Israeli Troops Quickly Cut Off Gaza Strip From Egypt

By Alfred Friendly
Washington Post Foreign Service

THE GAZA FRONTIER, Egypt by capturing its south less than two miles away what June 5—in a swift initial military success in a secondary village of Khan Yunis.

I was among reporters who cut off the Gaza Strip from a vantage point on border kibbutzim (co-operative farm settlements) was directed from the east against the hill of Ali Mun tar, a spot made famous by two British assaults, both repulsed, 1917. The hill is a commanding position above Gaza City.

Frequent Bursts

Apparently from Israeli forces working northward from Khan Yunis, heavier mortar bursts were to be seen on Ali Mun tar. Bursts hit every minute or two during the afternoon, kicking up clouds of dust and seemingly starting fires.

The area behind the border settlements was studded with troops and armor, tucked away under the double and triple rows of eucalyptus trees that line most Israel roads long since planted for the purpose of concealment.

At the kibbutz of Nahal Oz, barely a mile from the border, the officer commanding that sector, a young lieutenant colonel who carried himself as if the day's events were routine, took us to a high spot from which a clear view of the softening-up operation was to be had across fields of ripened grain.

He said that about 8 a.m., Monday, Egyptian mortar fire, apparently trying to get the range, began to fall on the kibbutz from the Egyptian side was butz. The alert was sounded also laid down at the kibbutz and non-fighting personnel of of Kefar Aza. Overshooting, the settlement took to their the missiles set fire to several acres of ripe grain fields a

The bombardment, he said, few hundred yards beyond the came from light and heavy center of the settlement. The mortar and shelling. A few smell of fresh smoke still hours later, the Israeli response began and the Egyptian firing ceased.

As reporters arrived, a bulldozer was hauling out the carcass of the last of 20 cows killed by shots into one of the settlement's barns. There were no human casualties, the officer said.

Mortar Fire Heard

His recital of the events was punctuated by the sound of mortar fire nearby—first a sharp crack at the launching and, a few seconds later, the dull thud of the landing as it echoed from Ali Mun tar across the gentle valley. The only features on the landscape that intervened were the square blockhouses of the erstwhile U.N. Emergency Force, now evacuated on orders of Egyptian President Nasser.

There was no air action and there had been none. Clearly, both sides had better use for their planes far to the south, on the Sinai border cutting through the Negev Desert, where the heavy and doubtless decisive battles of this war are taking place.

Nahal Oz was the scene of an Egyptian terrorist attack last week, when mortar fire from the Egyptian side was}

Conflicting Reports

There were conflicting reports about the time of the first Egyptian shooting. The director of the kibbutz was reported to have given it as 8 a.m. However, three farmers to whom I spoke indicated that the firing began about 4 a.m., paused, and resumed at 8 a.m.

Language difficulties, plus the insistence of escort officers to get reporters quickly out of an area where continued military action had not been expected, prevented reconciling the divergent reports.

At about the same time Monday the sector reported that there had been Egyptian firing on two kibbutzim to the south, Kissufim and En Heshelousha. It was from that area that the successful Israeli thrusts at the key village of Khan Yunis must have been launched.

No reports of casualties were given for the two farm collectives, which lie about on the level of the bottom, or southern boundary of the Gaza Strip.