

TAC NEWS

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September - October 2002

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The Assaults on Abu Ageila Sinai - October & November 1956

Historians are always searching for turning points, those pivotal events that clearly delineate one era, one course, from another. Military history is full of these important episodes. Many are associated with technical developments, such as the Monitor and Merrimack in 1862, or the birth of armoured warfare at Cambrai in 1917. Certainly, the 1972 bombing of the Hanoi-Hai Phong Bridge with the first "smart bomb" was a turning point in modern military history.

In other cases, the crucible of the battlefield leads to a revolution. Few events have affected the development of the Israeli Defense Force more than the Battle of Abu Ageila, fought over four days in the autumn of 1956. Born in the infantry battles of the 1948 war, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) entered the 1956 war with a doctrine based on infantry units, loosely supported by armoured formations. Indeed, they only had two tank battalions when the conflict began. But their very hard fought struggle in the Sinai led to a complete re-thinking of their doctrine. In many respects, the Battle of Abu Ageila set the stage for the modernization that transformed the IDF into the fighting force that it is today.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In 1956, Egypt was led by President Gamel Abd al-Nassar. His nation's former colonial ties with England had worn thin. The refusal of the west to assist with certain internal projects, especially the construction of the Aswan Dam, had led to a rift. The Soviet Union was quick to step into the vacuum. As usual, huge arms purchases had begun to transform the Egyptian Army from one of surplus Allied equipment into the characteristic Warsaw Pact model of that stage of the Cold War.

As troubling as this might have been,

bigger issues were concerning the West. Nassar nationalized the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956. Ongoing negotiations proved futile. With an Egyptian stranglehold on commerce through the canal, England and France sought an opportunity to re-occupy the Canal Zone.

Israel was a willing partner. The resurgent Egypt seriously threatened the fledgling nation. With the canal closed, her only means of trading with the east was via Eilat (at the southern tip of Israel) through the Strait of Tiran, at the south end of the Gulf of Aqaba. Egyptian forces occupied the Sinai side at Sharm al-Sheik. Many Israeli's considered this a legitimate cause for war.

By October 1956, the three nations were in secret negotiations to cooperate against Egypt. Representatives of France and England promised to invade the Canal Zone, and supply air strikes, if the IDF would "provoke" an international incident. Israeli Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan, came up with the plan. A battalion of Israeli paratroopers would land near the canal. The Europeans would issue an ultimatum for all troops to leave the Canal Zone, and would threaten use of force to insure a free and open canal. Egypt would ignore them. Israel would free the Sinai threat to their border and trade routes. The Sevres Agreement, signed 24 October 1956, also promised significant arms sales from France to Israel.

The stage was set: operations were to commence 5 days later, on 29 October.

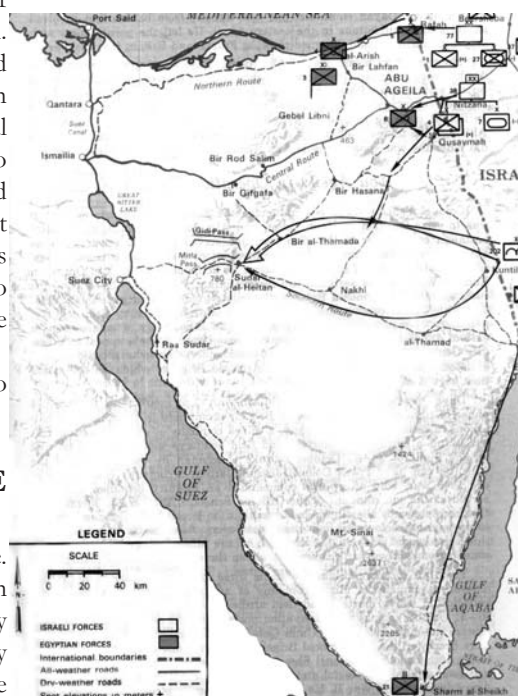
EGYPTIAN DEFENSE IN THE SINAI

The Sinai Peninsula is a rugged place. From the sea south about 25 km., it is open sand dunes. Next, a narrow band of relatively good country is bordered to the south by mountain ranges that extend all the way to the

Red Sea. The central region, offering the best tactical terrain, had the only all-season road from Israel to the Suez Canal. For 40-km west from the border with Israel, this area was flat and open. The first ridge, 25 to 30 meters high, was at Abu Ageila.

