



'Trouble in the Suez'

The Royal Australian Navy and the Suez Crisis of 1956

By Greg Swinden

Some Australians may recognise the opening title of this article as a snippet from the 1989 Billy Joel song 'We didn't start the fire'; but many would not understand the meaning. In 1956 the world held its breath as Britain, France and Israel became embroiled in yet another conflict in the Middle East. The 'enemy' was not however the expected Soviet Union but instead was Egypt and the fighting had the potential to spill over into yet another World War. In the end it did not and despite tactical prowess and operational success, this short war was a strategic failure for the British and French Governments.

The 'Suez Crisis' was a highly complex and at times confusing political and military situation. The catalyst was nationalisation of the Suez Canal on 26 June 1956 by Egypt's charismatic president, Gamil Abdel-Nassar. Great Britain had for many decades controlled Egypt and the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company also operated this key waterway; in fact British troops had been stationed in Egypt for many years and did not finally depart until early June 1956.

Nassar, an Egyptian army officer, came to power in July 1952 when the monarchy of King Farouk was overthrown by the Egyptian Army. Egypt's new leader frequently clashed with the British and French governments over various foreign policy issues especially Egypt's support for Algerian independence from France. Under Nassar, Egypt also began to purchase eastern bloc weaponry, recognised Communist China and like many other Middle Eastern countries was anti-Israeli.

Nassar in many ways played the various western and eastern bloc countries off against each other in order to achieve what he wanted for Egypt. Financial support from the United States and Great Britain had been obtained to progress the Aswan Dam project; to better control the flooding of the Nile River and water for agricultural use. However on 19 July 1956 the US and Britain suddenly withdrew funding and Nassar was only made aware of this via a news statement. While Nassar had been considering nationalisation of the Suez Canal, the Aswan Dam funding withdrawal brought this plan forward. On 26 July 1956 Nassar announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal; and this was coupled with seizure by military force of the facilities and assets used to operate the canal.

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Significant diplomatic efforts began to resolve this issue and Australian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, played a role in the early diplomatic attempts to seek a peaceful resolution. Britain and France, as the largest shareholders of the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company saw the nationalisation as yet another hostile act by Egypt and began making plans to take back control by force. In this they obtained secret military support from Israel and planning for Operation MUSKETEER began.

In August 1956 the three Australian services were directed to advise the Menzies Government what units could be sent to the Middle East to support British forces if required. The Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Roy Dowling CBE, CB, DSOⁱ, advised that the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne*, one destroyer (HMAS *Warramunga*) and one frigate (HMAS *Quadrant*) were available to leave Australia immediately. These ships had been conducting work-ups off the Australian east coast, since late July, and *Melbourne* had her Fleet Air Arm squadrons embarked (consisting of Gannet anti-submarine aircraft and Sea Venom fighters). Additionally, the non-operational carrier HMAS *Sydney* was available to leave Australia at

short notice to carry troops and suppliesⁱⁱ.



HMAS Warramunga (I) was identified as an RAN asset which may have been provided to support British forces.

Dowling also advised that two frigates were 'available to leave Australia by the end of August'ⁱⁱⁱ; these were HMA Ships *Queenborough* and *Quickmatch*, then completing short refits. The two *Battle* class destroyers HMA Ships *Anzac* and *Tobruk*, then part of the Far East Strategic Reserve based at Singapore 'could be made available should it be decided to employ units from this Reserve'^{iv}. The Navy advised that the eastern Australian based ships would take 19 days to reach the Middle East but could be forward deployed to Western Australia thus reducing the transit time by seven days.

The RAAF advised that two Canberra bombers squadrons, a Neptune anti-submarine squadron



and a Dakota transport squadron could be deployed either immediately or by the end of September. The Lincoln bomber squadron, then deployed to Malaya, could be made available if required but was currently employed on anti-communist terrorist operations as part of the Malayan Emergency^v. The Army was the least ready for deployment although in all fairness the Australian Army Battalion Group was also in Malaya conducting operations against communist terrorists. Another battalion could be made ready, in Australia, within 3-4 weeks and then embarked in Sydney but with a transit time of 19 days to the Middle East^{vi}.

