

Marooned in the Sinai desert ...

Egyptian soldiers manning strongpoints along the Suez canal, started shouting in alarm. A siren wailed in the distance and the dredges stopped working one by one. Floodlights along the canal winked out and a flare shot up into the night sky, quickly followed by another, lighting up the area we were in. Below the crest of the dune, our jeep was completely invisible from the Egyptian army positioned between us and the canal, but the misfiring engine with its gunshot-like sounds was creating pandemonium among the soldiers. A searchlight came to life, its long bright light playing over the top of the dunes. A heavy machine gun thudded into action, its tracer bullets curving over us into the desert behind where we were hidden.



Being marooned and fired at while negotiating a flood in the middle of the Sinai desert was no fun. And how did I find myself there? You may well ask. Well, here's how!

In early 1978, I was working for the United Nations at its headquarters in New York. In March of that year, after a massacre of its citizens on a northern coastal road, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) invaded Lebanon to create a buffer zone and prevent further attacks on their border settlements.

Following many late night meetings, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was created by the security council to keep the warring sides apart. As there was some urgency to have the UNIFIL deployed in South Lebanon, the UN called for volunteers amongst its HQ staff to serve with this newly created force which was forming in Israel.

Israel was a place I had always wanted to visit. As a student of history, my mind was filled with glorious stories of the birth and life of Christ, the Romans, the Saracens and their battles against the Crusaders and more recently, the creation of the state of Israel. I jumped at the opportunity to volunteer and found myself with only days left before I was to report to the northern Israeli seaside town of Nahariya near the border of Lebanon.

The morning before I was scheduled to fly to Tel Aviv, I received a phone call from UN field services located on the 23rd floor of the UN building.

It was the operations officer. 'Rod,' she began. 'I have some bad news. The Israelis are refusing to issue you a visa and it's going to take some time for us to get it sorted out.'

This was not something I was expecting. 'Why are they doing that?' I asked curiously. The implication of what she was saying had not yet crossed my mind.

'It's because your country does not recognise Israel and has no relationship with them.'

Her statement made me think. I remembered that in 1967, after the Six-Day war with Egypt, the Sri Lankan prime minister had spectacularly thrown out all Israeli embassy staff, severing diplomatic ties with that country and making headline news all around the world.

The pieces fell into place and it began to make sense. *This could be a major problem*, I thought to myself. I had been very much looking forward to going.

Unsettled by this development, I started thinking of various options. 'Why do I have to go to Israel?' I asked the operations officer. 'Why can't I just fly into Lebanon?'

'UNIFIL is being assembled in Israel, so you have to fly there,' she advised. 'Anyway, it's too dangerous to fly into Beirut.'

That made me pause. It looked like I had no choice but go through Israel. 'How long will it take to get the visa?' I questioned. 'Is there a chance they will say no again?'

'There's no guarantee they will say yes,' the operations officer admitted. 'It all depends. This has never happened before.' I could hear the sympathy in her voice.

'Depends on what?' I said anxiously. 'You mean I may not be able to go at all?'

The days prior to my leaving had been filled with frenetic activity and a large wooden box with my personal effects was already on its way to Israel. The job I had been doing in the department of conference services for the past 5 years had been assigned to someone else and even though I was guaranteed a job when I returned to New York, everything would have to be rearranged.

'If they refuse, yes!' the officer said. 'But we can get the office of the secretary-general to intercede on your behalf.'

When she said that, I felt that the situation was getting out of hand. Why on earth would the secretary-general (SG), the most senior diplomat in the United Nations, intercede on my behalf? With the thought of diplomatic cables flying between New York, Jerusalem and Colombo whirling in my mind, I thought that discretion was the better part of valour. 'That sounds complicated,' I said nervously. 'He must have more important things to do. Why don't I just forget about going!'

‘No, no!’ the operations officer said firmly. ‘You’re a UN staff member travelling on a UN passport and they can’t just refuse to grant you a visa because of your nationality. We can’t let them get away with that. You may not be able to travel tomorrow but we will get you that visa, don’t worry. Let me talk to the under-secretary-general (USG) for field operations and get back to you in the morning.’

I hung up wondering what would happen next. The head of field operations was General Brian Urquhart whose face appeared on the TV news almost daily. Getting the Israelis, the PLO and the Lebanese to allow a UN force to stop them killing each other was not an easy task. I went to bed that night quite despondent, not believing that the USG would have the time to take care of my insignificant little problem.

True to her word, the operations officer contacted me first thing the next morning. ‘I’ve got good news and bad news,’ she said. ‘What do you want to hear first?’

‘The bad news,’ I said. I have always believed that getting the bad news out of the way first is the best way forward.

‘Ok, you’re not going to UNIFIL,’ she said. My heart sank. That was bad news. ‘But don’t worry. You are going to UNEF. We’ve booked you on a flight to Cairo and you are departing from JFK this afternoon.’

