and the Gulf of Aqaba (right) is almost entirely desert. In contrast, Cairo can be seen to the upper left as the darker green smudge, with the thread of fertile land stretching to the south like an umbilical as it follows the course of the river Nile. Aside from brief foreign occupations, the region had been part of Egypt since at least 3100BC, and is rich in history and the religious foundations of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. (NASA).

conditions. They were surprised on looking through the paperwork to see that one of the venerable Kiwi airframes was a rebuild from South Vietnam when a Vietcong satchel charge had been detonated in the cabin.

As the latest in a long line of ANZAC units there was added poignancy to the Dawn Service 25 April 1982 with its 6 aircraft flypast - searchlights on and in a cross formation. That same day the remaining occupied areas of the Sinai peninsula were handed over to Egypt in a formal ceremony at MFO Force Headquarters. The Multinational Force and Observers Mission was now unhindered and there was an immediate upsurge in tasking. The changeable nature of Sinai weather was observed the next day 26 April when SBLT 'Miz' Henschke suffered hailstorm damage and flash floods were observed.

The first medevac was flown 29 April 1982 from an OP to El Gorah for a Bedouin child suffering from a scorpion sting. In May the first night medevac was flown when a German civilian suffering a land mine injury was flown to Tel Aviv. With four medevacs in both May and June the Air Adviser halved alert time to 30 minutes.

By June 1982 the flying had settled into an established pattern whose varied nature would hold relatively steady until 1986. Troops would be rotated in and out of their OPs and CPs and their senior officers would be flown in on inspections. The weekly ration resupply was always met with smiles at various desert pads and even the frequent sanitation inspections of the remote FIJIBATT and COLBATT outposts would be enlivened by some low level flying.

Special border patrols were introduced in December 1982. This required tactical low level dusk insertions of five man infantry teams into selected border positions, and extraction at first light the next morning. With these insertions of Colombian and Fijian patrols into temporary OPs the operational aspects of the Unit stabilised until the introduction in late 1983 of night border patrols. To efficiently maximise skills, several aircraft would often conduct a low level formation exercise before individual aircraft broke away for their respective daily tasks.

The US battalion in the southern sector of Zone C, from Eilat down the length of the Gulf of Aqaba, had their own helicopter support unit. Unlike the RWAU, who flew missions from inside the Israeli border all the way west to the canal, the Southern Air Unit was restricted to Zone C. The US pilots lack of expertise with external loading saw the RWAU tasked with moving 17 generators and several 1000 gallon water tanks in May 1982 as outposts were constructed in all three battalion sectors. Launch was as early as 0400 to maximise performance in the cooler air before the heat of the day.

***Above**. Less than three weeks after the operation commenced the Unit suffered a catastrophic fire . In the morning a land mine had been discovered (and removed) from a dirt area between the tarmac building and the runway/airfield. Just after lunch a fire broke out in the maintenance tent. All the tents themselves were swiftly destroyed and the fire spread into equipment in the tents. It was extinguished within about 30 minutes, but caused significant loss and damage to most of the support equipment and aircraft spares. Fortunately, a nearby container with ammunition and explosives did not ignite. Also particularly fortunate was that the containers with all the 4X beer were not damaged. Note ASLT Geoff Fiedler on the right. (Image: Kym Manuel).*

A pilot exchange program from January 1983 swapped co-pilots with the SAU for up to a week. The RWAU also provided aircraft and crews in September 1984 when the US helicopters were grounded for several weeks. That the two helicopter units marched to different standards was starkly shown when a lost FIJIBATT patrol was located 6 August 1983. They had been inserted the previous day by a US crew 10nm south of the desired grid point.

From April 1980 the Sinai Field Mission had carried out limited Verification

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It is difficult to capture the scope of the terrain over which the MFO flew, but these images may give some indication. It was an unforgiving landscape, hard on both the men and machines, but in the four years of its operation the RWAU achieved 16,414 accident free flying hours with over 93,000 passengers and 2,564,197 lbs of freight delivered. It was a remarkable achievement that, by any measure, stands tall in the annals of the Fleet Air Arm's history.

A RAAF Iroquois UH-1H Helicopter (A2-809) flown by ASLT Richard Nest, FLTLT Peter McAulay and Sergeant (Air)Peter J O'Brien (RAAF Loadmaster) in Tank Valley en route to Moses Valley. Tank Valley at one stage contained over one million landmines. (AWM image).

missions and observed the initial phased withdrawal eastwards by Israeli forces to the A and B lines. These Observers transferred as a group to the Multinational Force becoming the O of the MFO. The Civilian Observer Unit, US State Department people on secondment or retired military, dressed in bright orange uniforms. They were, inevitably, called 'Agent Oranges' by Anzac Airlines who flew them on their many Reconnaissance and Verification missions. Teamwork and cooperation between aircrew and Observers was high and many friendships were established.

A complete cycle of Verification missions would visit all Egyptian and Israeli installations in Zones A, B and D twice monthly to verify compliance with the treaty limitations on personnel, armaments and military infrastructure. There was also the requirement to respond within 48 hours to any reported treaty violations - some 20 in the first months. As well as embarking two Agent Oranges for a mission, Egyptian or Israeli Liaison officers would also be carried depending on the area to be covered.