Ultimately when hostilities commenced the Australian Government chose not to commit forces but did not withdraw the 13 RAN personnel then serving in Royal Navy ships operating in the region. The Australians were however directed to remove any items of clothing that distinguished them as RAN personnel, which in those days consisted only of the brass buttons on their ceremonial uniforms so it was a moot point.

The final step towards conflict occurred in late 1956 when the United Nations Security Council recognised Egypt's nationalization

of the Canal; as long as it allowed the safe passage of all foreign shipping. Britain and France were members of the Security Council but the decision to regain control of the canal by military means had already been decided by both countries.

On 29 October 1956 Israeli forces, spear-headed by tanks and paratroopers, surged across the Egyptian border, in the Sinai, and headed west towards the Suez Canal. Egyptian defence was weak, with over 2,000 personnel killed and another 5,000 taken prisoner. Two days later, on 31 October, British and French forces commenced operations with aircraft (both land based and carrier borne from the French carriers *La Fayette* and *Arromanches* and HM Ships *Albion*, *Bulwark* and *Eagle*^{vii}) attacking Egyptian airfields with devastating effect. In the south, in the Red Sea, the cruiser HMS *Newfoundland* encountered and sank the Egyptian frigate *Domiat* in a hard fought engagement on the night of 31 October. *Newfoundland* was hit by Egyptian shellfire with some damage and minor injuries sustained.



HM Ships Eagle, Bulwark and Albion off the coast of Egypt during the Suez Crisis (RN Museum)

With the bulk of the Egyptian air force destroyed on the ground or forced to re-locate to more southerly air bases, the way was open for British and French paratroopers to land at Port Said at dawn on 5 November. A British amphibious task force arrived off Port Said on the morning of the following day in preparation for landing. An Anglo-French minesweeping force had already cleared the approaches to the port and naval 'support fire' (restricted to 4.5 inch and smaller calibre weapons) was used for one hour prior to the troops going ashore. The restriction on duration and weapons used had been deliberately imposed by the British Government to reduce civilian casualties. Royal Marine Commandoes landed via assault craft and RAF/naval helicopters and, after linking up with the

paratroopers, the city was effectively captured by the 7th.

To add to the confusion of this short war was the presence of the US Sixth Fleet in the region with aircraft carriers and submarines. The US Navy was present to conduct the evacuation of US nationals from Egypt but their aircraft, especially the swept wing F95 Cougar, which resembled the MIG 15's operated by Egypt, caused concern as the British and French were keen to avoid a Blue-on-Green incident. Equally US ships evacuating their nationals from Alexandria Harbour delayed Anglo-French operations until they had departed.



Flight deck of HMS Albion during the crisis (RN Museum)

After the capture of Port Said the British and French forces continued to push south against weak Egyptian resistance, however, a UN brokered ceasefire was enacted on 7

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November; but not before Nassar had ordered the sinking of several vessels in the Suez Canal. This action effectively blocked the canal for four months before clearance of the vessels was undertaken. The United Nations (with substantial US manipulation of Britain's financial security; which is another story) forced the Anglo-French troops to withdraw from Egypt by the end 1956. Israeli forces were not withdrawn from the Sinai until late March 1957. A short war that could have expanded to other parts of the Middle East was now over and a United Nations peacekeeping force was deployed to the Sinai^{viii}.

So what of the 13 Australian naval personnel^{ix} involved in Operation MUSKETEER?

They were:

Lieutenant Commander Ian Burnside, serving as navigator in the *Daring* class destroyer HMS *Duchess*. He entered the RAN College as a 13 year old cadet midshipman in 1939; graduating in 1942. Burnside saw active service during World War II in the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia*, the destroyer HMAS *Arunta* and Royal Navy warships. During the Suez operations *Duchess*^x undertook escort duties for the three British aircraft carriers as well as later

escorting British troopships at the conclusion of hostilities. Burnside later commanded the guided missile destroyer HMAS *Perth* in the Vietnam War (deployed during 1970-71) for which he was mentioned in dispatches. Ian Burnside was appointed as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the New Year's Honours List 1972 'for long and meritorious service'. He reached the rank of commodore before retiring from the RAN in June 1979.

