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GUARDING SINAI

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Dear Peter,

In a moment of weakness I promised a friend from American University to take care of his apartment for the summer. I had been overwhelmed by the spectacular view of the Nile and failed to notice the absence of air conditioning. According to friends here, this summer has been rather cool. As I sit at my writing table, towel wrapped around my arm to avoid soaking the paper, I wonder what a hot summer in Cairo must be like? Even on so-called cool days the combination of sunlight, exhaust fumes, and the ubiquitous Cairo dust sometimes makes me wince.

To catch the shallowest draft I'm forced to leave windows and doorways of the apartment wide open. This invites what seem to be clouds of mosquitoes. I have waged a ferocious round of chemical warfare these last few weeks. As soon as dusk descends I'm stalking the apartment, armed with cans of Raid, tablets of Ezalo Mat ("Le puissant insecticide moderne") and Spiralette mosquito coils "guaranteed to put an end to mosquito infestation (sic!)."

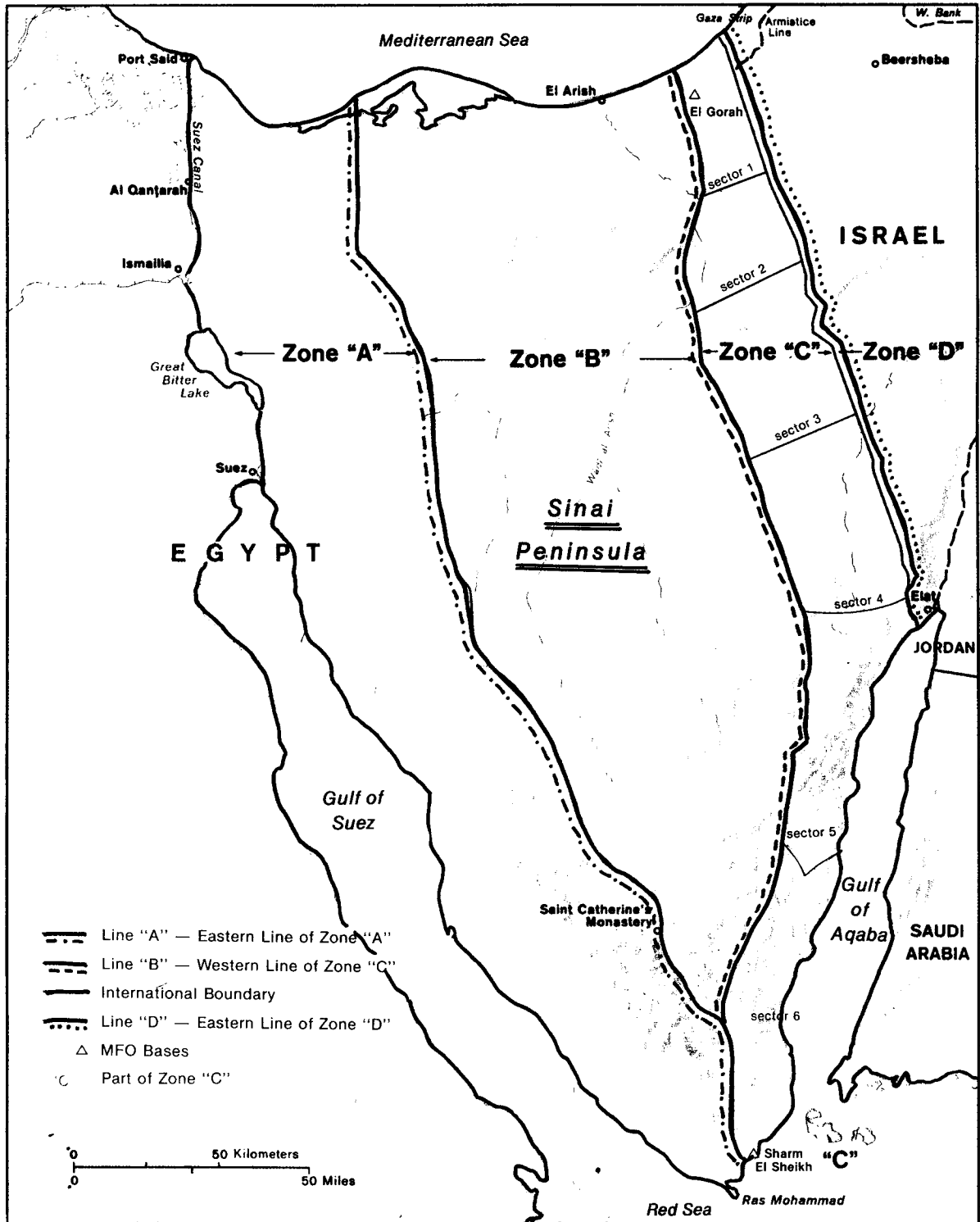
Needless to say, it's a battle I'm losing. A generation of mosquitoes is barely being obliterated before a new one hums around my bed. I've adopted a rather itinerant lifestyle as a result, moving back and forth between bedroom and study at all hours of the night.