Reconnaissance missions would search for specific areas needing closer inspection such as new defence works or signs of forces redeploying. The actual Verification involved landing and entry by the Observers into every base to physically check on numbers of

Air Traffic Control

The Anzac MFO Detachment included an ATC cell/team comprising of four ATCs and a number of radio operators. The four ATCs were initially meant to be three Navy and one RAAF Senior ATC Officer (SATCO). In the end the first detachment was two Navy and one RAAF ATC with a second RAAF arriving some later. The primary role of the team was to provide flight following (arrivals, departures, person on board, ops normal checks, etc) services for the 10 Anzac helos, three French fixed wing aircraft (a C160 Transall and two Twin Otters) and three contractor B212s. Almost all of the radio work was conducted on HF given the size and terrain of the Sinai Peninsular. Ancillary work included arranging approvals and submitting flight plans for flights into other parts of Egypt or Israel.

LISTEN TO THE AUSTRALIAN NAVAL HISTORY PODCAST

Commander Greg Swinden and his expert panel of Group Captain Terry Wilson, Lieutenant Commander Graeme Lunn and Lieutenant Commander Mick Galvin discuss the Australian contribution to the Multinational Force & Observers or MFO in the Sinai from 1982 to 1986.

Produced by the Naval Studies Group & the Creative MediaUnit at the University of NSW (Canberra) in conjunction with the Australian Naval Institute, the Submarine Institute of Australia,, Naval Historical Society & the Seapower Centre Australia.

Click on the graphic above to listen to the Podcast.

How Crews Were Trained

Back at Nowra when a naval pilot was notified of deployment to the Australian Contingent of the MFO HC723 Squadron would, if possible, provide some refresher UH-1B hours. Then a week or two would be spent with No.5 Squadron at RAAF Fairbairn to familiarise on the larger UH-1H. Since Pilots' Course and the initial Helicopter Conversion Course were joint RAAF/RAN, the naval aviator would find many familiar faces, both junior and senior, on arrival in the desert. Whether fellow course mates, unit instructors or executives it meant integration with the RAAF was problem free. Occasionally the tight deployment timeframe would see some aircrew needing a final check once in-theatre. Flying out of RAAF Amberley initially, and then RAAF Richmond, there were Pre-deployment lectures, some training which included the uncomfortable CS gas exposure, and the inevitable administration. The comprehensive issue of new kit even included desert boots. The training in personal weapons and their wearing whilst flying was soon discontinued in theatre.

With most of the RAAF aircrew direct from No.9 Squadron they naturally had more familiarity with infantry support, and the UH-1H airframe, than the predominantly junior naval aviators. However the navy driver or aircrewman was most often fresh from the Wessex National Task so well used to flying armed SAS, and with considerably more night flying and close formation experience than his RAAF equivalent. For both the RAAF pilot and RAN aviator the in-theatre training program ensured efficient contribution to the tasks of the RWAU within a week of arrival.

From August 1982 there was a formal three-day Theatre Indoctrination Course at El Gorah which included comprehensive briefings on the flying operations to be undertaken. If possible a familiarisation flight would be flown, or a routine sortie extended, to show as much of the area as possible. At this point the newly arrived would wonder at the huge areas of red on his chart - known mined areas to be avoided if the nature of an emergency gave him the time to choose where to do an emergency landing.

He would generally be flown south over the sand dunes and into the deeply etched wadis and hills of the plateau. The B line, SCCs, OPs, CPs, Relay Stations and the MSR would be pointed out and the basic nav techniques demonstrated. Dominant land features, by which all aircrew could quickly orient themselves in the FIJIBATT and COLBATT sectors, would be observed if the visibility permitted. Flying over El Quesima with its extensive earthworks from previous conflicts he would be shown the international border as they turned northwards past the Israeli electronic Listening Posts topping the ridge line looking out over the desert. Eventually they would come to the swath the border cut through the divided town of Gaza before turning left and returning to El Gorah by overflying the destroyed Israeli settlement town of Yamit.

By his third day in country he would start flying as a co-pilot on all Zone C missions and within the first few weeks would have done a day and night emergencies trip with the units instructor. Prior to the construction of a more formidable base perimeter fence the night emergencies ride could prove unnecessarily difficult as the local Bedouin delighted in stealing the portable approach lights.

By month two or three he would fly a check ride with one of the unit executives and be awarded 'Category C Captaincy - Sinai'. Initially this would involve flying as a Captain on 50% of his tasking within Zone C while continuing to fly as co-pilot on Reconnaissance and Verification missions in the other zones. As his experience built, and junior pilots rotated into theatre, he would command a bigger percentage of Zone C missions and Captain Civilian Observer Unit missions. Although predominantly junior pilots four RAN Lieutenants in turn were made the Unit's Programming Officer, assigning crews to the day's tasking handed down from the Air Adviser.

With several months of Sinai experience the aviator would do a night SAR check. This included night navigation to various OPs, approaches to desert pads and perhaps a landing at the El Arish hospital pad. He would now be rated a 'SAR Captain - Sinai' and do 24 hour duties as SAR alert crew. As a fully qualified Sinai captain he was able to fly low level without reference to his chart and insert a patrol to within 10 meters of their requested grid position. He would know Zone C intimately and could follow the curving B line with ease through the desert, coming across the occasional white painted drum with a sureness that seemed almost mysterious to those newly arrived. With even more experience he would start flying the night border patrols.

Crews were almost always a mix of RAAF, RNZAF and RAN but whenever the vagaries of programming provided a complete naval crew it felt like a special day. That first occurred almost a year after the Unit's formation when SBLT 'Bear' Dickinson, LEUT Mike Galvin and LSA Terry Garside flew a Reconnaissance mission on 2 March 1983.

