

# THE CROSSING OF THE SUEZ

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help, within weeks of our defeat in June 1967. By September 1968 our ground forces, at least, were sufficiently recovered to challenge the enemy encamped along the east bank of our canal. The War of Attrition began. Militarily, our aim was to raise the morale of an army battered by a stunning defeat and to inflict casualties upon an enemy always sensitive to losses. Our plan was to shell enemy forward positions along the east bank, and to send commandos deep into occupied Sinai to ambush enemy tanks and trucks by night.

Initially, our barrage and our raids achieved good results. But the enemy retaliated by dropping helicopter-borne units deep into Egypt to blow up vital targets: the power station of Nag Hamadi in Upper Egypt was one; vital links in our irrigation system were others. We were forced to call off our attacks. After five months, however, the need to do something—our need to symbolize our refusal to remain defeated forever—forced us to reopen our efforts in late spring 1969. The enemy responded more fiercely than ever. In July 1969, the Israeli Air Force was committed to the battle.

Swiftly, Israeli aircraft destroyed our air defense system in the northern sector, opening a breach between Ismailia and Port Said, a corridor for enemy aircraft to penetrate deep into the Nile Delta. Nor did we have to wait long to learn what this air superiority would now permit.

On September 9, 1969, a sea-borne force of ten tanks and several tracked vehicles crossed the Gulf of Suez, landing not far from our port of Zafarana. In a raid lasting almost a whole day, they destroyed defense installations, air observation posts, and whatever vehicles happened to be on the coast road. Zafarana was scarcely a sensitive target. Our troops there were scattered, their

task, routine observation rather than the repelling of enemy tanks, especially as they had only small arms and anti-tank guns with a range of no more than 500 yards. From almost 2,000 yards the enemy tanks picked them off. The Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces was promptly dismissed by President Nasser. But the failure ran deeper than an individual. The significance of the raid, apart from its propaganda value to the enemy, was that the coast-to-coast round trip took about 12 hours, during which enemy air superiority was such that no Egyptian aircraft or vessel came to challenge.

As the enemy intensified air strikes into the depths of our country, the calamity reached its climax. Our air defenses collapsed and the enemy began to hit even civilian targets with impunity—industrial centers, factories, even a children's school. Our ground forces were reduced to defending with World War Two anti-aircraft guns. In December 1969, presumably to demonstrate absolute superiority, the enemy landed on our Red Sea coast, raided an isolated radar station, dismantled the equipment, loaded it into a helicopter brought for the purpose and flew the prize back to Israel.

In January 1970, President Nasser went secretly to Moscow and asked the Soviet Union to take a direct hand in our air defense. The Soviets agreed. Through February and March, in great secrecy, their men and equipment began to arrive: 80 MIG-21 interceptors; 27 battalions of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs); banks of electronic equipment to counter that carried aboard the enemy intruders; four MIG-25 high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft and the crews to man them. In all, two Soviet air force brigades and an air defense division. The Soviet role was purely defensive, the protection of

our heartland. The Soviet presence eased the defense burden on our air force and enabled us to concentrate on rebuilding air strength. The Soviets took responsibility for certain interior areas only, while Egypt defended the rest, including the strip running ten miles west of the canal and the Gulf of Suez.

By April the Soviet equipment was fully operational; on April 18, Russians in Egypt became a secret no longer. The Soviet pilots made their first contact with Israeli intruders and pursued them into Sinai, chattering the while in Russian, which was promptly monitored by Israeli and American listening stations. Israeli penetration raids ceased. The first phase had ended. Between January 1, 1970 and April 18, the enemy air force had flown 3,300 sorties and dropped 8,000 tons of munitions on our territory.

At last our surviving air defense units could reorganize and build. First priority was to assert themselves along that ten-mile strip west of the canal which remained Egypt's own responsibility. The priority went beyond questions of national pride. Preparations to cross the canal would focus on this strip; assault forces would concentrate there. That was why the strip was so important. In the last days of June 1970, under cover of night, our reconstituted air defense units leapfrogged their SAMs forward into the strip. The second phase had begun.

Our reward soon came. On June 30, 1970, our SAMs shot down two enemy F-4 raiders. Through the first week of July ten enemy intruders fell, seven on our territory. The Egyptian *fellah* promptly honored the time with a special name in his calendar: "The week of the falling of enemy aircraft" it was baptized. The truth was that, welcome as the victory was in signalling the rebirth

of our air defense service, it had ushered in the era of missile-versus-aircraft. And it was already clear that victory in any such conflict would go to whoever happened to have the more sophisticated electronic detection, jamming and counter-jamming devices.

On that uneasy basis, by the end of July 1970 both sides had agreed to a ceasefire on the Suez front. It was, for the moment, a stand-off. The work of preparing a new assault could proceed. The foundation of that had to be the reconstruction of our ground forces.