As I stand once again on my balcony at four in the morning the sun slowly rises above Bulaq across the river. Small fishing boats are already moving amidst the swirls of mist. Women are bent over cooking stoves in their holds. The mist disperses the flames into a hazy ball of light, making the boats momentarily look like giant floating lanterns. The first train for Alexandria clanks across the Imbaba bridge. Maybe today will be nice and cool? Two hours later I'm already taking the first of many cold showers, thinking that I should break down and rush out to buy the fan I saw advertised on Shariff street - and some mosquito netting!!

To escape Cairo momentarily I travelled to Sinai, from where the following report originates.

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Map showing Sinai, and zones A, B, C, and D assigned to the Multinational Force and Observers.



GUARDING SINAI

At Qantara the Suez canal is barely a stone's throw wide. In just a few seconds the rickety ferry, with its unavoidable detachment of soldiers in white summer uniforms, reaches the Sinai bank. To Egyptians, however, "crossing the canal" signifies more than a short ferry ride. It brings back memories of the 1973 October war when the Egyptian army was able to cross the canal into Israeli occupied Sinai. Although in the final stages of the war Egypt's Third Army had been routed by Israel, the psychological impact of the conquest of the Bar Lev line was tremendous.

Tawfiq al-Hakim called the October war "a spiritual crossing to a new stage in our history." Ever since then the word al-'ubur (lit. the crossing) has taken on a special meaning in Egypt. One of president Sadat's many honorific titles was "Hero of the Crossing." He particularly enjoyed that designation, at least until the 1977 bread riots when one of the more popular slogans chanted in the streets was "Hero of the Crossing, where is our breakfast?"

As Sadat had hoped, the October war acted as a catalyst ^{for} bringing the United States fully into the peace process - a peace he considered indispensable to the economic future of his country. By the end of September 1975 Secretary of State Kissinger had negotiated two disengagements that had delivered part of Sinai back into Egypt's hands.

Immediately the difficulty arose over who would guard Sinai. After the Suez crisis of 1956 the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) had been stationed in the peninsula as a peacekeeping force. But the agreement under which it had remained there gave each party the right to request its withdrawal. After months of tension, this was exactly what president Nasser asked for on 16 May 1967. Two days later Egyptian forces appeared at UNEF's Sharm al-Shaykh post and demanded its withdrawal - according to UN records before a formal request had been made. With Sharm al-Shaykh occupied, Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, in effect precipitating the 1967 war.¹

Israeli leaders undoubtedly were reminded of this when negotiating for Sinai's future after 1975. After the disengagement agreements the US Sinai Observation Team had in part provided an early warning system, and some United Nations troops remained in the area. A more permanent solution, however, was needed after the signing of the Camp David agreement in 1979. Articles I and II of the agreement's appendix provided for the gradual

¹ There is still a considerable amount of controversy surrounding these events. The official Egyptian line remains that Nasser did not ask UNEF to withdraw from Sharm al-Shaykh. The United Nations has maintained that Egypt's written request for UNEF's withdrawal from Sinai included a verbal demand for withdrawal from Sharm al-Shaykh as well. If the UN version is correct it means that Secretary General U Thant acted in a much less precipitate manner than has usually been accepted - and it makes the charge that this abrupt decision gave Nasser the chance to close the Straits of Tiran rather spurious.

removal of Israeli troops from Sinai, to be completed within a three year period. Under Article III both parties agreed "to the redeployment of the United Nations Emergency Force."