In any theatre, one or two photographs become a classic and this image of a wandering Bedouin with an MFO Iroquois behind him is up there with them. It sums up the nature of the Sinai: a hard and unforgiving place, drenched in blood over the centuries of its turbulent past, and seeped in the timelessness of the people who live there. No doubt this man was unfazed by what is going on around him - in the chronology of his people he would have known it was merely a blip, soon to go and, perhaps, be replaced by something else. (Image via Tony Nelson).

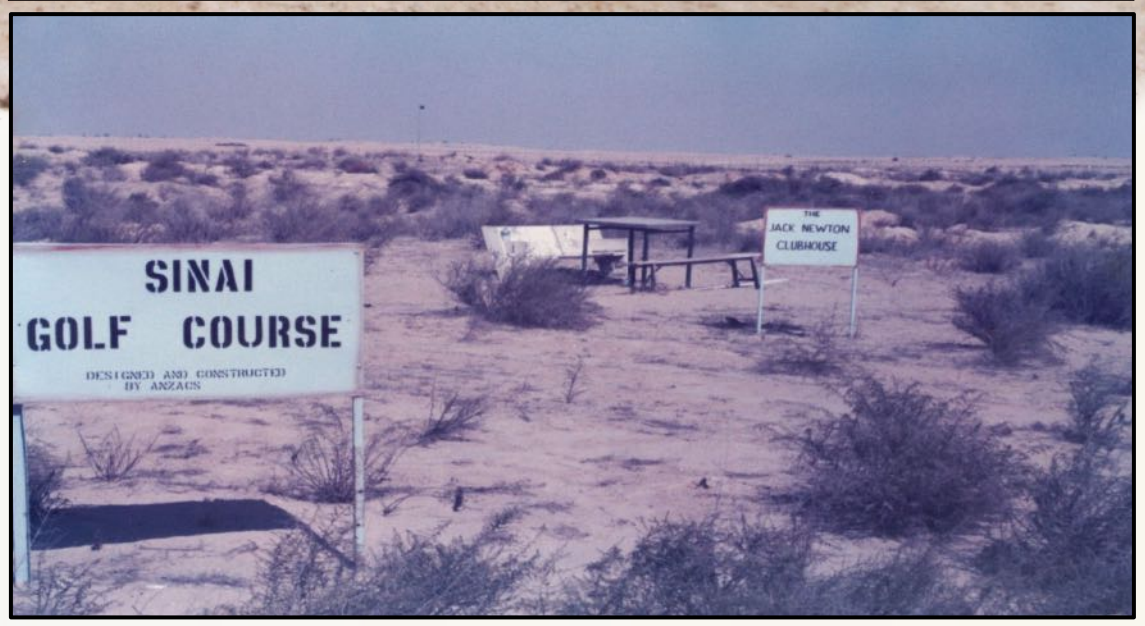
people, their weapons and equipment. Just as the RWAU was vital to the military barrier role these mission requirements of the COU made the helicopters of the RWAU equally indispensable.

The first Observer mission, a Reconnaissance of the B and C lines, was flown 29-30 April 1982 while May saw the first complete round of missions. These missions could take up to 50% of the unit's flying hours as they did in October 1982, although a more normal split would be that of September 1984 which saw 280 missions and 361 hours flown of which 136 hours were battalion support and 92.5 hours were Reconnaissance and Verification missions.

Such missions were popular with aircrew, and would involve up to six hours flying in a day for individual crews, in what could often be a wave of four or more aircraft. On 1 June 1983 for example there were six Observer missions in addition to other tasking. If operating in Zone D a buzzing by an IAF Kfir or A4 fighter was not uncommon. Accurate navigation was vital and the Programming Officer would ensure that each Captain of a Reconnaissance or Verification mission had previously covered that sector as a Co-Pilot. If a crew was especially fortunate they would fly the southern Verification mission that could include a visit to the 6th Century St Catherine's Monastery in the shadow of Mount Sinai/Jebel Musa.

It was an unenviable fact that despite being one of the smallest units the RWAU had the highest number of VIP visitors and also, of course, flew every other unit's visiting VIPs. There were so many that a Scenic Tour in Zone C for an 'MFO Gold' flight or formation was a well worn airway and usually included El Quesima, Moses Valley, Wadi El Arish, Yammit and SCC2. During one VIP visit on 30 March 1983 the accompanying Australian press were referred to in the Unit History as being "reminiscent of bush flies at a summer picnic". Not all were as lucky as LEUT Craig Marcombe who, while flying the Governor General of Fiji on 17 July 1984, got to partake of the feast put on by FIJIBATT at one of their CPs. Certainly not SBLT John Clark who had to fly the Australian Foreign Affairs Minister, in particularly uncomfortable winter weather, on 27 January 1984 to a CP where cameramen had been pre-positioned to record the august arrival.

It is illustrative of the tasking to examine the flying of a typical month - June 1984. The RWAU flew 420 hours on 277 missions. 129 missions were to insert/extract and resupply FIJIBATT and



The ANZAC contingent's ability to improve off-duty time was remarkable, as in the construction of a Golf Course (image Dennis Eagle); concerts (such as this one engaged in a rendition of "Doing The Time Warp") and various 'clubs' including a Surf Club and Wine Appreciation Society. They often caused bemusement amongst the other national contingents.

COLBATT troops, while COU Reconnaissance and Verification tasking required 44 missions of longer duration. There were 31 training missions covering SAR checks, day/ night emergency training and night border runs. There was even some water hoist training off 'Fiji' beach at which the naval crews naturally stood out. Remaining tasking saw 43 maintenance missions, six Dutch rotations and inspections, seven Command and Control senior officer missions and six medical/hygiene missions. One medevac was flown and a visiting RAAF Air Vice Marshal was given the northern Zone C VIP Scenic Tour.

