SUEZ, 1956

A Successful Naval Operation Compromised by Inept Political Leadership

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This article was originally undertaken to note the fiftieth anniversary of the Suez Affair, the November 1956 Anglo-French invasion of Egypt, which, although originally headed for rapid success, was quickly halted by a combination of political and economic pressure. As work progressed it became apparent that much of what happened fifty years ago, and the political and military thinking (or lack thereof) behind it, has relevance for today's strategic planners. Indeed, as one contemplates the present situation in Iraq, Santayana's oft-quoted axiom—that those who cannot learn from the past are condemned to repeat it—remains extraordinarily relevant. Suez was a war of choice in a time of peace, one that, we now know, was largely justified by clandestine political arrangements. It was extraordinarily divisive both politically and among the military leadership, the latter going to unusual lengths in their attempts to halt it. The politicians responsible, anxious to sustain their fictitious casus belli in the face of rapidly moving events, interfered with tactical operations in a manner that went well beyond the political/military relationship normal in democracies. Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from Suez is that flawed political decisions are likely to lead to flawed operational strategy. Nevertheless, as we look at the actual military performance during the invasion, taking into account the constraints imposed, we see near copybook performance by the airmen, commandos, and

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paratroopers involved. Suez goes down in history as a bad event and carries a bad name, yet from a half-century's perspective it appears that those who fought there, however briefly, performed well. It is to recognize this point that this article concentrates on the operational side of the affair as much as, or more than, on the political.

Following the end of World War II the Middle East became an area of increasing tension. Many factors were responsible, but the most significant was the continuing conflict between the new state of Israel and its Arab neighbors. In 1950, Britain, France, and the United States issued a Tripartite Declaration in which they agreed to take action to prevent any violation of the 1947 armistice lines separating Israel from its Arab neighbors. Intended to defuse the situation, the declaration did little to calm tensions, but it did become a central factor in Washington policy making. In the fall of 1955, Moscow and Cairo concluded a major arms contract, at which point relations between Egypt and the West started to deteriorate rapidly. Nevertheless, at the end of the year the United States, Britain, and the World Bank offered to fund construction of Egypt's prestigious Aswan High Dam. However, Gamil Abdel-Nasser (Egypt's new head of state) and his proposed dam were equally unpopular with Congress, and on 19 July 1956 the financing offer was withdrawn. A week later Nasser announced that the Suez Canal would be nationalized. The French and British, its principal owners and users, deemed this unacceptable, fearing restrictions on the use of this vital international waterway.[1]

Although Anglo-French diplomacy throughout the affair appeared at the time to be primarily directed at regaining the canal, events following the nationalization owe much to the fact that Prime Minister Anthony Eden of Britain and Prime Minister Guy Mollet of France wanted also to eliminate Nasser, believing, respectively, that he was undermining British prestige in the Middle East and providing support for the Algerians in their rebellion against France. Such feelings resonated with much of popular opinion in the two countries; comparisons with Hitler and Mussolini were rife. Removing Nasser from power, however, if a potentially valuable collateral outcome of a successful recovery, represented a confusing alternative priority for military planners. Even though the two governments decided within days after nationalization to use military force, they never properly defined their political objectives—regime change or canal access—and could thus give little clear guidance to their military staffs. As historian Hugh Thomas later noted, "The political aims of the campaign remained somewhat obscure to the officers designated to carry it out."[2]

British post–World War II defense policy contemplated two kinds of war: full-scale operations against the Soviet Union within the framework of NATO, and

suppression of small-scale colonial insurgencies. In the summer of 1956, on one hand, a major portion of Britain's active-duty army was assigned to its Army of the Rhine, where it represented a significant component of NATO's military strength; on the other hand, Royal Marines and paratroopers (Britain's main rapid-deployment units) were largely employed on anti-insurgent duties in Cyprus and lacked current jump and amphibious assault training, respectively, while other infantry units and Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons were occupied in the long-running Malayan Emergency. French troops, barely recovered from their disaster in Vietnam, were heavily engaged in Algeria. Although Anglo-French planners were fortunate to have significant naval surface and air power available for what would prove to be principally a littoral operation, much preparatory work would be necessary before a significant eastern Mediterranean offensive could be contemplated. Many units had to be redeployed and retrained, army reservists recalled, and landing craft and troop transports brought out of reserve or requisitioned.[3]

London was concerned that Washington remain at least neutral throughout any conflict, but American thinking was dominated by the upcoming 1956 presidential election. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was seeking a second term, urged a diplomatic resolution, but such ran counter to the Anglo-French desire for military action. The transatlantic relationship was further frayed by extraordinarily bad relations between Eden and the American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, and by Washington's irritation at Britain's apparent inability to accept its reduced status in the world. Evidence of this reduced status was available for all to see in the fact that the U.S. Sixth Fleet constituted by far the largest collection of naval power in the Mediterranean, a sea the British had once dominated and historically had regarded as a natural extension of its empire.[4]

For several weeks following the nationalization, high-level meetings involving the British, French, and American governments (collectively the largest users of the Canal) and the United Nations struggled to develop compromises acceptable to all. The diplomatic process was slow, but by early October private negotiations with the Egyptians at the United Nations seemed close to meeting most of the canal users' concerns, while Egyptian canal pilots had successfully taken the places of European waterway operators. The Anglo-French casus belli appeared to be melting away and with it any excuse for destroying Nasser. At this point the Israelis, increasingly concerned with their security in the face of a rising level of Egyptian *feydaheen** attacks, provided the alliance's political leadership with a convenient solution.[5]

* Holy warriors sworn to defend the prophet and serve the cause of freedom.