The Egyptian garrison of the area was the understrength Egyptian 6th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. Sami Yassa Boulous, a Coptic Christian. He had 2 infantry Bttns, a cavalry troop in Staghound ACs, 2 SPAT companies with a total of 22 Archers, and an artillery battalion with 16 x 25 pounders. The troops were well trained, and occupied extensive defensive positions covered by minefields and barbed wire. They were arrayed in a classic "hedge-hog" defense, with mutually supporting fields of fire. In all, they were well prepared for an assault.

ISRAELI PREPARATIONS:



U.S. Army Command & General Staff College Map

OPERATION KADESH

War plans for a possible assault into the Sinai had been in the works for years. Codenamed Operation Kadesh (the biblical launching place for Moses' march to the "promised land"), was to open with an airborne assault by a battalion from Lt. Col. Ariel Sharon's elite 202 Parachute Brigade landed at Mitla Pass late on 29 October. That night, elements of the IDF would cross the border into Sinai: 77th *Ugdab* (division) crossing at Rafah and advancing on the coast road toward al Arish; the 9th Infantry Brigade at Eilat south toward Sharm al-Sheik; and the rest of 202 Para to relieve their brothers at Mitla Pass. The main effort, however, was left to the 38th *Ugdab*, under Col. Yehuda Wallach. Lead elements were to brush aside the border guards around Qusaymah and head toward Abu Ageila.

The heart of Wallach's command consisted of 2 reserve infantry brigades, and the 7th Armoured Brigade, the IDF's only regular tank force. He also had 3 batteries of 25 pounders, a bttn of 120mm mortars, and a reserve of mechanized infantry. Following the breakout fights on the border, the 10th Reserve Infantry Brigade, under Colonel Shmuel Goder, would advance and take the ridge of Umm Qatef at Abu Ageila.

Though the 38th *Ugdab* had, on paper, an overwhelming superiority over the Egyptian defenders, Wallach's orders prevented his application of either mass or surprise. The timetable left lots of time to get the truck-borne infantrymen the 40 km. Wallach was to hold off the attacks at Umm Qatef until 48 hours after crossing the border. Additionally, Dayan had ordered that the armoured elements were not to be used until October 31st, a day after the infantry were to have begun their assault. The 7th Brigade was to be held available to streak to relieve the isolated forces at Mitla Pass.

Prior to the war, there had been a major doctrinal debate within the IDF. The "pro-infantry" proponents had held sway, led by the Chief of the General Staff, Moshe Dayan. He believed that Israeli infantry were superior to the potential Arab enemies, and that tanks were too expensive and mechanically unreliable to be trusted with the first wave of an assault. Not a scholar of military history, Dayan had not carefully studied the fighting of World War II. In his mind, tanks were best relegated to a support role. By both underestimating his opponent and focusing on tactical principles more based on Israel's limited military experience than on "modern" practices, Dayan's plan for Operation Kadesh was flawed.

INTO THE SINAI: 30 OCTOBER

At 1659 on 29 October 1956, Lt. Col. Raful Eitan led 395 paratroops and hit Mitla Pass. Within hours they had consolidated their positions: at the same time the 3000 remaining members of Sharon's 202 Para Brigade crossed into Sinai and headed to their relief.

Further north, after initial difficulties, Qusaymah fell to the Israelis on the morning of 30 October. Fearing a delay to the timetable, the local commander committed the 7th Armoured Brigade, contrary to orders. Egyptians who could elude the IDF followed their plans and withdrew to Abu Ageila. With the Israeli tankers already engaged, they followed up the retreating enemy. By early afternoon, an IDF mechanized bttn and a company of tanks was approaching Abu Ageila from the south.

Boulos immediately counterattacked with an infantry battalion. Egyptian AT fire destroyed 2 tanks and several AFVs. The Israeli spearhead pulled back to await the arrival of the 61st Mechanized Infantry Bttn. During the action, Col. Boulos was wounded and had to be medivaced to Cairo. Command passed to Col. Sa'ad Mutawalli.

Meanwhile, the IDF's 10th Infantry Brigade had crossed the border and advanced to just 9 km from Umm Qatef by 1700. There they prepared for a frontal assault.

As the sun set on 30 October, the Israelis had 3 forces poised to strike Abu Ageila: infantry from the east, a small mechanized force from the south, and a company of Shermans and a company of M3 halftrack infantry creeping north through Daika Pass. By dawn, after a tough night traversing the narrow defile, these companies were in position to attack the rear of the Egyptian defenses.