It was the SAR Captaincy that would place aircrew in a position requiring the use of all their skills. The first medevac of MFO personnel was on 19 May 1982 when a road traffic accident saw two walking wounded flown to El Gorah and a stretcher case on to Tel Aviv. SAR/Medevac had originally been envisaged for MFO personnel only, however the reluctance by Egyptian Civil Police helicopters to fly, especially at night, meant many civil cases were passed to the MFO. No serious case was ever refused which engendered serious local goodwill through the years.

Apart from the obvious lethality of mines a large number of medevacs were as a result of Road Traffic Accidents on the bad roads and drifting sand. In November 1982 an RAN officer on the MFO Staff was injured in a RTA and was hospitalised. On 29 October 1983 three US soldiers died in a RTA and 2 medevac helicopters were required for the retrieval. From this time on the RWAU rostered 2 SAR crews on a 24 hour standby. Such missions would occasionally lead to the grim task, such as SBLT Leigh Curac undertook after that October incident, of flying the deceased to the Sheba Hospital pad in Tel Aviv as the first stage in their repatriation home.

On 26 December 1983 the RWAU flew a particularly nasty medevac mission. An Egyptian ordnance disposal team set off a mine, killing five of its members with five survivors needing rescue from the minefield and evacuation to the hospital in El Arish. The crews responding to this incident included LEUT Graeme Lunn and LEUT Steve Vooles. On 5 February 1984 an Israeli A4 crashed in Zone C. Two helicopters searched wadis at 50' in the light of dropped flares attempting to find aircraft and pilot. SBLT 'Jerry' Lewis was flying with the Unit Commander that night and their flying earned warm gratitude and a presentation from the IAF unit across the border.

LEUT Rob Hill was tracking along the Sudr road on a Verification mission, one of 7 Observer missions on 18 July 1984, when:

"I saw the column of black smoke in the distance and went to investigate, The truck was off the road - suspect it hit a mine - and the poor soldier was wandering down the road carrying his boots and in shock. It was over 40 degrees. I could see the burnt skin peeling off his leg in strips. We took him to a hospital right beside the Suez Canal. I just remember seeing syringes and bandages littering the sand around the helicopter."

The Unit History noted that Allah had been on the side of Private Mohamed El Said Ali that day.

Any technical unit is vulnerable to its spare parts availability. The RWAU depended on MFO logistic support and that support was inadequate. Arriving in theatre supplied for 90 days independent operations, by August 1982 shortages of spares, and their cumulative effect on serviceability, was becoming a problem. Only rarely could the desired 80% serviceability level be maintained but tasking never suffered and no mission was ever refused. When sufficient spares were flowing an 8, 9 or ten aircraft formation would overfly the base to show that, if the supply system provided the required spares, then the unit maintainers could generate the required numbers of serviceable aircraft.

There were no FAA maintainers posted to the RWAU but the RAN was requested to supply Safety Equipment ratings to make up for a RAAF shortage in this specialist area. The RAAF maintainers did a magnificent job in the harsh desert environment. Outdoor maintenance on the flight line with temperatures well above 40°C and humidity as low as 10% was gruelling. With a wet season from November to March and frequent sandstorms the fine dust penetrating everywhere made something as simple as a quill seal a task requiring extra care and attention.

Upper: *LEUT 'Pa' Hawkins (left) in the belly of a Hercules. New people invariably arrived somewhat shell-shocked, having endured five days in a C130 jammed with spares, stores and bodies (image Syl Reid) - or perhaps it was the sight of the vinyl camel (**middle**) that was the first object to thrust its head in through the open door, together with a blast of scorching desert air.*

Lower: *The Kiwis organised a Haka to welcome the six-weekly resupply by RAAF and RNZAF Hercs (or, occasionally, an RNZAF Boeing 727). Their small numbers required Aussie supplementation. The resupply missions were huge events - partly to celebrate the arrival of items like mail, but mostly the beer. It also meant everyone moved up one level in the pecking order particularly the first resupply after your arrival when you graduated from "pinkie" status.*

Once a sandstorm arrived so suddenly that a navy crew of LEUT Steve Vooles, LEUT Tony Nelson and POA Al Whittaker, had to hover taxi back along the Main Supply Route to find the base, ever fearful that a truck or bus would loom out of the storm without warning. In the sand and dust laden atmosphere there was again the rapid deterioration of engine compressor sections which had been experienced during UNEF II operations. With fine abrasives in the atmosphere up to 2000' the turbine blades suffered, the windshields crazed and the leading edges of the rotor blades wore past the sacrificial tape. Overhauls had to be decreased to a 200 hour interval.

The off-duty activities of the typical MFO desert ANZAC would be a worthy of an Anthropologist's PhD thesis. It is too wide a subject to properly examine here but the elements of self-help and humour, coupled to a singular ability to improve life in adversity are seemingly common to all ANZAC operations. The Surf Club, Sinai Golf Course and the Sinai Wine Appreciation Society were only a few of the efforts which caused bemusement among other national contingents.

On arrival in March 1982 it was immediately obvious that there were major problems with accommodation, water, food and communications back to Australia. Initially existing on C-rations the consensus was that the civilian contractor E-Systems had not raised the bar by much when they commenced catering. While the units executives approached HQ for changes, in many areas self-help was quickly the order of the day. All who came after had cause to be thankful for those who served before and 'mucked-in', especially those in the first two or three rotations. The 'Acme Naval Furniture Company' was registered in the Official Unit History on 28 March 1982 and delivered a commendable line of lounge chairs from packing cases and foam rubber.