On 22 October, representatives of the French, British, and Israeli governments meeting in a Paris suburb secretly agreed that the Israelis would at the end of the month launch a major preemptive attack on the Suez Canal Zone. The French and British would then demand that the Israeli and Egyptian governments withdraw all troops ten miles back from either side of the canal. If the Egyptian government did not agree to this ultimatum by the morning of 31 October, Anglo-French forces would begin military operations. Although its relationship with Israel was uneasy, Britain had an essential role to play: it alone had the air power deemed necessary to destroy the Egyptian air force, whereas the Israelis were understandably reluctant to risk their army in the open desert until that had been done.[6]

Port Said. Imperial War Museum, by permission

Future planning was complicated by the fact that almost no one who would be concerned with the Anglo-French operation had any knowledge that the three-way plot existed. A treaty providing that Britain would come to the aid of Jordan in the likely event of hostilities between that country and Israel further confused matters on the British side. Indeed, there was a moment in October when two distinct planning staffs were preparing for war—one against Israel, the other against Egypt—both assuming the use of largely the same military forces. One Royal Navy squadron commander recalled expecting to be fighting the Israelis, and his surprise when he found the opposite to be true. As Israeli general Moshe Dayan commented later, "I must confess to the feeling that, save for the Almighty, only the British are capable of complicating affairs to such a degree."[7]

During October the normal free flow of intelligence information between London and Washington largely dried up. Heavy communications traffic between London and Paris aroused suspicion in Washington but overwhelmed American deciphering capacity. Reports from Israel indicated a possible large-scale mobilization. Nevertheless, unknown to anyone but a small circle in Washington, a new and highly secret presence was watching what was going on. On 27 September America's recently introduced U-2 spy planes were instructed to conduct high-level reconnaissance over the eastern Mediterranean. In the ensuing weeks CIA pilots, including the soon to be famous Francis Gary Powers, photographed most of the Middle East. U-2 reports indicated that the number of French jet fighters in Israel significantly exceeded the number the French were permitted to transfer under the Tripartite Declaration, while high-resolution photographs indicated large quantities of weapons being loaded onto French and British ships in Toulon, Malta, and Cyprus. However, even though the military preparations of the British and French had become well known to the Americans, their intentions remained unclear. Still, as CIA director Richard Bissell commented when he saw the photos, all those vessels were not there getting ready for a regatta.[8]

The Anglo-French ("allied," for this purpose) naval forces available for the Suez operation would be asked to perform their traditional roles in military expeditions: to bring the invasion force safely to the enemy shore, soften up defenses prior to the landing, transport the landing force onto the beaches, and provide cover for the troops while they established a secure beachhead. Royal Marine commandos, together with army paratroopers, would form the initial assault force. The Royal Navy and its marines were thus following a tradition that went back through Cunningham at Cape Matapan at least to Nelson at the Nile—countering a threat to Britain's vital eastward lines of communication—although in 1956, oil from the Middle East rather than trade with India was the prime motivator.[9]

The British at the time had a well-developed network of military bases in the Mediterranean. However, those in Libya and Jordan (made available by treaty) were largely unusable for political reasons, while more accessible colonial facilities had their own drawbacks: airfields and harbors in Cyprus had limited capacity; Royal Air Force ground-attack aircraft operating from Cyprus would do so at their maximum range, thus reducing their effectiveness; and Malta was some thousand miles to the west of any likely action. It was thus clear that carrier aviation would prove a vital part of the invasion plans.[10]

The Royal Navy that went into action at Suez had just undergone a major and innovative carrier modernization program. Three years earlier, during the Korean War, it had provided close air support for United Nations land forces

using World War II–era straight-flight-deck light fleet carriers and propeller-driven attack planes. Now its operational carrier strength consisted of five recently commissioned ships equipped with early-model angled decks and a new mirror landing system, which together provided improved flight deck safety and reduced the accident rate. Steam catapults had not yet been installed, so the ships remained much at the mercy of their old hydraulic models, and these gave considerable trouble. HMS *Eagle,* a modern fleet carrier already in the Mediterranean, was hastily reinforced by its smaller contemporaries, *Bulwark* and *Albion.* (*Eagle*'s operational efficiency was significantly reduced before the outbreak of hostilities by the failure of its port catapult.) Two obsolete World War II carriers, *Theseus* and *Ocean,* were rapidly prepared for troop carrying and sailed for Malta in early August. The French navy promised a battle group consisting of the older carriers *Arromanches* (a sister ship of *Theseus* and *Ocean*) and *Bois Belleau* (formerly USS *Langley*) and the fast fifteen-inch-gun battleship *Jean Bart*. South of Suez the Royal Navy assembled a task force consisting of the cruiser HMS *Newfoundland* and French and British escorts. The initial allied assault force would have eighteen tank and troop landing vessels. Troopships with larger combat organizations were to follow some hours behind. Altogether, with escorts and auxiliary vessels, the assault force numbered over a hundred ships.[11]

