

Flight Over Sinai Deserts Witness to Egypt's Disaster

By Alfred Friendly Washington Post Foreign Service

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SHARM EL SHEIKH, Egypt, June 10—Under the eyes of the first visitors permitted to enter Sharm el Sheikh, an Israeli merchant ship steamed peacefully through the Strait of Tiran, which President Nasser of Egypt blockaded three weeks ago—provoking a six-day war.

Israel also put on view for reporters the panorama of Egyptian defeat. It was the western Sinai, scene of colossal destruction of Egypt's army, with the blackened carcasses of 500 trucks

and 50 tanks stretching bumper to bumper for four miles through the Mitla Pass.

Four American news reporters and a few European journalists saw the theater of war and its peaceful climax at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba from a plane flying less than 50 feet above the ground for most of the day-long trip.

What we saw below us and at our stops, validated beyond doubt Israel's claims of Egyptian planes and armor destroyed.

Flying over one of the three main

roads through the desert, I counted at least 200 shattered Egyptian tanks.

At each of three airfields viewed in the middle of the Sinai Desert, an average of 20 planes, mostly Migs, presented their bare bones and ashes to the sizzling sand.

All the mechanized equipment, guns and armor lying about was of Soviet manufacture.

A reporter's running notes of a tour over the cemetery of Egypt's hopes tells a small part of the story:

10 a.m. Off at wave top level down Tel Aviv's glittering waterfront. Every-

one in the city appears to be on the beaches or in the water this Sabbath morning.

10:15 a.m. Except for the thoroughly smashed radar station, the city of Gaza seems untouched. The people are again in the streets, the houses of the huge refugee settlement stand in neat rows. Further to the south, along the beach, the grass and reed-thatched huts come into sight, many with white flags hoisted on poles.

10:30 a.m. Over the road from Rafa, at the bottom of the Gaza Strip, to El Arish, front headquarters which the

Israelis reached by noon the first day of the war.

The navigator points out the sights. Until two weeks ago he was flying the New York-Tel Aviv run for El Al Airlines, at a leisurely maximum of 70 hours a month. In the last five days he has been in the air 80 hours, mostly ferrying food and water to the forces in the desert and evacuating the wounded.

Smashed and burned trucks begin to appear below, dotting the road as grisly milestones. Enough wheels there

to make a traffic jam in Moscow. New tanks, a couple seemingly untouched.

More and more materiel, mostly guns and trucks, with the camouflage nets never removed. Whole cities of Egyptian tents, unstruck.

11 a.m. Over El Arish, which looks unscathed, again except for the radar stations. But the air field looks like a junkyard. As far as can be seen, and we circled from 30 feet, there were no random shots. The Israeli planes seemed to have wasted no rockets,

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Flight Over Sinai Reveals Extent of Egypt's Disaster

making precise hits in each revampment.

Some bombing, too, however, as the black spots on the runways testified. They are the repairs the Israelis have made to put the field back in operation for their own use.

Below is a Mig, still coupled by a hose to an equally-ruined fuel truck.

11:30 a.m. The made-in-Russia, destroyed-in-Sinai cadavers on the road below, leading southward to Jebel Lidni, the second day target of the central Israeli thrust, grow more abundant, and the proportion of dead tanks to transport vehicles increases.

11:45 a.m. We land at Jebel Lidni, between the blackened revampments on each side, each Mig lying in its open coffin, not pretty to look at. No craters, no random destruction, just direct hits. But the craftsmen who made dummy planes which such loving care need not be unhappy. Their products, placed around the field, are as good as new. The Israeli airmen didn't touch them.

Visit Headquarters

We climb into a truck for a 20-minute drive through the buildings that were the Egyptians' Sinai headquarters and now serve the same purpose for the victors.

Signs of a sudden assault and a hurried retreat are everywhere. Piles of bedding, mess equipment, personal belongings are everywhere. A belt of shells, half unused, hangs from the breach of a 17-pounder anti-tank gun.

But mostly shoes. Heaps of shoes. Shoes, the hallmark of Egyptian defeat in Sinai in this war and the one in 1956. The photographers in our party have a field day.