Central to these efforts to keep morale high by raising the standard of living was the Surf Club. Building a wall around the complex (the 'Wailing Wall') it was entered through a Waharoa or Maori gateway. By September 1982, in addition to the internal bar fixtures, the area featured 36 square meters of grass, a patio with outdoor furniture and a 12' length of concrete gutter in the sand for, obviously, gutter parties!

You would have to ask a veteran of the RWAU to explain the progression through his tour from a Pinkie to a Napalm, then Brownie and finally a Next. The entertainment cycle revolved around the six weekly rotation and resupply C130 Hercules from Australia. That six week cycle delineated a persons tour and perceptively hastened its completion which was celebrated with a Mar-es-Salaam Farewell Concert and Kangaroo Court. Tourism of Egypt, Israel and Europe was also eagerly pursued.

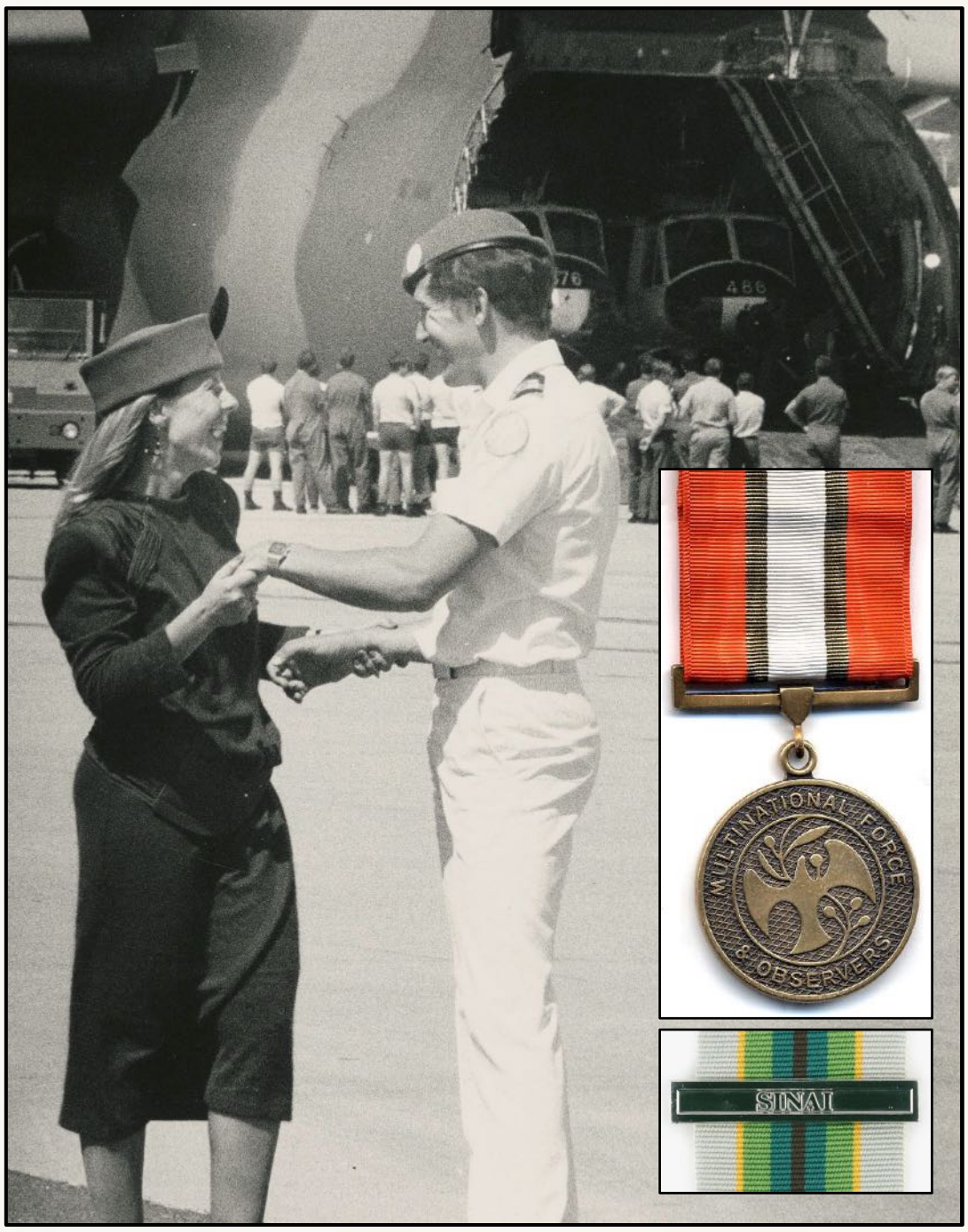
Five days travel in the cargo hold of a Hercules from RAAF Richmond to El Gorah meant new arrivals looked distinctly shell shocked on arrival. That could have been due to the sudden high apron temperature when the ramp and door were opened, or the vinyl camel sticking its head around that door, or the very enthusiastic welcome Haka by the Kiwis. The trickle turnover of personnel every six weeks also contributed to the professional standards of the RWAU remaining at a constant high level. It was a very rare month indeed where there was a single day without a helicopter airborne.

In early 1985 the RAAF unilaterally informed Navy that, for future deployments, their aviators would undertake co-pilot duties only. From LCDR's Vidal and Brown and LEUTs Lawrence, Ledger, and Edwards flying with UNEF 11 through the, to date, two dozen naval aircrew with the ACMFO nothing would apparently justify such a change. The RAAF, RNZAF and RAN differences in backgrounds and operations had been addressed at a Unit executive meeting 26 April 1982 and standardisation procedures adopted. On 4 June 1982 the first RAN pilots to fly as Captains on operational tasks were SBLTs Al Fisher and Mark Hype, while in 1984 LCDR Mike Curry was Acting Commanding Officer when the Wing Commander was on leave.