The British carrier air groups, other than helicopters and airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft, were all modern jet or turboprop, comprising a hundred Seahawk and Sea Venom fighter-bombers, nine Wyvern attack planes, and eight AEW aircraft. The twenty-five radar-equipped Sea Venoms embarked in *Eagle* and *Albion* had night and all-weather capability, giving the Royal Navy for the first time the ability to mount around-the-clock operations. The French carriers operated thirty-six F4U Corsair fighter-bombers and ten TBM Avenger antisubmarine aircraft, all propeller driven and of World War II vintage; in his subsequent report the (British) Flag Officer Aircraft Carriers was particularly complimentary regarding the aging Corsairs' operational versatility. In mid-October, belatedly concerned about a possible underwater threat, the Admiralty rapidly equipped *Theseus* with a helicopter antisubmarine squadron, which would later prove invaluable in another context. French Avengers also provided antisubmarine capability.[12]

There were three other navies operating in the rather crowded southeast corner of the Mediterranean in October 1956. The Egyptian navy in the early 1950s had two former *Hunt*-class destroyers, six frigates, and a sloop (a small destroyer-escort equivalent), all World War II vintage and all acquired from Britain. In 1955 Nasser had acquired two more modern Soviet-built *Skori*-class destroyers, as well as four armed minelayers and twenty motor torpedo boats (MTBs). The

possibility that Nasser had also purchased Soviet submarines was of some concern to the allied navies. The Israeli navy believed that the training of Egyptian navy crews, by Poland and the Soviet Union, had been considerably more effective than that received by Egyptian soldiers.[13]

Israel's much smaller navy consisted at the outbreak of hostilities of two formerly British Z-class destroyers, and a frigate, as well as several MTBs and landing craft. As will be seen, it soon received reinforcement from an unexpected quarter.

Finally there was the powerful American Sixth Fleet, mustering fifty ships, twenty-five thousand personnel, and two hundred aircraft. Two modernized *Essex*-class carriers, USS *Randolph* (CVA 15) and *Coral Sea* (CVB 43), made up the fleet's principal striking force. Its air groups included swept-wing F9F Cougar fighters—a fact that would cause considerable confusion to Anglo-French air crews—and, probably unknown to the rest of the world, small detachments of F2H Banshees trained to deliver the nuclear weapons that carriers now routinely carried. The British and American navies in the theater, normally friendly rivals used to a high degree of informal cooperation, had essentially stopped speaking to each other by mid-October. The Americans claimed that they knew nothing of British plans; apart from having been told to evacuate American civilians from the combat area, the Sixth Fleet's commander, Adm. Charles R. Brown, had no better instructions than a message from Adm. Arleigh Burke, the Chief of Naval Operations, saying: "Situation tense, prepare for imminent hostilities." Other participants, though unaware of the highly secret U-2 activities, believed that Washington knew exactly what was going on. In fact, however, Washington still did not.[14]

The Egyptian air force, which represented the principal threat to both the Anglo-French invasion and the Israelis, consisted of 110 MiG-15 supersonic fighters and forty-eight Il-28 medium bombers, as well as some older fighters. These aircraft were spread among seven airfields. The MiGs, which outclassed anything possessed by the allies, were of particular concern, especially if flown by Eastern bloc "volunteers." However, these new fighter planes had only just been delivered, and Egyptian pilot training in them was incomplete. The "volunteers" never did appear, and throughout the campaign it would be a lack of pilots, not of aircraft, that would inhibit Nasser's air forces. The Egyptian pilots who resisted were more competent than the Israelis had expected.[15]

By the end of July the British staff had prepared a preliminary plan and an interservice command structure; the codeword was MUSKETEER. The planning staff became Anglo-French in early August, under British leadership. Although inevitable differences would occur throughout the planning process, the matter that most distinguished between the allies was British insistence on massive and

well-prepared force, an approach that contrasted with French emphasis on speed of preparation and execution. It appears that Eden initially favored the French view until dissuaded by his military advisers, whose thinking was predicated on World War II experience, and by serious concern about the new weapons with which the Soviets had generously equipped the Egyptian forces. In fact the British military apprehensions were misplaced, while the French political judgment was proved right: the long time that elapsed between inception and action allowed the many voices calling for peace to become mobilized, while the reasons for war became less convincing.[16]

In the event, and to the chagrin of the French, who were urging rapid action, and the bored and occasionally mutinous British reservists, who badly wanted to go home, the operation was postponed several times while diplomacy ground on. London eventually approved the final plan of attack on 19 September. The landings would be at Port Said, but there was still no definite date. Postponements resulted in equipment problems—weapons and vehicles at sea suffered from the effects of salt air, without proper maintenance. The Royal Navy's Mediterranean command emphasized to the Chiefs of Staff in London the weather-related perils of attempting a landing on defended beaches after 1 November.[17]

By a curious coincidence (one that appeared too good to be true and probably was), the invasion plans called for a command and communications exercise (BOATHOOK) to be carried out in early November. Thus on 27 October the headquarters ship HMS *Tyne* sailed from Malta with Royal Navy and Air Force commanders on board. The following day French naval units sailed from North

African ports. On 29 October the Israelis began their Sinai offensive. The British carrier task force left Malta for BOATHOOK with destroyer and cruiser escorts, and more cruisers and destroyers sailed from Aden toward the Gulf of Suez. All naval units likely to be involved were thus assembled in the war zone by 30 October. Unknown to the various combatants, all of this activity was carefully monitored and photographed by the unseen U-2s.[18]