SINAI SNAFU: 31 OCTOBER

Coordination eluded the IDF. Radios failed. The little force in Daika Pass lost contact with Wallach. After daybreak they charged eastward, capturing the important crossroads. Then reports came in that Egyptian T34/85 and SU-100s were coming in on their left flank from Gebel Libni. This turned out to be incorrect, but without the ability to coordinate with the other IDF thrusts, they were forced to consolidate a defense around the crossroads and await support.

To the south, flanking Umm Qatef, an early morning advance was repulsed. Sources tell little of this action.

In the east, Goder's 10th Infantry Brigade had problems of its own. A reconnaissance of the heights of Umm Qatef persuaded Goder that a frontal assault in broad

daylight was impossible without armoured support, but the nearest tanks would not be available for hours. During this delay, Dayan appeared on the scene, and ordered an immediate attack. Bolstered with 10 halftracks, the dismounted infantry charged across the open fields into a divesting hail of fire. The Archers made quick work of the halftracks. The "luke-warm assault" melted away and withdrew.

Reorganization took 24 hours. The next assault on Umm Qatef occurred at nightfall on 31 October. One battalion of infantry was to assault each flank of the ridge simultaneously. Both got lost in the dark. Though one IDF platoon got into the southern end of the Egyptian defenses, and hand-to-hand fighting occurred, a counterattack swept the IDF back once again.

Dayan was disgusted. He replaced Godor. Tank and Mechanized units of the 37th Brigade were pulled from the Gaza Strip to renew the offensive on 1 November. Too impatient to await the arrival of the Shermans, the halftracks charged over the same field the 10th Brigade had crossed two days earlier, with the same dismal results. Umm Qatef was solidly in Egyptian hands.

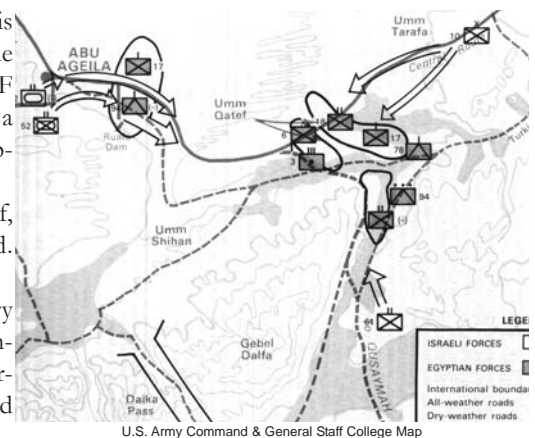
STRATEGIC VICTORY

By 2 November, the French and English Air Forces had been hammering Egyptian forces for several days. Desperate to concentrate assets on the Suez region, all Egyptian forces were ordered to fall back from the Sinai. Despite their stolid, professional defense, Mutawalli ordered his men to retreat. Lacking trucks, they walked. Tragically, many died of dehydration in the desert.

After action analysis led to major changes in Israeli doctrine. Never again would armour be relegated to a secondary role. The next time the IDF assaulted Abu Ageila, in June 1967, the mistakes of 1956 would not be repeated.

by Jim Moffet

31 October 1956 Assaults



Assault on Umm Qatef

Sinai - 31 October 1956

Anxiously behind schedule, mobile elements of the "Israeli Defense Force" (IDF) have been stalled by the unexpectedly stiff resistance of the Egyptian Army at the natural fortress of Abu Agiela. It's already Wednesday, and Sharon's Paratroopers have been at Mitla Pass for days without relief. The Israeli commander must take a desperate gamble, or Moesha Dayan will sack him, too! He must occupy "Umm Qatef" at the end of turn 20.

The Egyptian Army has had years to fortify Umm Qatef. Their men are well trained and eager to prove themselves. They must stop those damned Israeli's and earn the respect of the entire Arab world. They continue to occupy "Umm Qatef" and control the highway west.