Researching the background for that 1985 decision has proved elusive. In the words of the first Contingent Commander integration had been 'seamless' and he was unable to explain this inexplicable policy shift three years later. The most likely explanation is that an individual in the RAAF hierarchy, with a negative viewpoint about naval aviation ashore, counselled his 'position' and 'solved a problem' where no problem existed. The next to deploy (LEUT Andy Whittaker, SBLTs Jeff Konemann and Cameron Price) had their postings cancelled. LEUT Graeme Hawkins, SBLTs Murray Lindsay, Dave Threlfo and Richard Nest all flew under this restriction, exhibiting the same excellence in operations as their predecessors.

Canadian staff officers visited the RWAU in May 1985 to be briefed on the helicopter operations that they were slated to take over in March 1986. That there was no ANZAC run down period for the next ten months was demonstrated when Air Vice Marshal Gration AFC, at a 28 January 1986 Parade, presented the RWAU with the RAAF's Gloucester Cup. Awarded annually to the most proficient 'flying squadron of the RAAF' its presentation to this integrated unit meant that RAN and RNZAF members could take equal and justifiable pride in the award.

LEUT Stan Ritchie of Nowra is greeted by his wife, Sheldri, after the contingent arrived at RAAF Fairbairn in Canberra in March of 1986. The USAF Galaxy not only brought home the last of the personnel, but eight of the UH-1H helicopters - a much quicker and smoother ride than the long sea voyage that had taken them there four years earlier. (image: Richard Briggs). ***Inset****. Those ADF members who served in the MFO were awarded the Australian Service Medal with clasp 'Sinai' and the Multinational Force and Observers' Medal. (approved by the Governor General).*



With all FAA pilots rotated back to Australia or taking foreign leave the final RAN crewed mission, a COLBATT troop insertion, was flown by POA Pete Cummings on the 14 Mar 1986. He was also in the 10 aircraft formation over El Gorah 16 March 1986. The 8 RAAF helicopters then broke away for Tel Aviv where they were loaded into a C5A Galaxy. As the ANZAC's handed over to the Canadians on the 17 March 1986 the Surf Club was renamed Beaver Lodge. The airframes and the majority of the Australian personnel returned to Australia 18 March 1986. On 26 March 1986 the remaining two Kiwi airframes were returned to USBATT officially marking the last day of ANZAC flight operations in the Sinai.

Despite the trying flying conditions pervading the Sinai, and the demanding nature of much of the tasking, the RWAU achieved a remarkable 16,414 accident free flying hours in four years of operations. Over 93,000 passengers and 2,564,197 lbs of freight were delivered.

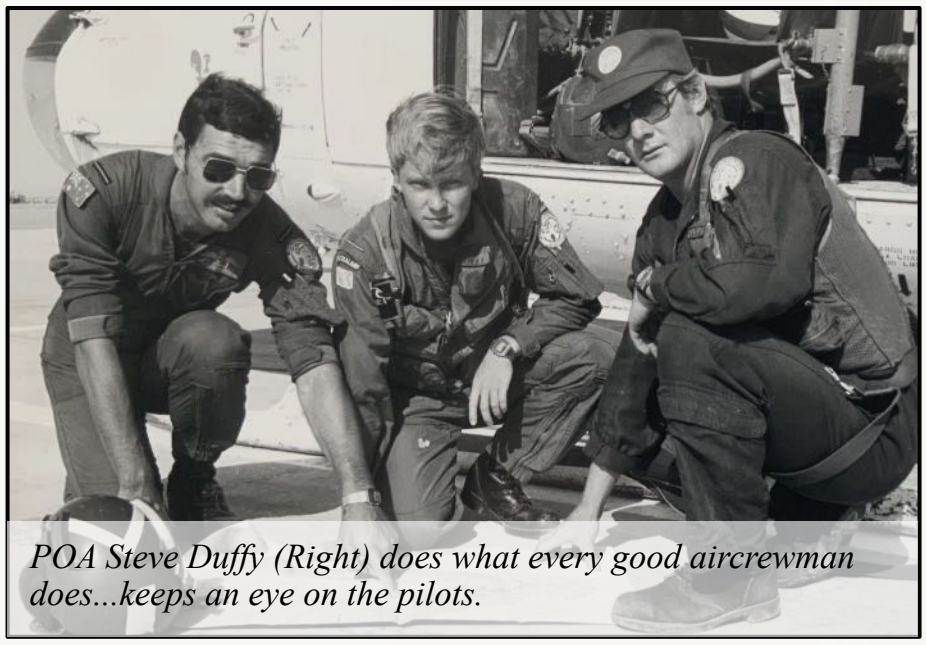
LCDR 'Dick' Chartier RAN (Ret'd) reflecting decades later on his naval flying felt that the deployment with the ACMFO was the experience of a lifetime. He had "a real sense of purpose in the missions we flew" and was proud "that the peacekeeping effort to which we were contributing was of great benefit". This feeling of something consequential being achieved was held by all who served in the Sinai. It was simply expressed in the unofficial motto of the Anzac RWAU:

"Quiet Success"

Addendum

On 15 February 1984 the Director General of the MFO, Leamon Hunt, was assassinated in Rome by the Red Brigades.