Hostilities began at 5:00 PM on 29 October when 395 Israeli paratroopers landed just east of the strategic Mitla Pass. The promised Anglo-French ultimatum was delivered to the Israeli and Egyptian governments on the 30th. Accusations of collusion were already bedeviling the British, despite Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd's flat denial. Israel immediately accepted the (previously agreed upon) *diktat,* which, since the Sinai Peninsula was at the time Egyptian territory, meant they could advance some one hundred miles to positions only ten miles east of the canal. Nasser, for the same reason, rejected it out of hand. The British and French went to war, the latter with much more conviction than the former.[19]

Already bedeviled by confused strategic goals, MUSKETEER suffered from three related tactical constraints. The first was Prime Minister Eden's obsession with maintaining the fiction that the allied armada would be landing in Egypt solely to separate the Israelis and Egyptians. Second, and because of this, the convoy that would bring the main body of the landing force from Malta could not be loaded, let alone sailed, until the ultimatum had expired and been rejected. The third constraint was the speed of the convoy; although even the slowest vessels could make eight knots, the passage was planned for six and a half knots, to allow for possible bad weather and the mechanical problems likely with ships only recently taken out of reserve, meaning that a week would elapse before it could arrive off Port Said. Although diplomatic negotiations had provided just enough time to assemble and train the troops, ships, and aircraft deemed necessary by the British, the French clearly feared that the preparations were overdone and that London's ponderous time schedule was likely to result in the failure of the operation.[20]

The campaign began with surface actions. During the night of 31 October the cruiser *Newfoundland* encountered the Egyptian frigate *Domiat* in the Red Sea. The Egyptian captain ignored an order to heave to, and *Newfoundland* opened fire at less than a mile. *Domiat* bravely returned fire until incapacitated, after which it was rammed and sunk by *Newfoundland*'s escorting destroyer. Only sixty-nine of the *Domiat*'s crew were rescued. The same evening a series of confused actions took place off the Israeli port of Haifa. As the midnight deadline of the ultimatum approached, the Egyptian frigate *Ibrahim El-Awal* was able to approach within five miles of the Israeli coast and open fire. Israeli security forces had assumed that the ship was part of an American flotilla that had been cleared

into Haifa to evacuate American nationals. Fortuitously, a small French squadron was in Haifa for refueling. One of these units, the destroyer *Kersaint,* opened fire on the Egyptians, removing any doubt as to whose side the French were on but causing little damage. Soon after, a small force of Israeli ships approaching from seaward also attacked the Egyptian vessel, assisted by a pair of Israeli air force jet fighters. Given the assembled firepower it is not surprising that the *Ibrahim El-Awal* surrendered, allowing an Israeli boarding party to bring it into port. (After repairs it was given the name *Haifa* and sent back to sea under the Israeli flag.) On 1 November, as the Israelis crossed from Gaza into Egypt, the French cruiser *Georges Leygues* bombarded Egyptian positions around the border town of Rafah, but without notable success.[21]

The remaining time before the arrival of the invasion fleet, expected on 6 November, was occupied by a sustained air offensive against Egyptian military targets, designed to soften up defenses and reduce the population's will to resist. Phase I of the air offensive began at dusk on 31 October and was intended to eliminate any threat from the Egyptian air force. After rather ineffective night attacks by Cyprus- and Malta-based RAF heavy and medium bombers, naval and RAF ground-attack aircraft attacked Egyptian airfields, concentrating on runways and parked aircraft. Great effort was made to avoid damage to civilians, and it became evident early in the campaign that under such constraints medium- and high-level bombing was ineffective against small military targets. Nearly all the meaningful Phase I damage was achieved by low-level ground-attack aircraft using bombs and rockets. Naval aircraft performed the bulk of this work, since RAF fighters operating out of Cyprus carried a reduced weapon load and even so could only spend some fifteen minutes over their targets. Eight Sea Venoms operating at night destroyed six MiGs on the ground outside Cairo. As the attacks began the Egyptian air force began evacuating its bomber force to airfields in the south of Egypt or to friendly Arab countries. Egyptian antiaircraft fire was light and inaccurate, and the few fighters that got off the ground avoided combat. By dusk on 2 November the Egyptian air force had been effectively neutralized. Flight to safety proved illusory: on 4 November French F84s destroyed thirteen out of fourteen Il-28s that had taken refuge at Luxor, some 350 miles south of Port Said.[22]

Phase II of the air offensive (3 through 5 November) consisted of attacks on nonairfield military targets, such as stores, barracks, and military road and rail traffic south of Port Said. Of particular importance was the Gamil Bridge, which carried the only road linking Port Said with its hinterland. Because of poor intelligence (what was thought to be a swing bridge was actually a causeway for much of its length) twenty-seven bombing sorties were required to render it impassable (the British carriers were close enough to the target, however, to permit

returning aircrews to advise changes in bombing technique). Heavy and accurate flak protected the bridge, causing the loss of one Wyvern. Destruction was finally achieved by a low-level "skip-bombing" attack by eight Seahawks, each carrying two five-hundred-pound bombs. High priority was also given to preventing the Egyptian blockship *Akka,* which was moored nearby, from obstructing the canal. Two attacks were unsuccessful, giving the Egyptians time to tow the ship into place and scuttle it, together with another forty-seven concrete-filled ships, effectively closing the waterway. The Syrian army then destroyed pumping stations on the Western-owned Iraqi Petroleum Company pipeline. As Hugh Thomas has pointed out, the Anglo-French action thus precipitated what the two governments had most feared from Nasser's nationalization, an interruption in the flow of oil.[23]