But by early 1981, after several futile attempts within the UN Security Council to reconstitute UNEF, it was clear that the United Nations would play no further role in peacekeeping in Sinai. Opposition to Camp David within the Arab world had been particularly vituperative. The Soviet Union as one of the UNSC's permanent members refused to align itself with what was considered an American-inspired initiative. President Jimmy Carter's proposed alternative was the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), an amalgam of military personnel from ten different nations that would once again guard Sinai.

It's only 5 a.m. and already an inch of clear, white light is visible across the Mediterranean. Within one hour the sun will be unbearably hot, turning the translucent color of the water into a light blue and then into the kind of deep cobalt blue one associates with travel posters of exotic locales. A couple of bedouin girls are guiding a flock of goats as I walk to the car. For just an instant the brightly colored needlework on their dresses are lit by shafts of light already filtering through the leaves of the palm trees that line the shore.

Except for the Bedouin girls, the goats, and the ubiquitous stray dogs, Al Arish is still quiet. For almost two thousand years this desert town has been a crucial passing point for armies in search of territories to conquer or to liberate. Roman ruins are strewn along the coast. But it was the Arab invasion a few centuries later that gave the area much of its present character - even though the bedouin that live here practice islam in an almost desultory fashion and are often looked down upon as borderline apostates. The area witnessed ferocious fighting in World War I, pitting British, Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces against the Turkish army.

When Israel became a state in 1948 Sinai became a regional issue. The 1906 line that had once been drawn up by the British to separate their claim from that of the Ottoman Empire became Israel's western border. Sinai once again found itself a buffer zone, but this time separating two local adversaries - one intent on maintaining itself as a new state in the area, the other determined to prevent the intruder's economic (even physical) survival. Sinai's strategic value in this regard could not be underestimated. It borders the Suez canal and controls access to the Straits of Tiran, both of which Israel considered crucial to her survival. The Suez debacle in 1956 had been one indication of its resolve to keep this vital lifeline open.

The closing of the Straits of Tiran in 1967 led to the Six-day War and Israeli occupation of the peninsula. One more time the people of Al Arish saw an invading army's tanks rumble by on its way to the Suez canal. The occupation lasted fourteen years, ending in 1981 when the last Israeli troops left the area.

Seventy kilometers separate Al Arish from the MFO North Camp at Al Gorah. The road, for the standards of the area, is in good condition, well marked and reasonably free of potholes and debris.² It curves back and forth between the sand dunes and the flat stretches of almost endless desert behind it. It crisscrosses the railroad that once connected Baghdad with Rafah and Al Arish during the faltering years of the Ottoman Empire. Rusted railway cars, now half hidden by the accumulated sand, lie upturned beside the tracks. Most are riddled with bullets, the metal often torn apart by explosives. Much of this is the work of Lawrence of Arabia and his band of bedouin raiders who sabotaged the railroad in an effort to slow down supplies to the Turkish troops in World War I.

The road now follows the coastline until Rafah and the Egyptian-Israeli border. A mile before it, a well-paved road intersects with the former and runs for almost fifteen miles into the heart of the desert. The northeastern side of Sinai here is monotonously flat. Occasional bedouin settlements dot the landscape, motley collections of huts made of sheet metal scraps and palm fronds.

On the whole, however, this is an enormous sandy area of desolation. After conquering Sinai in 1967 Israel built Eitam Air Base here, one of the largest ever constructed in the Middle East. Eitam quickly became a crucial asset to the Israeli air force. In the enormous expanse of Sinai, pilots and planes could be tested under conditions undreamt of within the confines of pre-1967 Israel. The decision to evacuate Sinai and to hand Eitam over to Egypt met therefore with substantial opposition from Israel's military leadership. But once the decision had been made the dismantling of the base proceeded. Whatever was considered too cumbersome or too sensitive to be left to Egypt was dynamited, leaving numerous skeletons of sagging fuel tanks, bunkers, and assorted military materiel along the arrowstraight road that leads to the base.