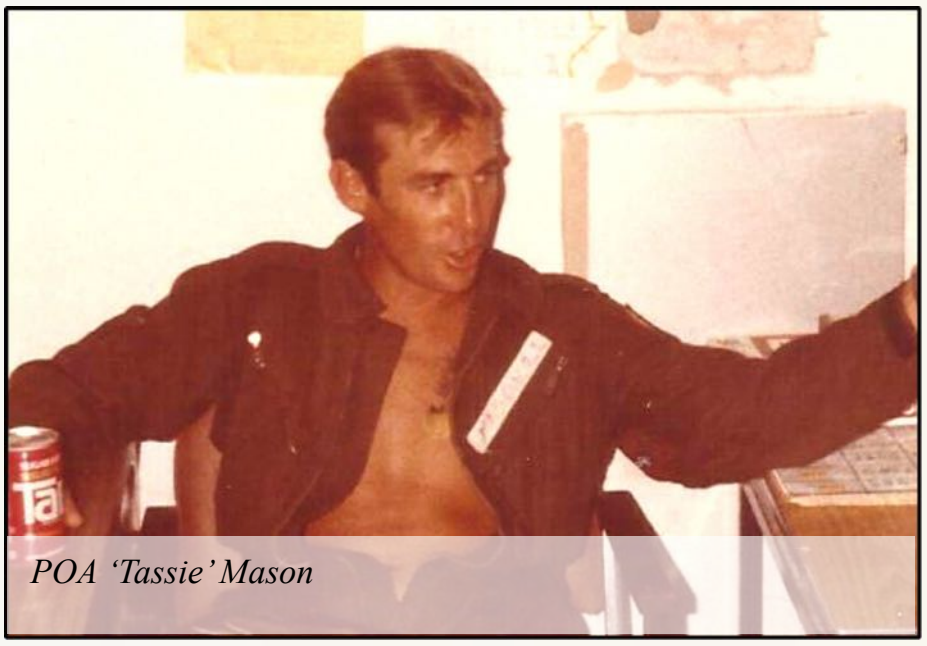
1993 saw yet again the return of ANZACs to the Sinai. Mainly serving in MFO HQ roles the deployed ADF personnel in the ongoing Operation Mazurka, and NZDF personnel in Operation Farad, have included several Force Commanders.



POA Steve Duffy (Right) does what every good aircrewman does...keeps an eye on the pilots.

SBLT Murray Lindsay with two 'Agent Oranges'.

LEUT Craig Marcombe conducting a pre-flight inspection on the line.

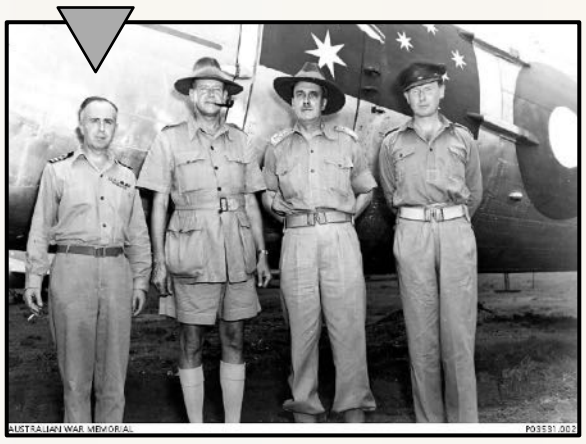


POA 'Tassie' Mason

Tony Nelson.

SBLTs Leigh Curac (left) and Brendan Leddy.

Forty three years on, four of the Fleet Air Arm Sinai MFO reunited in Canberra for the Peacekeeping Dinner at the Australian War Memorial. L-R: Craig Marcombe, Graeme Lunn, Rob Hill and Mike Galvin. The event celebrated the opening of the Peacekeepers Galleries in the Memorial honouring the service and sacrifice of the 60,000 plus Australian peacekeepers since 1947. At the Gallery entrance is an image of the very first UN Peacekeepers, one of which was Our Original Observer, Commander Henry Chesterman RAN OBE (1901-1985).



El Gorah (previously Eitam) had been an abandoned Israeli Air Force base before the MFO moved in. Facilities at the beginning of the deployment were rudimentary - such as tented hangarage and technical workshops - but the fire of '82 and considerable investment in both self-help and US Dollars worked wonders. By the time the Unit wrapped up the base provided not only comfortable living but a good range of recreation facilities.

Previous Page

A selection of photographs of people who served in the MFO. Please contact the webmaster if you wish to have your image added.