The U.S. Sixth Fleet had been ordered to the area in order to protect the evacuation of American nationals, and its commander, Admiral Brown, was to insist afterward that that was all he did. However, early in the morning of 4 November the carrier *Coral Sea* passed through the middle of the British task group. The British admiral asked his American counterpart to clear the area. The latter refused but signaled Washington, "Whose side am I on?" Admiral Burke replied, "Take no guff from anyone." Further, American submarines and aircraft created problems for Anglo-French air and underwater defenses, and risk of an international incident remained high. The Egyptian MiG-15s, although less of a threat than previously feared, remained of considerable concern to French and British pilots, especially since U.S. Navy swept-wing F9Fs, easily confused with the MiGs, were reported to be making "attacking" passes at allied formations. Flag Officer Aircraft Carriers believed that the Sixth Fleet was deliberately obstructing his operations; its adjacent air activities rendered his air-warning radar surveillance virtually useless.

Fortunately, both sides showed restraint, although, as the allied commander in chief, Vice Adm. M. Richmond, later reported, "The danger of shooting down an American aircraft with its international repercussions was ever present." Later Admiral Burke vividly recalled what the international repercussions could have been. When asked by Dulles whether the Sixth Fleet could halt the operation, Burke responded, "Mr. Secretary, we can stop them, but we will blast hell out of them." A French attack on an Egyptian PT boat off Alexandria brought a quick rejoinder from the British command that American ships were present in the harbor and no attacks should be made until they were well clear. The problem of the Sixth Fleet became the subject of "polite signals" between the local British and American commanders, and it was a great relief when the evacuation was completed and the latter withdrew, with some two thousand American civilians.[24]

It is fairly clear that Washington wanted to stop, or at least slow down, the allied operation but was uncertain what course to adopt if diplomacy failed. But there may have been a further consideration driving the U.S. Navy's actions. Ever since the Declaration of Independence in 1776, freedom of the seas had been a basic element of American diplomacy and a constant source of friction with the British, who had long insisted on their right when at war to stop and search any ship, belligerent or neutral. The War of 1812 had been fought largely over this issue and had done little to settle it. It was Germany's resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare in 1916 that had brought the United States into World War I in 1917, and freedom of navigation had been an essential component of President Woodrow Wilson's "fourteen points." On this issue Washington recognized no exceptions: "We would as soon fight the British as the Germans," wrote Adm. William Benson, the first Chief of Naval Operations (1915–19). Each of these actions, as with countless more over the years, was taken to demonstrate that Washington would not accept any abridgment of its fundamental maritime rights. Although Admiral Brown's instructions do not appear to reflect this policy directly, it is fair to assume that President Eisenhower was unwilling to allow the Anglo-French action (of which he strongly disapproved) to set a precedent contravening rights fought for over the previous two centuries. As noted earlier, Admiral Burke would have been firmly behind him.[25]

Not surprisingly, the Anglo-French-Israeli attacks on Egypt had produced a keen negative reaction around the world. The British Commonwealth nations, other than Australia and New Zealand, were strongly opposed, while British public opinion, fairly supportive of tough action the previous summer, was by now bitterly divided. Debate in the House of Commons became so acrimonious that the speaker had to suspend a session, for the first time in twenty years. Eden was paying the price for going to war without keeping the parliamentary opposition fully informed, an unprecedented action. Among the invasion forces, there was considerable resentment toward the opposition, which, it was felt, should be supporting those at risk. Britain's armed forces, like America's before Vietnam, were unused to military action opposed by much of the civilian population. Only the French and the Israelis appeared united and untroubled.[26]

In Washington, President Eisenhower was furious at what he perceived as an Anglo-French double cross, given the fact that the Tripartite Declaration required both Britain and France to come to Egypt's aid if attacked by Israel. In New York, on 30 October, the British and French added fuel to the president's anger by vetoing a U.S. resolution in the United Nations Security Council calling for a cease-fire. Two days later the United States took a similar resolution to the veto-proof General Assembly, where it passed by an overwhelming majority, as did a plan for the UN to occupy the canal in place of the British and French.[27]

The Soviet Union added a further political complication, attempting to use the crisis to distract attention from its brutal behavior in Hungary, where, while the Anglo-French invasion was proceeding, Moscow was using its troops to overturn a short-lived rebellion against Soviet domination. The premier, Nikolai Bulganin, threatened Britain and France with "rocket weapons" and suggested that the U.S. and Soviet militaries join forces to protect Egypt, an offer that was summarily rejected.[28]

45 Commando leaves HMS *Theseus*. Imperial War Museum, by permission

Beset by political opposition at home and abroad, Eden was beginning to show signs of the breakdown that would eventually cost him his job. Disapproval also came from the professional head of the Royal Navy, Adm. Lord Louis Mountbatten, a cousin of the queen with considerable political influence. Mountbatten felt that the operation was both morally and militarily wrong and that the adverse political impact of the impending invasion had been poorly thought through. Most importantly, he felt that the British, if successful, would have to occupy the Canal Zone for a considerable period of time, at significant cost and with a serious impact on their other global responsibilities. He attempted to resign but was overruled by his civilian superior in the Admiralty. Mountbatten made a final and extraordinary telephone call to Eden, appealing to him to turn back the assault convoy before it was too late. Eden said no and hung up the phone.[29]