Lieutenant Rory Ward Burnett, serving as a torpedo and anti-submarine warfare officer in the *Colony* class light cruiser HMS *Jamaica*. He entered the RAN College as a 13 year old cadet midshipman in 1943; graduating in 1946. Burnett saw active service in the destroyer HMAS *Warramunga*, in 1952, during the Korean War. During the Suez operations *Jamaica* was part of the force that supported the landing of British forces at Port Said. Burnett later commanded the frigate HMAS *Derwent*, on escort duties, during the Vietnam War. He reached the rank of commodore before retiring from the RAN in July 1984.

Lieutenant Ian Alexander Gregor MacGregor serving as a gunnery officer in the *Colony* class cruiser



HMS *Ceylon*. He entered the RAN College as a 13 year old cadet midshipman in 1943; graduating in 1946. MacGregor saw active service in the frigate HMAS *Condamine* (July 1952 – April 1953) and the destroyer HMAS *Arunta* (January – June 1954) during the Korean War. During the Suez operations *Ceylon* was part of the force supporting the landing of British forces at Port Said. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander before tragically losing his life, on 10 February 1964, while serving in the destroyer HMAS *Voyager*; which sank following a collision with the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* off the NSW south coast. His body was not recovered.

Lieutenant Edmund John Melzer, serving as a communications officer in the *Loch* class anti-submarine frigate HMS *Woodbridge Haven*. He entered the RAN College as a 13 year old cadet midshipman in 1943; graduating in 1946. Melzer saw active service in the destroyers HMA Ships *Bataan* (August 1950 – June 1951) and *Tobruk* (August 1951 – February 1952) during the Korean War. During the Suez operations *Woodbridge Haven* operated as a forward support and headquarters ship for minesweeping operations to clear the approaches to Port Said. Melzer reached the rank of

lieutenant commander before retiring from the RAN in April 1962.

Lieutenant Ian Hawkins Nicholson, serving as communications officer in the *Daring* class destroyer HMS *Daring*. He entered the RAN College as a 13 year old cadet midshipman in 1942; graduating in 1945. Nicholson did not see active service during World War II but served in the aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* during her 1951-52 Korean War deployment. During the Suez operations *Daring* undertook escort duties of the three British aircraft carriers during their attacks on Egyptian targets. Nicholson served briefly in the Vietnam War during an official visit in January 1967. He reached the rank of commodore before retiring from the RAN in January 1988.

Lieutenant Donald Proctor 'Weary' Weil, serving as a seaman officer in the aircraft carrier HMS *Bulwark*. He entered the RAN College in 1949 as a special entry cadet; graduating in 1950. Weil served in the Korean conflict on four occasions including service in the aircraft carrier HMS *Unicorn* during July – September 1950 and October 1950 - July 1951, the destroyer HMS *Comus* during September – November 1951 and the destroyer HMAS *Arunta* during the post



Armistice period (January – October 1954). During the Suez operations *Bulwark's* aircraft conducted air strikes against Egyptian air bases and other targets. Weil subsequently served as the navigator in the destroyer HMAS *Hobart* during the ship's first operational deployment to Vietnam in 1967. He was awarded a Naval Board Commendation for his Vietnam service and later commanded the training ship HMAS *Queenborough* during May 1970 – December 1971. He reached the rank of acting captain before retiring from the RAN in early 1981.

Commissioned Communications Officer Graham Angus 'Spider' Currie, serving in the *Loch* class anti-submarine frigate HMS *Woodbridge Haven*. He joined the RAN Reserve as an 18 year old ordinary seaman on 21 May 1942. Currie saw active service during World War II in the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia*, the destroyers *Arunta* and *Napier* and the corvette *Ipswich*. During the Korean War he served in the destroyer HMAS *Warramunga* during her deployment from August 1950 – August 1951. He was promoted to chief yeoman of signals in early 1954 and appointed as a commissioned communications officer on 20 July 1956. During the Suez operations *Woodbridge Haven* operated as a forward support and

headquarters ship for minesweeping operations. Graham Currie served in his fourth conflict in 1970 as a member of the ship's company of the guided missile destroyer HMAS *Hobart* on 'the gun-line' during the Vietnam War. He reached the rank of lieutenant commander before retiring from the RAN in October 1974.