² Despite this we managed to puncture one of the gas tanks and shredded one tire before we even got to Al Arish. After a small incident between my arab guide and an Egyptian official at Qantara, he steered us onto a desert road which at one point had a dip of about 8-10 inches and a small pipeline protruding from it above the sand. Hitting it at about 40 miles per hour one of the bolts on the pipeline punctured the gas tank, rapidly spilling its contents. With few gas stations in this stretch of the desert, drastic action was called for. It was at this point that my all-cotton, dry-clean-only Burton shirt suffered an ignominious end, its sleeve unceremoniously torn off and trussed around the hole. Thus equipped we arrived in Al Arish where our unconventional solution and a possible repair job became the subject of long talks and negotiations at one of the local garages. After innumerable parlays and cups of sweet green tea we agreed on a fee for patching the hole. The delicate operation itself was executed by a ferocious looking egyptian who commanded a bevy of grease-covered children - often spurning them on to greater productivity by paddling their behinds with a #16 US-army wrench.

Even though the now demolished Eitam base was chosen as the northern MFO headquarters in Sinai, the logistical problems in establishing and running the MFO North Camp and South Camp on a day-to-day basis were daunting. Basic guidelines had been described in the Carter protocol, but there was no precedent for a multinational force outside of the United Nations in the Middle East. US Sinai observation teams had been in the area for a few years, but what was called for under the protocol were three fully fledged battalions, supported by soldiers from a number of different nations. The plan was ambitious, calling for the creation of permanent headquarters in Rome and regional offices in Cairo and Tel Aviv. Crucial to MFO's mission, fifty-six permanent observation posts (OPs) needed to be constructed throughout eastern Sinai, an area stretching 400 kilometers across some of the most rugged and inaccessible terrain anywhere. The MFO South Base had to be built ex nihilo near Sharm al-Shaykh, and access roads built across the entire length of the peninsula. As an indication of how difficult conditions are, even now the main physical link between the North and South Camp remains the daily C-160 cargo flight operated by a french detachment.

Within a few months both North and South Camp and the main road connecting them were constructed. Beside the purely logistical nightmare there was also the ever present danger of hundreds of minefields that accumulated during a number of wars stretching back to World War I. Estimates are imprecise, but as many as 11 million unexploded mines and other ordnance may still be buried beneath the sand, shifting with the dunes.

By the time MFO started its operations in August 1981 ten nations had committed troops, materiel and financial support to the mission: Australia, Colombia, Fiji, France, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States, and Uruguay.³ Sinai was redrawn into four zones that ran north to south across the entire desert. Under the agreement signed by Israel and Egypt each zone is allowed only certain military personnel and equipment. Zones C and D straddle the border between the two countries. No Egyptian troops are allowed within the C-zone. It is here that both MFO camps are located and that the network of OPs, sector control centers and checkpoints exist (see map).

The C-zone itself is divided into six sectors, guarded by a Fijian, Colombian, and United States battalion. The northern and middle sectors, known here as FIJIBATT and COLBATT, each have 500 men. All are armed with light weapons, primarily M-16 guns. The USBATT contingent is situated at MFO South base near Sharm al-Shaykh and controls the southern sector of C-zone. It includes the disputed Taba area and the Straits of Tiran. Except for the small Italian contingent that patrols the Straits, USBATT is entirely american.

³ Australia's contingent was replaced by a Canadian team in April 1986.

In the rush to complete the infrastructure, many larger questions had been left unanswered. There was no precedent for this type of operation. When MFO started in August 1981 it was - by default - largely an american enterprise. Even now american soldiers and officers make up almost half of MFO's 2,600 men. Its 350 men logistical unit is completely american.

The US, Egypt, and Israel each pay one third of its operating budget. Some MFO critics, however, charge that Israel and Egypt's contribution simply comes out of the annual military aid provided by the US - thus in effect making the US foot the entire annual MFO bill of approximately \$100 million. But perhaps the most obvious sign of America's interest in MFO is the Civilian Observing Unit, a group of thirty state department and retired military men who travel throughout Sinai to check for possible violations. As one of the Dutch military police remarked, "this is primarily an american operation with other nations thrown in to legitimize MFO."

President Carter had indeed pushed hard to establish MFO, and much of what had been contributed had necessarily been american. Now the larger task of building a truly multinational force had to be faced. It is primarily to this task that Lt. Col. Dennistown-Wood and his small New Zealand contingent dedicate themselves. A Sandhurst graduate and regular officer in the New Zealand army, Dennistown-Wood is head of Plans and Training responsible for charting the future of some of MFO's rules and regulations. Dressed impeccably in olive green uniform, he readily admits that initial planning was modeled on the US army system but sees his mission as "introducing the MFO way of doing things."