Israelis

Elements, 38th *Ugdah*
Col. Yahuda WallachCohesion
17

Egyptians

6th Infantry Brigade
Colonel Sa'ad MutawalliCohesion
14

7th Armored Brigade - Colonel Uri Ben-Ari
 Brigade Headquarters: 1xGHQ(+1)/Truck, 1xM4A3 "Sherman"
 Recon Company (-): 2xJeep[R]
 82nd Armored Battalion(-) Lt. Col Avraham Adan:
 8xM4A3 "Sherman"
 52nd Mech Infantry Battalion(-):
 4xInfantry, 1xInfantry Support, 5xM3A1 Halftrack
 Artillery Support: 3x(TL2)120mm "Brandt" Mortar(2)/Truck

10th Infantry Brigade - Colonel Schmucl Goder
 Brigade Headquarters: 1xGHQ(+1)/Jeep
 Recon Company: 3xInfantry(R)/Jeep
 104th Infantry Battalion(-) 1xInfantry Headquarters,
 9xInfantry, 3xInfantry Support
 105th Infantry Battalion(-) 1xInfantry Headquarters,
 1xInfantry, 3xInfantry Support
 Tank Company/82nd Armored Battalion 3xM4A3 "Sherman"
 Artillery Support: 3x25lbr(2)/Truck,
 3x(TL2)120mm "Brandt" Mortar(2)/Truck

Air Support: 1xAvia C-210, 1xP-51

Forward Observers:
 Any five (5) armed stands may contain attached FO's

Brigade Headquarters: 1xGHQ(+0)/"Landrover"

Within 10" of Umm Qatef
 Recon Troop: 1xStaghound AC[R]
 1 Company, 17th Infantry Battalion: 3xInfantry,
 1xSupport/Bren Carrier, 1x57mm ATG/Truck
 18th Infantry Battalion: 10xInfantry, 3xSupport/Bren Carrier,
 3x57mm ATG/Truck
 78th Anti-Tank Battalion: 3xArcher
 Anti-Aircraft Support: 1x30mm "Hispano Suiza"
 3rd Artillery Regiment: 3x25 lbr.(2)

Field Fortifications: 15xMedium Improved Positions
 15x"Standard" Mines, 8xDummy Minefields

Within 10" of Ruqfa Dam
 17th Infantry Battalion(-) 1xInfantry Headquarters/"Land Rover",
 6xInfantry
 2xSupport/Bren Carrier, 2x57mm ATG/Truck
 Recon Troop: 1xStaghound AC
 94th Anti-Tank Battalion(-) 2xArcher

Forward Observers:
 Any two (2) armed stands may contain attached FO's

OPTIONAL IWHAT-IF! REINFORCEMENTS

The Egyptian "Front Line" ran northwest of Abu Agiela to al Arish (3rd Infantry Division command post). There was an Armored Brigade garrisoned at Gebel Libni, 30 km west of Abu Agiela. On October 30th, Israeli reconnaissance aircraft spotted an armored column approaching Abu Agiela from the northwest. The report proved to be false, but the Israelis sent two platoons from the 82nd Armored Battalion to delay the arrival of these "phantoms".

Enter from northwest corner of the map.

Relief Column:

1xT-34/85(HQ), 10xT-34/85, 10xSU-100

At this time, 9th Armored Battalion/7th Armored Brigade, was past the southern mouth of the Diakla Pass, racing west to reinforce the paratroopers at Mitla Pass 140 km away. This unit was composed of AMX-13 (75) Tanks. One or two companies of this battalion could have detoured north to assist with repulsing the expected Egyptian riposte at Abu Agiela.

Enter from southwest corner of the map.

9th Armored Battalion(-):

1xAMX-13(HQ), 8xAMX-13

SPECIAL RULES

- A. Optional rules to be used:
- 12.1 The Hot Shot!
 - 12.2 The Communications Breakdown!
- B. Minefield Destruction
- Artillery may "neutralize" minefields. Any minefield is considered to have an "unarmored" defense strength of eight (8). Minefield markers are reduced in "concentration" each time they are "Eliminated" by artillery fire.
- A. "Defensive" minefields are reduced to "Standard" minefields.
 - B. "Standard" minefields are reduced to "Hasty" minefields.
 - C. "Hasty" minefields are "eliminated".

Note: You are not allowed to attempt to remove any "S" or "D" markers a minefield suffers due to artillery fire during subsequent marker removal phases. (Minefields are not human beings and cannot "recover" or "rally!")

SUGGESTED READING

Key to the Sinai: The Battles of Abu Ageila in the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli Wars, by Dr. George W. Gawrych. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990.

TERRAIN SUGGESTIONS:

- The map should be approximately 72" (East to West) x 48" (Northwest to Southeast)
- "Mixed" Desert with one good road running East-to-West.