HMS Woodbridge Haven with minesweepers

Commissioned Ordnance Engineer Charles Edward Goodwin, serving in the destroyer depot ship/command vessel HMS *Tyne*. He joined the RAN as an ordnance artificer 4th class on 18 February 1946. Goodwin was appointed as an ordnance engineer on 7 January 1953 and saw active service in the Korean War in the destroyer HMAS *Anzac* (21 March 1953 – 26 June 1953). During the Suez operations *Tyne* operated as the floating headquarters for the Joint Task Force. Goodwin reached



the rank of engineer lieutenant but sadly died from stomach cancer at Balmoral Naval Hospital (HMAS *Penguin*) aged 40 on 14 March 1962.

Commissioned Communications Officer Norman Bruce Dickson Macrae, serving in the C class destroyer HMS *Cavendish*. He was born in New Zealand and joined the RAN as an 18 year old Ordinary Seaman in September 1945. Macrae served in the post-war navy in a variety of ships including the heavy cruisers HMA Ships *Australia* and *Shropshire*. He saw active service in the Korean War in the aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* (1951-52) and the destroyer HMAS *Tobruk* (June 1953 – February 1954) for which he was mentioned in dispatches. He was a yeoman of signals when commissioned in January 1956 and during the Suez operations *Cavendish* conducted escort duties for various ships. Macrae reached the rank of commander before retiring from the RAN in 1973.

Commissioned Boatswain Leonard Bernard Peterson serving in the aircraft carrier HMS *Albion*. He joined the RAN as an 18 year old RAN Reserve Ordinary Seaman 2nd Class in August 1942. Peterson saw active service in the Landing Ship

Infantry HMAS *Manoora* and the corvette HMAS *Ipswich* before being demobilised in March 1946. He re-enlisted in the RAN in October 1946 and worked his way through the ranks to chief petty officer and was appointed as a commissioned boatswain in 1955. During the Suez operations *Albion's* aircraft conducted air strikes against Egyptian air bases and other targets. Peterson reached the rank of sub-lieutenant (special duties) before resigning from the RAN in February 1960.

Midshipman (Supply) Keith Eric Denton, serving under training in the aircraft carrier HMS *Albion*. He entered the RAN College as an intermediate entry cadet in 1953; graduating in 1955. He subsequently served in the destroyer HMAS *Vendetta* during 1960-62, as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve, and also in the destroyer escort HMAS *Stuart* during 1964-67. Denton reached the rank of lieutenant commander before retiring from the RAN in 1973.

Midshipman (Supply) Brian Charles Meredith Bigelow, serving under training in the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*. He entered the RAN College as an intermediate entry cadet in 1953; graduating in 1955. During the Suez operations *Eagle's*



aircraft conducted air strikes against Egyptian air bases and other targets. Bigelow also served in the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* during 1960-62 with the ship conducting periods of service as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve. He also served in the destroyer escort HMAS *Stuart* during 1963-64. Bigelow reached the rank of lieutenant commander before retiring from the RAN in April 1968.

Midshipman (Supply) Kelvin Allan Gulliver, serving under training in the *Colony* class cruiser HMS *Newfoundland*. He entered the RAN College as an intermediate entry cadet in 1953; graduating in 1955. During the Suez operations *Newfoundland*, normally based in Singapore, operated in the Red Sea on Egypt's southern flank. The cruiser saw significant action when, in company with the *Daring* class destroyer HMS *Diana*, she engaged and sank the Egyptian frigate *Domiat* (formerly HMS *Nith*) on the night of 31 October. *Domiat* was sighted by the two British warships and ordered to 'heave to' but instead opened fire. In the exchange of gunfire *Newfoundland* was hit; with one of the shells destroying the pay office where Kelvin Gulliver normally worked. Gulliver saw service in Vietnamese waters in HMAS *Melbourne* during 1965 and HMAS

Vendetta during 1970. He attained the rank of Commodore and was appointed as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the Australia Day Honour's List 1988 *for services to the Royal Australian Navy as Director General of Recruiting*. Commodore Kelvin Gulliver retired from the RAN in 1988.