It is his responsibility to develop and implement standard operating procedures for the multinational force, and to train the different nations' field commanders. Since its inception five years ago "MFO has definitely taken on a multinational character" he asserts; "my task is to make sure that guidelines are set out so that there are no conflicts of interest among the different countries."

Dennison-Wood is not so naive as to suggest that MFO will turn overnight into a cozy international community of peacekeepers. The key issue in his mind is to set uniform standards made specifically for MFO. He therefore sees his task as an important one, providing a sense of continuity sorely lacking in a system where, except for the Fijians, batallions are replaced every six months.

Running a full-scale military base in the middle of Sinai presents enormous logistical problems. From supplying the fifty-six observation posts with water to stocking the necessary rotor blades for the Canadian and US helicopters, trying to provide for 2,600 soldiers and another 800 civilians is an enormous task. In the relative isolation and boredom of MFO's North and South Camp, food assumes particular importance.

Captain Linda Colwell of the Canadian army is in charge of food supply. Hers is an unenviable position. When MFO started out, very few guidelines had been set. "Twice a month MFO used to have turf and surf for the soldiers. I don't have to tell you how much steak and lobster we went through those initial months." It was a time when the dollar was also at an all-time high. Now that the exchange rate is lower, Colwell is forced to make cutbacks, something always unpopular with the soldiers. Although

portion control is not yet considered, she has advocated several cost cutting measures ranging from batch cooking and the introduction of a salad bar to "doing away with some nice-to-have things such as shellfish."

She runs through some of the figures in her 1985 ledger. Last year MFO consumed 144,000 pounds of beef, 14,400 pounds of canadian bacon - "although, as a Canadian, I wouldn't call that stuff they serve here canadian bacon" - 37,500 pounds of frankfurters..." She smiles, knowing the figures seem overwhelming on a yearly basis. "Let me give you some more concrete figures. Every two weeks we buy 440 pounds of fish for the Columbian contingent and 1,500 pounds for the Fijians - each consisting of 500 men. The Fijians alone consume 110 pounds of curry powder every two weeks. We cook 200 pounds of rice per day and squeeze more than 8,000 pounds of orange juice per week. In June this year we spent \$7,000 on ice cream. All of this on a \$6 million yearly budget."

Except for the fresh produce and milk which is bought in Israel, most supplies are ordered from the Department of Defense in Philadelphia. It takes 60-120 days for supplies to arrive. "We need to plan months in advance. To give you one example, because we were able to buy lobster cheap we have stocked 15,000 pounds in the freezer."

To Captain Albin Majewski in charge of central storage, Colwell's lobster stock is a nightmare. "Welcome to the world's largest freezer run by all-army personnel" he booms as we rush past the doors of a giant cooling shed. From almost 105 degrees in the sun outside to far below freezing, the sudden drop in temperature almost takes one's breath away. "We can only stay in for three minutes, sir. After that we need to put on arctic suits. Army regulations."

A couple of young soldiers dressed in the requisite clothing with wolf's ruff around the hoods are loading enormous boxes of steaks into a corner. "I'm running out of space. Look at that! Someone bought 15,000 pounds of lobster." We emerge from the freezer and the extreme difference in temperature turns some of the air into snow around the doorway. Captain Majewski trods on into the dry goods warehouse, still marveling at the insensitivity of the procuring people to the capabilities of his unit. We pause before an enormous mountain of little plastic containers. "Two million packets of non-dairy creamer. You know how long this stuff will last? YEARS!!"

We walk past the petroleum lab where all incoming fuel is tested. Very often Egyptian oil contains too much sediment to be useful, "but we want to find that out before it goes into our helicopters." American rock music is blaring from a portable stereo in the aviation shed. It stocks every imaginable item necessary for the helicopters' maintenance. "The Canadian unit usually wants its rotor blades fixed and put back on" Majewski says, adding that "the American contingent just puts new rotors on."