A sudden, blessedly brief, stench passes across our speeding truck. To the west, five bodies, rotting in the sun. Then a couple more. Then one, bleated, on the right.

12:10 a.m. Four generals, including Joshua Gabish, chief of the southern command, meet with us. Gabish tells us in French: "We have finished the war in four days, from Israel to the Canal. We beat seven divisions, two of them armored. I believe we have knocked out 500 tanks and we have engaged several tens of thousands of soldiers. You will see for yourself."

The commander of one of the task

forces can hardly speak above a whisper, having shouted in the field telephones for five days. He says:

"We haven't talked very much. Our friends on the other side of the Canal, they talk a lot. Instead we have tried to show through acts and deeds what we can do when our country is threatened.

"I know a little bit about military history and I have never before heard of such a thing as our tank crews did, not to mention our pilots. In 50 hours we've smashed the enemy in Sinai.

"Everything depended on the troops. They had the spirit. All we needed was one word, 'Go.' They got it. Then there was only one word, 'Stop,' that prevented them from going on to the other side of the canal.

"I have just come back from visiting the Canal area. I have never seen anything like it."

Brigadier Generals

A reporter asks the four officers their rank. All are brigadier generals.

"We have only one major general, the Chief of Staff," says one. "We are a small country, you know. Of course, in Egypt they have Field Marshals and all that."

1 p.m. On the way back to the airfield we looked at the big T-55 tanks, drilled from the front through its four inches of steel by a Centurion 105 mm. The tank is so fresh from Russia as still to be painted forest green, for use in Europe, instead of the ochre suitable for the desert.

An Israeli officer looks at the 14 other tanks, mostly light T-34s, drawn up almost in a straight line on the other side. Trucks, upside down, on their side, plunged forward on their nose, on both sides of the road.

Aloft again, but not very much so — the pilot flies so close to the dunes that we rise and fall with their contours.

More Wreckage

What we saw before was mere prologue on the way to the Suez Canal. Above the road leading to Ismalia, we see what were two convoys, each with 50 to 75 burned-out vehicles. The Israelis, whose trucks and jeeps are now using the roads, have hauled the hulks to the side, where they lie grotesquely. Shattered tanks, occasionally two or

three together, but mostly at intervals of a few hundred yards on the sides of the road or back in the dunes.

1:20 p.m. We are flying south, a few miles to the east of the Suez Canal. The ship channel lies on our right, peaceful, vast and empty.

1:50 p.m. We swing back east through Milla Pass. The destruction is staggering.

The natural scene is dramatic enough. The roads in the sand dunes drop into a canyon with sheer cliffs on each side, reminiscent of southern Utah or New Mexico. It was the scene of the most fierce battle of the 1948 war.

Now, for four miles, it stretches like an incinerated snake. I estimate one vehicle to every ten yards. Oil and ashes cover every inch.

Trap Sprung

Israeli aircraft, we are told, blanketed one end of the pass with bombs while Israeli tanks drove through from the other. The ruins are two days old.

3:30 p.m. We have been flying what seems an endless trip, along the shoreline of the Sinai Peninsula. The oil fields of Radis and Dina seem untouched and deserted, the drilling rigs motionless, like ostriches with their beaks tethered close to the ground.

But at Ras-Sudar, a farm of six tanks is blazing furiously, flames sending up a greasy plume of smoke that stretches down the peninsula at least 10 miles. The Israeli officers above say the Egyptians sabotaged it before they pulled out.

3:55 p.m. Sharm el Sheikh, an irregular hook of flatland just around the corner from the southernmost point of Sinai, comes into view, with its United Nations buildings and Egyptian anti-aircraft guns, tents and shacks still in place. Israeli troops throng below.

Col. Ram Ron, Israeli military attaché in Washington from 1963 to 1966, and Col. Asher Levy (senior) led the successful assault on the place against the Egyptians in 1956. Ron was its commander for 18 months, until he handed it over to the U.N. Emergency Force in 1957.

"I told the Danes," he recounts, "to keep the Strait of Tiran open. You don't," I said, "we'll be back." Now he is back.