Meanwhile, the assault force steamed on, still due to arrive off Port Said on 6 November. The French, desperate to move before the tide of international opinion overwhelmed their already precarious diplomatic position, urged that the landings be accelerated. The British reluctantly agreed that a parachute drop, originally planned to precede landings on the 6th, would instead take place on the 5th. Awkwardly, however, Israel had by then captured all its objectives and wanted to obey the UN cease-fire resolution, thus removing any rationale for further Anglo-French action. The allies managed to persuade Tel Aviv to attach sufficient conditions to its cease-fire acceptance that it could not become effective immediately. The landings would go ahead.[30]

At dawn on 5 November, a small force of six hundred British and five hundred French paratroopers descended on Port Said, landing four miles west and a mile south of the town, respectively. The risks they ran were considerable, since there was no way in which they could be given significant assistance for the next twenty-four hours. Historian H. P. Willmott later noted of this event that the British paratroopers proved "better than their equipment," while the French operation was a "model of how an airborne operation should be carried out." The drop was successful, largely due to the effective support provided throughout the day by naval aircraft directed by air contact teams dropped with the paratroopers; "cab ranks" of Seahawks and Corsairs were available to be called in as needed. There were never less than twelve aircraft patrolling above the British troops, plus six Corsairs for the French. Missions could be effectively planned, on a minute-by-minute basis. The British eastward advance was slowed down on the beach road by an old coast guard barracks that had been turned into an Egyptian strongpoint. The structure, which had proved impervious to Seahawk rocket attacks, was quickly devastated by thousand- and five-hundred-pound bombs placed with great precision by Wyverns of *Eagle*'s 830 Squadron. While this was happening, French paratroopers, well-trained veterans of colonial wars unburdened by their ally's inhibitions about civilian casualties, were blasting their way northward. Allied paratroopers emphasized later that their rapid advance and low casualty rate would have been impossible without naval air support.[31]

The main assault force arrived on time on 6 November and took up position five miles out to sea. The passage in to Port Said had already been swept for contact and magnetic mines by an Anglo-French minesweeping force. Preliminary bombing runs against the landing beaches were followed at dawn by naval gunfire. Initially all naval bombardment had been vetoed by Downing Street, due to concern about civilian casualties. However, the British task force commander determined that what he was about to deliver was "support fire," not "bombardment," and decided to go ahead. Last-minute instructions from Downing Street limited the fire to no greater than 4.5-inch caliber, lasting no

longer than an hour. This restriction eliminated from the invasion force the main batteries of the French battleship *Jean Bart* and the British cruisers *Jamaica* and *Ceylon*. In his after-action report the invasion fleet commander noted how "the development of modern communications, though intrinsically of great value, is inclined to produce a number of last-minute queries and instructions from London which cannot fail to upset the Command on the spot."[32]

Warship fire ceased when naval aircraft started strafing the beaches, the air attack continuing until a few minutes before the arrival of the first assault craft. Royal Marines of 42 Commando went over the beaches at 6:15 AM, just to the west of the canal, followed by tanks of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment. By 9:30 they both had reached their first objective south of the town, supported by air strikes. By noon they had linked up with the French paratroops, who had been well supported by their Corsairs. Forty Commando, on 42's right, advanced south to link up with British paratroopers moving in from the west. An incident in which Royal Navy aircraft accidentally attacked a British commando unit, inflicting considerable casualties, evidenced the risks inherent in providing close air support in built-up areas.[33]

Forty-five Commando, held in reserve, came in an hour after 40 Commando in order to clean up the port area. In a battlefield "first," this commando was brought in by a mixed collection of twenty-two RAF and Navy helicopters, which in an hour and a half brought ashore 415 men and seven tons of stores. None of the aircraft had been designed for the purpose, but the successful operation vindicated Mountbatten's long-held belief in the use of helicopters in battle. Having landed the commando brigades and related supplies, the helicopters turned their attention to evacuating the wounded out to *Ocean* and *Theseus*. On 7 November the weather deteriorated; strong winds and heavy seas over the next few days would have made landings over the beaches impossible. Since *Eagle*'s second catapult had failed a day earlier, rendering the ship incapable of flying operations, the Royal Navy's ability to complete its mission on time owed much to good fortune.[34]

The allied carrier force made 1,616 sorties during MUSKETEER, of which 1,164 were offensive, 359 combat air patrols, and the remainder for reconnaissance and transport. The proportion of defensive sorties dropped to under 20 percent in later days as the Egyptian air force was seen to represent less of a threat. Seahawk and Sea Venom aircraft, which undertook the bulk of the operations, averaged 2.8 sorties per day, compared with the 1.4 per day by RAF ground-attack aircraft. Naval aircraft flew two hundred "cab rank" sorties in support of the parachute operations on 5 November. Two Seahawks, two Wyverns, and one Corsair were lost due to enemy action. The Corsair pilot was killed, as was the pilot of a Seahawk involved in a deck landing accident. These were the

only naval losses. Total allied casualties were twenty-six killed and 129 wounded.[35]

The Anglo-French forces now on the ground were aware of the possibility of a cease-fire and made every effort to move as far south along the canal as possible. However, the final outcome of the battle was being decided not by the military or by the politicians but by anonymous central bankers in capitals as far flung as Washington, New Delhi, and Beijing.[36]