One of the real problems he adds is getting rid of stuff. "You see, it's been bought through the general budget. Who do you reimburse when you sell the stuff?" As a result many items have started to pile up, adding further to the captain's worries. As we leave the area two forty foot trailers pull into the yard with more supplies. An average of ten arrive

each month, in addition to two trucks weekly filled with produce from Israel. In a corner of the compound part of the logistics unit is loading supplies onto wooden pallets for transport by the C-160 cargo plane to South Camp.

MFO's entire existence hinges on the ability of the observation posts to check for possible violations of the specific guidelines laid down in the Peace Treaty's appendixes. These specify the number of military personnel and materiel Egypt can have in zones A, B, and C and Israel in zone D. For purposes of observation the posts are most often located on hills and mountains within Sinai, and the only way to provide them with supplies is by helicopter.

Col. Brian Bertrand and Cap. Mike Paslawsky are already discussing the flight route when we enter the flight operation center. Part of the Canadian batallion, they deliver food and water and remove garbage from some of the isolated OPs. Today's assignment is OP 2-3, perhaps the most inaccessible observation post in the COLLBATT sector. Situated on a ridge about sixty miles from MFO North Camp, it is manned by seven young Colombian soldiers who remain on the craggy mountaintop side for two week periods.

Both Bertrand and Paslawsky have made the flight dozens of times. But this morning the logistics team will explode a 500 pound bomb discovered earlier in the week. According to their schedule the helicopter should be out of the area long before the explosion takes place. Nevertheless, neither pilot puts much faith in logistics scheduling. "We'll fly at four thousand feet. I don't trust their clock" Bertrand says.

The helicopter gently rocks back and forth as the engines are warmed up, already loaded with food for OP 2-3. Bertrand and Paslawsky, looking trim and athletic in their jumpsuits, have started the checking procedure. Both have donned leather gloves "to make sure hands don't slip at a crucial moment" and pore one last time over flight maps. The flight should last one and a half hours, following a southerly direction over Gebel Dafa and Gebel el-Ghereif. At the last minute an extra box of vegetables is stuffed behind our backs in the cargo area.

The Hughes UH-1H helicopter has reached maximum power. Over the microphone Bertrand doublechecks one last time with his colleague. "All systems go. Three, two, one." The helicopter slowly rises a couple of feet off the pad and gently executes a 180 degree turn. As a final precaution it glides a few yards across the concrete runway, then slowly lifts its tail. Within seconds we have passed the rolls of concertina wire around the camp's edge. Huge slabs of concrete from Eitam's former runways can be glimpsed, now partly covered with sand. We climb rapidly to four thousand feet. The desert looks completely flat from this height, almost monotonous. The lack of orientation points induces a strange feeling of immobility. The only signs of human activity are tracks left in the sand here and there by MFO vehicles, looking like prehistoric rock tracings in South America.

Suddenly the flat stretches give way to steep hills and mountains. Even the bedouin barely ventures here, the area too inhospitable for the survival of man and camel alike. The surface is almost lunar, pockmarked

and utterly devoid of any vegetation.

"OP 2-3 Ridge at 11:30" one of the pilots announces. Almost invisible except for a large antenna and an orange windsock hanging limply in the still air, the observation post slowly emerges from its monotone background - a couple of trailers on top of a windswept rocky backbone in the middle of the mountains. We can feel the heat of the desert floor as the helicopter descends, and for the first time realize its speed as it approaches the observation post in a wide arc.

A couple of Colombian soldiers dressed in white T-shirts and army fatigues scurry across the rocks toward the landing pad indicated by a simple circle of stones. Within seconds of our landing the supplies have been unloaded and dragged across the rocky path toward the field kitchen. This is the last day for the seven man crew, and they are anxious to get back to North Camp. Already all the post's equipment has been lined up outside the trailers for inspection by the incoming crew; an assortment of helmets, tools, cooking utensils, and the rest of bric-a-brac that makes up life at this remote station.

Visitors are scarce here but the conversation is nevertheless stilted. Only a couple of the Colombians speaks halting english, and neither Major Eagles nor I know more than a few words of spanish. All are very young, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. They offer us some icecold fruitpunch and a quick look at their kitchen and sleeping quarters. Both are remarkably clean. One of the two soldiers who speaks english nonchalantly asks Major Eagles for his rank.

"Major"

The young soldier jumps into a salute: "Good Morning, Sir."