While no RAN warships were involved in the Suez Crisis one Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) warship briefly was; this was the cruiser HMNZS *Royalist*. Commissioned as HMS *Royalist* in 1943, the cruiser saw active service during World War II before being laid up in reserve in 1946. She was subsequently modernised and purchased by the RNZN. The cruiser was handed over to the RNZN, at Plymouth, on 9 July 1956 and then proceeded to Malta to commence work up and training exercises with the British Mediterranean Fleet before sailing to New Zealand.

In October 1956 *Royalist* was still operating with the Mediterranean Fleet. She was the most modern anti-aircraft cruiser in the fleet, at that time, and by October the ship and her men were ready for action. The Suez Crisis had however polarised political opinions and the New Zealand Government advised it would not support an armed intervention by Britain. On 30



October, the British Mediterranean Fleet was at sea exercising when a signal was received to prepare for hostilities with Egypt.

Royalist remained with the fleet but following the commencement of Operation MUSKETEER, on the 31st, she was ordered by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Sidney Holland, to withdraw from the operation. *Royalist* did withdraw from the operation but 'lingered' in the eastern Mediterranean for another few days until departing for Malta on 2 November. Her ships company were somewhat frustrated in not being allowed to take part in the operation^{xi}. Unable to sail via the Suez Canal, *Royalist* departed Malta on 10 November 1956 heading west, via the Strait of Gibraltar, then turning south for the long journey to New Zealand via South Africa. She arrived at Devonport Naval Base, Auckland on 20 December 1956^{xii}.

The naval personnel who served in Operation MUSKETEER were awarded the Naval General Service Medal with clasp *Near East*. No Battle Honour was issued for the Suez operations and one commentator later described the events as 'a successful naval operation compromised by inept political leadership'^{xiii}. From an Australian perspective retired Lieutenant Commander Melzer, when

interviewed in 1987, stated '*Anthony Eden served too long under Churchill and it affected him. It caused much derision amongst Britons. The attitude of the senior officers was that the Arabs should never have tried to stand up for their rights. Suez was not a campaign any one on the British side could feel proud about. It was a disaster for Britain.*'^{xiv}



The Naval General Service Medal with Clasp 'Near East' for service in the Suez Crisis (31 October – 22 December 1956). Qualification was one or more days ashore in Egypt or on duty off the Egyptian coasts.



ⁱ Dowling was knighted in the 1957 New Year's honours list (KBE) and made a Knight Commander of the Royal Victoria Order (KCVO) in 1963.

ⁱⁱ National Australian Archives A816, 14/301/738 pages 98-99.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} British land based aircraft operated from Malta and Cyprus but their time in Egyptian airspace was limited due to their fuel endurance. During 1952-54 RAAF 78 Wing had been based in Malta supporting British activity in the region.

^{viii} The United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was deployed in November 1956 and consisted of personnel from Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, India, Indonesia, Norway, Sweden and Yugoslavia. It was withdrawn in May 1967.

^{ix} One author has suggested there was a 14th Australian involved with Able Seaman Reginald Stanley Lascelles (R/29722) serving in a Landing Ship Tank (LST 517), but there are currently no records to support this. Lascelles served in the RAN

during 1946-58 but during the Suez Crisis was serving at HMAS *Cerberus*.

^x HMS *Duchess* was transferred to the RAN in 1964, following the loss of HMAS *Voyager* in a collision with the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* on 10 February 1964. Becoming HMAS *Duchess* on 8 May 1964 she served as a destroyer and training ship until decommissioned on 23 October 1977.

^{xi} In 1992 the New Zealand Government issued the New Zealand General Service Medal with clasp *Near East* for those serving in HMNZS *Royalist* in Egyptian waters during 31 October - 22 December 1956. Qualification was 1 day's service in Egyptian waters and approximately 550 men were entitled to this medal.

^{xii} Royal New Zealand Navy Museum website.

^{xiii} Michael H. Coles 'A successful naval operation compounded by inept political leadership' (Naval War College Review, Number 4, 2006).

^{xiv} Fogarty, Michael 'Small wars you may have missed': the minor campaigns of the RAN, 1936-1956', Page 133 (David Stevens (Ed.), *Maritime Power in the 20th Century - The Australian Experience*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998).