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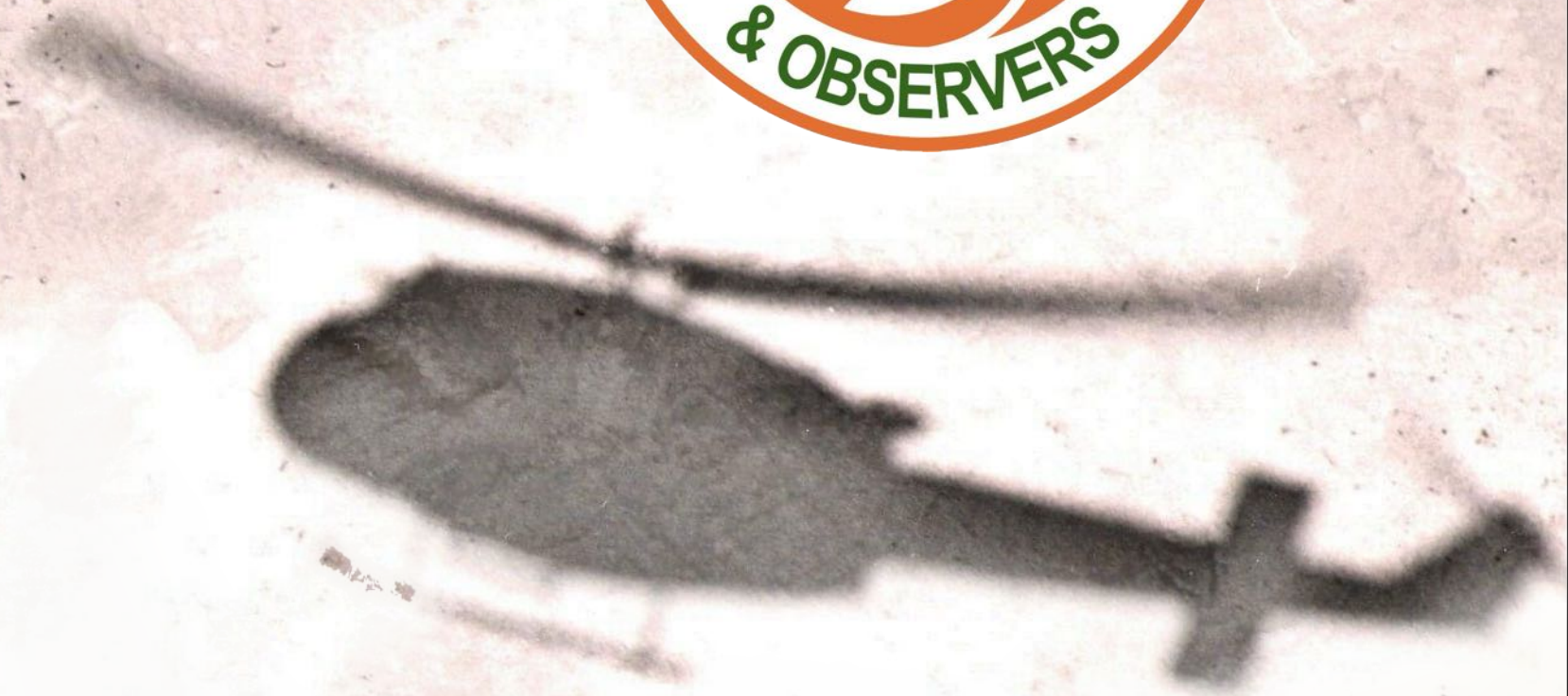

NOMINAL LIST OF NAVY MFO PERSONNEL

Andrew, M L	SBLT ATC
Barnett, G P	ABSE Jul 1985 - Mar 1986
Biddle, D (Dave)	LSSE
Bradford, R (Bob)	ABSE
Brand, S C (Ocker)	LEUT P Mar 1982 -
Chartier, R (Dick)	LEUT P Oct 1984 - Apr 1985
Clark, J A (John)	LEUT P
Culley, (Ray)	POA
Cummings, P (Pete)	POA - Mar 1986
Curac, L R (Leigh)	SBLT P July 1983 -
Curry, M R (Mike)	LCDR P May 1984 - Oct 1984
Dalton, A C (Tony)	ASLT P Nov 1982 -
Dickinson, A C (Bear)	ASLT P
Duffey, S (Steve)	POA Aug 1983 -
Fiedler, G N (Geoff)	ASLT ATC Mar 1982 - Nov 1982
Fisher, A K (Al)	SBLT P Mar 1982 -
Frew, D J (Derek)	LEUT P Oct 1982 -
Galvin, M R (Mike)	LEUT P Jan 1983 -
Garside, T (Tezza)	LSA Feb 1983 -
Harford, J A.	POA Oct 1982 -
Hawkins, G D (Pa)	LEUT P Jul 1985 - Jan 1986
Henschke, M D (Miz)	SBLT P Mar 1982 -
Hill, R J (Rob)	LEUT P May 1984 - Dec 1984
Hype, M J (Mark)	SBLT P Mar 1982 -
Jacobs, A (Andy)	SBLT ATC
Jacobs, A W	ASLT ATC Jun 1982 -
Kubel, G A (Gary)	LEUT P
Leddy, B C (Brendan)	SBLT P Jun 1983 -
Lewis, G A (Jerry)	SBLT P
Lindsay, M M (Murray)	ASLT P Jun 1985 -
Lunn, G P (Graeme)	LEUT P Aug 1983 - Mar 1984
Marcombe, C W (Craig)	LEUT P Jul 1984 - Dec 1984
Mason, A J (Tassie)	POA Mar 1982 -
McConachie, I C (Ian)	SBLT ATC
Nelson, A K (Tony)	LEUT P Feb 1984 - Aug 1984
Nelson, P W (Pete)	LEUT OP
Nest, R W (Richard)	ASLT P. Jul 1985 - Mar 1986
Newman	LSSE
Ritchie, S K (Stan)	LEUT ATC May 1985 - Mar 1986
Roberts, N F	ABSIG Mar 1982 -
Rodenburg, S F	MIDN ATC Mar 1982 -
Secker, T G (Daryl)	SBLT P Mar 1983 -
Smillie, T G (Tom)	SBLT P Apr 1983 -
Smyth, R N	SBLT ATC Jun 1983 -
Sydney, G (Jock)	LEUT P Oct 1982 -
Threlfo, D J. (Dave)	SBLT P
Vooles, S (Steve)	LEUT OP
Welsby, P D	ABSE Mar 1982 -
Whittaker, A (Al)	LSA
Wilkinson, T (Terry)	POA Aug 1984 - Jan 1985
Wynberg, T B (Ted)	LCDR O Mar 1982 -