INITIAL DEPLOYMENTS

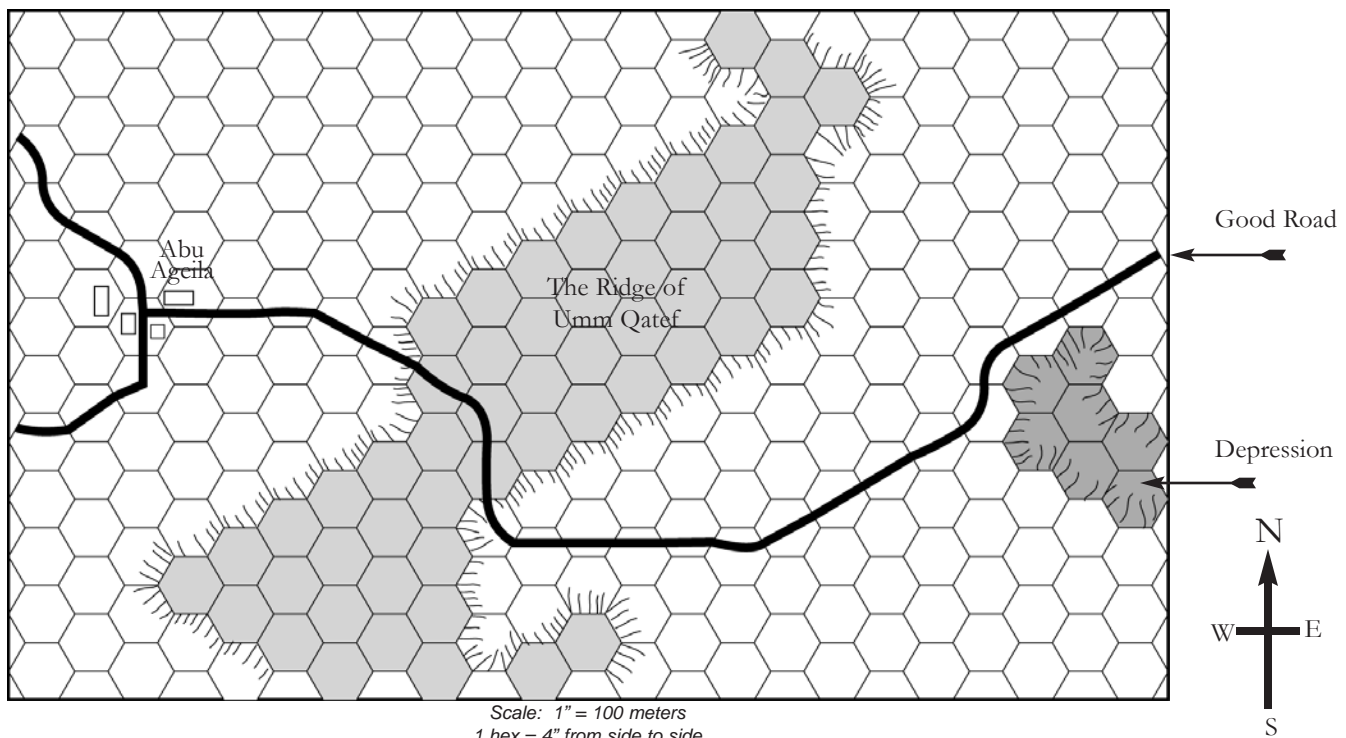
- A. The Egyptian player must locate all minefields within four inches of the east edge of Umm Qatef.
- B. The Israeli player(s) may plot indirect artillery fire for Game Turns 1 and 2.
(This must be done before any Egyptian units are placed on the map.)
- C. The Egyptian player(s) then deploys his forces as described in the Order of Battle.
- D. The Israeli 10th Infantry Brigade should be deployed 10" north east of Umm Qatef.
- E. The Israeli 7th Armoured Brigade should be deployed 10" of the village of Abu Ageila.

SCENARIO LENGTH: 20 TURNS

VICTORY CONDITIONS:

Israeli Victory:
Open the road Israel to Suez. Occupy at least 5" on both sides of the road where it crosses Umm Qatef. If 15 or more Egyptian stands are eliminated, but the road not secured, a marginal victory will be achieved. Empty truck, halftrack, and tractor stands do not count toward this total.

Egyptian Victory:
Eliminate 30 or more armed Israeli stands before the Israeli player achieves his victory conditions. Empty truck, halftrack, and tractor stands do not count toward this total.



Scale: 1" = 100 meters
1 hex = 4" from side to side