On the way back the pilots volunteer to take us across Gebel al-Quesina, known to most westerners as Moses' Valley. Legend has it that Moses spent his years in the wilderness here. The story seems plausible for a couple of reasons, both visible from the helicopter as we fly in a northeasterly direction toward our target. Moses' Valley is a strategic point, its position crucial to anyone who fears being attacked. Any approaching army or intruder has to negotiate through the pass leading into the valley if they want to get reach Sinai proper.

The second reason is obvious as soon as the helicopter skims over the mountain ridge; the valley is a verdant paradise amidst the harsh surrounding area. It boasts one of Sinai's only year-round springs and houses one of the peninsula's oldest bedouin communities whose mellons are renowned throughout the area. Carefully groomed plots of date trees are laid out in geometric patterns. Against the valley ridge run the crumbling remnants of Roman fortification walls.

As we're heading out of the valley the helicopter gains altitude again and its strategic location once again becomes apparent. Bertrand points his finger down, and within seconds we're hovering over part of the valley floor covered with several hundred muslim graves, the remnants of turkish soldiers who lost their lives here in the first World War fighting ANZAC forces. A few hundred yards further enormous concrete dragon teeth of more recent origin - perhaps the 1967 war? - are lined up in the bottom of the valley to stop tanks from approaching the area. And at one particularly

chilling place hundreds of pairs of army boots are sticking out of the sand. They were left behind by Egyptian troops trying to outrun the approaching Israelis in the sand. As the bedouin know, running with boots in the sand is an impossible task, and they haven't even bothered to collect them for that reason. The pilots tell us about Gebel al-Halal, a few kilometers to the West, where dozens of Israeli and Egyptian tanks are piled up, destroyed in an effort to gain the advantage during one of the 1967 battles.

Invariably the pilots talk about the mines. Their flightmaps are dotted with red spots indicating minefields, but they are aware that no one knows precisely how far they extend. "One of the rules is that you never leave your helicopter. One of our teams once found a mine sticking out three feet from where they had landed." The bedouin who traverse this country often pick up mines and occasionally deposit them on MFO's runway at North Camp, knowing the special team will defuse them. It has also forced MFO personnel to visually make a runway check every morning before the day's flights start. Often the result is more tragic. Every year some of the bedouin are maimed or killed while running across some mines.

A couple of hours later I find myself wedged into the transport plane Captain Majewski and his crew have loaded earlier in the day, seated beside several bags of potatoes and red onions. A few young soldiers from the Italian battalion are also on board, and a couple of civilians who work for one of the base maintenance contractors. Heavily loaded the plane hugs the ground for what seems to be a very long time before climbing into a steep bank. Because there is no temperature control, the air heats up rapidly. We arrive at Ras Nasrani, a civilian airport a few kilometers away from South Base, an hour later and drenched in sweat. As one of the members of the french crew kicks open the small exit door in the side of the plane, fresh air rushes in. But it is as hot as the air inside. We have come four hundred kilometers south and temperatures at the South Base are considerably higher than at the North Base.

Immediately the contrast between the two bases is visible. South base is much smaller, all american, and is located just beside the sharp mountains that line the southern shore of Sinai. Perched almost precariously on a high cliff overlooking the Straits of Tiran it seems even less open to any type of terrorist incident than the North Camp. Deputy Installation Commander Holton readily acknowledges this but notes that they are working on the assumption of "low risk, high potential."

He points out that it seems unlikely anyone would want to attack the base anyway. About the most serious incident that occurs is radio jamming. "Be sure you call it radio interference and not jamming" Holton admonishes; "we don't want to antagonize anybody." Nevertheless no chances are taken. Since the US attack on Libya rotation schedules are now kept secret until the last minute. Also, at the time of the American interception of the Egyptian airliner carrying PLO members, Cairo was temporarily declared off limits to MFO. As Major Eagles remarks "There is a high identification of MFO with the United States, and we didn't want any incidents to take place."

Colonel Hook, commander of the South Base, joins us on the flight back

to North Base. The plane this times is almost filled to capacity with personnel, soldiers going on leave, and a solitary Egyptian liason officer. Soon almost everyone has dozed off in the heat. Perched on a canvas seat in one corner, Col. Hook summarizes his experience with MFO. As most of the commanders he feels MFO is proving a sound success. Nevertheless there are some drawbacks. One is undoubtedly the continuity problem. Most batallions except for the Fijians stay only six months. "Every 179 days we have a complete rotation of personnel. Although we try to overlap to some extent, it is hard to ensure that everything proceeds smoothly all the time. Many of our people, however, are volunteers and seem eager to make things work out for the best."