In 1956 the pound sterling was the currency most widely used in world trade. It was also an important reserve currency, particularly with respect to the British Commonwealth and those countries that did not wish to trust their financial assets to Washington. Willingness to hold sterling was very much a matter of trust, loss of which could well precipitate major sales by central banks and speculators. This is what happened in November 1956: for London to maintain trust required holding the prevailing sterling dollar parity, and doing so in the face of massive selling pressure required aggressive use of Britain's own reserves, which had begun to hemorrhage. In theory the reserves could be replenished from Britain's balances with the International Monetary Fund, but this would require American approval, and the Eisenhower administration made it clear that such would not be given until all Anglo-French troops were withdrawn from Egypt. Astonishingly, this development took the British by surprise; the French, less trusting of Washington, had prudently arranged a stand-by credit three weeks before the invasion. Eden attempted to bargain for time but with little success; faced with the possibility of national bankruptcy, he had no choice but to agree to a cease-fire. The French reluctantly went along. It was all over.[37]

Arguably Suez represents a seminal turning point in European history. Eden resigned and was replaced by the chancellor of the exchequer, Harold Macmillan, who took immediate steps to repair the "special relationship" with Washington. Britain would never again conduct a significant foreign policy initiative without at least token American support. Although the British Empire suffered a gradual decline throughout most of the twentieth century, many would say that Suez marked its end. As historian Niall Ferguson argued in his account of the Suez affair, "It was at the Bank of England that the Empire was effectively lost." In France, Suez led to further military disenchantment with the Fourth Republic, the soldiers' revolt, the recall of Charles de Gaulle, and the creation of the Fifth Republic. France turned itself toward Europe and the Treaty of Rome—and, some might say, would never again trust America.[38]

More generally, Arab nationalism remains a potent force in the world. Egypt continues to own the canal, which still seems to work, although its importance to world trade is vastly diminished. The Middle East remains a danger to world

stability, although Egypt and Israel do have a peace treaty. Wars of choice remain highly controversial.

Fifty years have gone by, yet it appears that some of the lessons of Suez still require relearning. Clearly defined political goals, well supported domestically and well communicated to the military, are arguably more important in wars of choice than they are in wars of national survival. Smaller powers should not assume that long-standing friendship with a great power provides them with a military blank check. The political wisdom of high-ranking generals and admirals may possibly exceed the military acumen of their constitutional masters; in any event, when the question is whether or not to go to war, the senior commanders should be listened to with care. Sea-borne expeditions take time, and the longer the time the more opportunity for the voices of those demanding peace to drown out the voices of those arguing for force, and the more opportunity for weather to change for the worse—something even the best-organized military cannot control. Shore bases continue hostages to political fortune, while floating airfields still retain their freedom of action. Task force commanders today must expect political micromanagement to an extent unimaginable by Nelson, Jellicoe, or Halsey. An expeditionary force must go in equipped with either an exit strategy or an occupation strategy; in small wars winning is often deceptively easy—what you do after you win is more difficult; Mountbatten was right, no one had thought about what to do with a defeated Egypt and the associated cost. And finally, debtor nations that value their currency's reserve asset status must be very, very, careful when they choose to go to war.[39]

NOTES

This article is based on a paper presented at the Annapolis Naval History Symposium "Expeditionary Warfare: America's Way of War" at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, 7–8 April 2005.

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2. Thomas, *Suez,* p. 114; Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson, the Story of Suez* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967), p. 34; *Times* (London), lead editorial, 1 August 1956; Scott Lucas, *Britain and Suez: The Lion's Last Roar* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester Univ. Press, 1996), p. 53.
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4. Chester L. Cooper, *The Lion's Last Roar: Suez, 1956* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), pp. 63,

80; Philip Alphonse Dur, *The Sixth Fleet: A Case Study of Institutionalized Naval Presence, 1946–1958* (unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1975); Jan Morris, *Fisher's Face; or, Getting to Know the Admiral* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 136.

5. Nutting, *No End of a Lesson,* pp. 77–78; Thomas, *Suez,* pp. 64, 83, 86–87; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident,* p. 187.

6. There are several accounts of this meeting, including a summary in FRUS, p. 776, but the account in Kyle, *Suez,* pp. 315–31 and app. A, is the most recent and thus probably the most complete. Also Kennett Love, *Suez: The Twice Fought War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 461–63.

7. Air Marshall D. H. F. Barnett, *Report of the Air Task Force Commander on Operation Musketeer, November 27, 1956* [hereafter Air Task Force Report], TNA, PRO, p. 2; Lt. Cdr. Roy Everleigh, RN, quoted in Brian Cull, David Nicolle, and Shlomo Aloni, *Wings over Suez: Air Operations during the Sinai and Suez Wars of 1956* (London: Grub Street, 1996), p. 169; Love, *Suez,* p. 449; Dyan comment in Thomas, *Suez,* p. 107.

8. Michael R. Beschloss, *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), pp. 137–38; Leonard Mosely, *Dulles* (New York: Dell, 1978), p. 446.

9. See note 39.

10. Thomas, *Suez,* p. 73; Kyle, *Suez,* pp. 168–69; Naval Report, p. 69.

11. Thomas, *Suez,* p. 72. See Norman Friedman, *British Carrier Aviation: The Evolution of the Ships and Their Aircraft* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989), for technical descriptions of contemporary British carriers. Also Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez* (New York: Linden/Simon and Schuster, 1981), p. 289; Naval Report, pp. 40–43, 69–72.