Back at North Camp Colonel Isikia Savua is waiting. Perhaps no one is better qualified than this commander of the Fijian batallion to answer questions about MFO and its future. On his third duty tour with MFO, Savua previously spent three years in Lebanon with UNIFIL. A large man with closely cropped curly hair and an easy smile, he quickly becomes serious when MFO matters are discussed.

Inevitably he contrasts his experiences in Lebanon and MFO. "Here in Sinai we have peacekeeping in the true sense of the word and not, as in Lebanon, peacefinding. In Lebanon there was chaos, each batallion doing its own thing. Once we stopped a PLO detachment from passing through the UNIFIL zone, but they were able to get past other countries' batallions." According to Savua the timeframe has much to do with the way a mission is perceived. "We were in Lebanon for one year at the time. Here at MFO we remain for at least five years. What's the use of keeping peace [in Lebanon] if after one year you don't know what will happen?"

To Savua, coming to MFO's North Camp was a real surprise. In Lebanon the peacekeeping force's mission was mostly crisis management, with few amenities for the soldiers. The first few days were spent looking for cooking utensils and drinking water. "Here at MFO everything was set up beforehand. Things are better integrated, better run. There's a better understanding and discipline to the different contingents. Everyone knows what the broad outlines of our commitments are. Logistics here are extremely good. Every contingent gets what it needs."

Although Savua admits missing the ration of coconuts formerly assigned to the Fijian battalion, he shrugs it off easily. "We're only here for a few months at the time. Why complain about small matters?" A more urgent problem in his opinion is keeping his men motivated. Almost eighty percent of his battalion has served in Lebanon. Most admit frankly that they prefer being stationed there. One young Fijian recruit asks rhetorically "What are we doing here? What peacekeeping is there in checking MFO vehicles at the front gate all day?"

Savua is perfectly aware of the problem. After Lebanon MFO seems staid, even boring. He recalls the volatility of the situation in Lebanon with an anecdote. The Fijian batallion has traditionally been proud of its athletic prowess. One day it was invited to play a volleyball match against one of the militias that operates in southern Lebanon. "We were ahead, and in the process of winning" he recalls with a wry smile. "That's when I called a time-out and talked to my men. We lost the game rather

diplomatically." When queried he adds, "There's no need to push your luck in Lebanon. The same people you play with during the day shoot you at night. Here at MFO the only time I use a weapon is on the range, for practice."

Although duties are rotated every few days Savua knows there is a lingering feeling of boredom among his recruits. But he carefully puts the whole matter into a larger perspective. "Our duty here is to make sure violations to the treaty are recorded. It is something MFO has done very well, and is equipped to do well. I think MFO therefore will remain here for a long time. Both Egypt and Israel recognize that it is in their best interest to keep it here. The few millions spent seem well worthwhile. If I have anything to do with the future of the Fijian batallion in MFO, I prefer us to be here."

Colonel Savua may well be right about MFO's longevity. There is no specific clause in the Peace Treaty's appendixes to terminate its mission. The feeling among many Egyptian and Israeli policy makers seems to mirror his observation that a few million dollars annually is a small price to pay for peace and security. As one Egyptian liaison officer remarked "we're now spending in one year what one day of serious fighting would cost us in a war with Israel - and we're not losing any lives."

Despite the greater role increasingly played by the other participating countries, United States support for the mission - both financially and in spirit - will remain crucial. Despite some misgivings about its disproportionate presence within the mission, none of the commanders saw much future in MFO without US participation. They have little to fear. Within a few weeks Vice President George Bush is scheduled to arrive at North Camp and is expected to deliver a strong speech in support of MFO. Quipped one soldier from the US logistics unit, "maybe we'll get turf and surf that day?"

All the best,

Handwritten signature

I would like to thank Major John Eagles at MFO North Camp, Ms. Jeanette McDonald of the Cairo MFO office, and Mr. Chester Jankovsky, formerly of the Civilian Observers Unit.

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