12. *Carrier Operations in Support of Operation Musketeer*, *1959,* ADM 1/27051 [hereafter Carrier Operations], The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO), p. 18; Naval Report, pp. 70, 72.

13. Robert Henriques, *A Hundred Hours to Suez: The Epic Story of Israel's Smashing Victory in the First Sinai Campaign* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1957), pp. 180–81; Carrier Operations, pp. 19, 43.

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15. Carrier Operations, pp. 19, 43; Cull, Nicolle, and Aloni, *Wings over Suez,* pp. 123, 169; FRUS, p. 939.

16. Naval Report 24; Terrence Robertson, *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy* (New York: Athenaeum, 1965), pp. 76–77; Gen. Sir William Jackson and Field Marshal Lord Bramall, *The Chiefs: The Story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff* (London: Brassey's, 1992), p. 298.

17. Naval Report, pp. 29–30, 68; André Beaufre, *The Suez Expedition 1956* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 64; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident,* pp. 188–89; Kyle, *Suez,* p. 340.

18. Naval Report, pp. 30, 171–72; Beschloss, *Mayday,* p. 137.

19. *Times* (London), 31 October 1956, 1 and 2 November 1956; Thomas, *Suez,* p. 130; Beaufre, *Suez Expedition 1956,* p. 82.

20. Naval Report, p. 173; H. P. Willmott, "The Suez Fiasco," in *War in Peace, Conventional and Guerilla Warfare since 1945*, ed. Robert Thompson (London: Orbis, 1981), p. 93; Kyle, *Suez,* p. 341.

21. Kyle, *Suez,* pp. 409–10, 413; Love, *Suez,* pp. 512–13; Henriques, *Hundred Hours to Suez,* pp. 184–88; Cull, Nicolle, and Aloni, *Wings over Suez,* pp. 125–27; Naval Report, p. 173.

22. Grove, *Vanguard to Trident,* p. 192; Carrier Operations, pp. 44–47, 93; Naval Report, pp. 73–74, 78, 173.

23. Naval Report, pp. 7, 74–78; Thomas, *Suez,* p. 134; Neff, *Warriors at Suez,* p. 398; Cull, Nicolle, and Aloni, *Wings over Suez,* p. 271.

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28. *New York Times,* 23, 25, 27 October, 2, 4 November 1956; Gorst and Johnman, *Suez Crisis,* p. 123.

29. Nutting, *No End of a Lesson,* p. 165; Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs,* p. 298; Grove, *Vanguard to Trident,* p. 193; "File on the Suez Affair of 1956," notes written in 1966, Mountbatten Papers, Univ. of Southampton Archives, MBI/N106, paper 3; Neff, *Warriors at Suez,* p. 400.

30. Thomas, *Suez,* p. 141; Beaufre, *Suez Expedition 1956,* pp. 89, 90.

31. Willmott, "The Suez Fiasco," p. 94; Carrier Report, p. 75; R. W. Rathbun [Maj., USMC], "Operation Musketeer: A Military Success Ends in Political Failure," paper delivered at War since 1945 Seminar, Quantico, Virginia, 1984, pp. 63–66; Naval Report, p. 75.

32. Grove, *Vanguard to Trident,* p. 191; Thomas, *Suez,* p. 147; Naval Report, pp. 1, 75–76, 98–99; Neff, *Warriors at Suez,* p. 407.

33. Kyle, *Suez,* p. 462; Willmott, "The Suez Fiasco," p. 96; Carrier Report, p. 62; Naval Report, p. 76.

34. Carrier Report, p. 61; Hackett, *Fly Navy,* p. 75; Air Task Force Report, p. 7; Gen. Sir Charles Keightley, *London Gazette,* 10 September 1957 (supplement), p. 5334; Naval Report, pp. 81, 178.

35. Admiralty Dept. of Operational Research, report, ADM 1/27051, 10 July 1958, pp. 2–4; Carrier Report, pp. 36, 129; Love, *Suez,* p. 635.

36. Willmott, "The Suez Fiasco," p. 97.

37. For an excellent description of the Suez-related sterling crisis see Kunz, *Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis,* esp. pp. 131–45. I am indebted to Professor Paul Kennedy of Yale University for drawing my attention to this work. See also Cooper, *Lion's Last Roar,* p. 192, and Thomas, *Suez,* p. 149.

38. Beaufre, *Suez Expedition 1956,* p. 14; Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956–1958* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 259; Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 347; Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 298–99; Alistair Horne, *La Belle France: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 2005), pp. 387–88, 393–96, 397–404; Cooper, *Lion's Last Roar,* pp. 269, 275; *New York Times,* 13 May 1958. For a general review of the "special relationship," see William Hopkinson, *The Atlantic Crises: Britain, Europe and Parting from the United States,* Newport Paper 23 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2005), available at www.nwc.navy.mil/press/npapers/np23/NP23.pdf.

39. Horatio Nelson: legendary British admiral, victor at Trafalgar; Adm. Sir John Jellicoe: commanded the British Grand Fleet at Jutland; Adm. Sir Andrew Cunningham: commanded the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, 1939–42; Adm. William ("Bull") Frederick Halsey, Jr.: commanded the U.S. Third Fleet in the Pacific at the end of World War II.