That was the good news. The UN Emergency Force was a long established peace keeping operation between the Egyptians and the Israelis and according to news reports, peace talks were about to get underway between the two countries.

‘Field services have made an official complaint to the Israelis through the SG,’ the operations officer continued. ‘You will serve with UNEF until the Israelis give you the visa.’

‘Oh, okay,’ I said feeling a bit better. It was not what I wanted but going to Egypt was also a dream I had harboured for a long time. Visions of camels and the pyramids crossed my mind.

Good! the operations officer said. ‘I’ll get the travel office to send down your passport with an Egyptian visa and the air ticket. Make sure you make the flight. You’ll be met in Cairo. Good luck!’



So, a few days later after flying from New York to Rome and then to Cairo, I found myself at UNEF headquarters in Ismailia, a mostly destroyed and desolate town on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal.

Not long after my arrival in Egypt, I received a cable from New York saying that I had been granted permission to enter Israel. I was not told how it happened but happen it did. Unfortunately the cable also said that the position I had been earmarked for in UNIFIL had been filled and I had to remain with the UNEF for the foreseeable future. This did not bother me as I had started to make friends where I was and beginning to enjoy living in Egypt.

Needless to say, I looked for the first opportunity that came up to visit Israel. I found out that UNEF staff regularly drove into Israel from Egypt and some even had apartments in Jerusalem where their families lived. There was a rule that UN staff could only travel across the front lines and into the UN buffer zone in pairs so I asked around whether I could join up with someone heading into Israel for the weekend.

My first trip turned out to be a truly memorable one.

A colleague was planning to spend a long weekend in Jerusalem and was happy for me to join him, as he too was looking for someone to travel with. His name was David McCullie, a Scotsman who had been a UN peacekeeping officer for many years.

We checked out a Jeep Cherokee from the UN transport garage in Ismailia on the following Friday morning and crossed the Suez Canal on a pontoon bridge which the Egyptian military erected twice a day. The pontoon bridge went across for an hour around midday and again at around midnight. Ships using the canal sailed from south to north in the morning and then switched to sail from north to south during the next twelve hour period. This gave the military a window of about an hour at each changeover to transport troops and supplies across into Sinai.



Crossing military bridge at Al Kantara

Crossing the Suez Canal, the Sinai desert and the front lines between the two forces for the first time was an experience I will never forget. It was both exciting and scary at the same time but that's another story.

Jerusalem was everything I thought it would be. We arrived late on Friday and went straight to bed at a small hotel that the UNEF staff used. I spent the whole of Saturday exploring the old walled city which is the home to holy sites for Christians, Jews and Muslims. Fulfilling a lifelong dream, I visited the Via Dolorosa and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Christ is buried. That

night I wandered through the old walled city, visiting the famous Arab souk, the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock.

On Sunday morning I walked on the ramparts around the old city exploring its 4,000 year old history from above. The tiny walled city, divided into an Armenian quarter, a Jewish quarter, a Christian quarter and an Arab quarter, is still the most fascinating place I have ever visited.



Jerusalem souk

David who was doing his own thing, met me for lunch at the Jaffa Gate, one of the main entrances to the walled city. After lunch, David was driving me down to the Dead Sea when the radio squawked into life. Every UN vehicle carried a military band radio which allowed field staff to keep in touch with the radio room in UNEF headquarters

back in Ismailia. We had to report in every few hours so that field operations would know where we were.

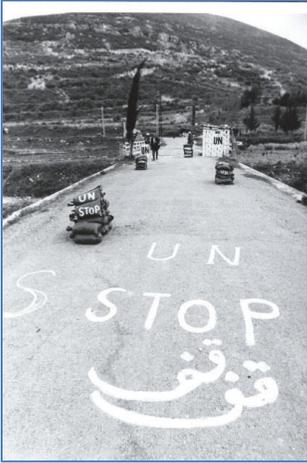
On the radio we heard that Egypt was going to lock down their borders the next day and all UNEF field staff in Israel were ordered to return to base immediately. According to the report, Egypt was playing hardball with the Israelis in the security council prior to peace talks getting underway and the UN were stuck in the middle.

This was going to be a major problem for us. Monday being a public holiday back in Egypt, our plans were to leave Jerusalem early in the morning and cross the canal on the military bridge erected in the early afternoon. Special permission in the form of an official piece of paper was needed to cross the Egyptian front lines after dark and the only place we could get that pass was back in Egypt.

I was quite concerned by the situation we found ourselves in. Having already experienced problems with the Israeli authorities back in New York, I didn't want to rock the boat in any way and overstay my entry permit which was issued for only a few days. Having already experienced some of the wonders of Jerusalem, I didn't want anything to ruin my chances of coming back into the country.

David did not seem to be concerned by what was happening. He told me not to worry, saying that he knew of a way we could get across into Egypt without an official pass. So with his reassurances, we set off from Jerusalem early that Sunday afternoon to drive back across the Sinai peninsula to Ismailia.

We drove south, stopping briefly at a second hand bookshop in the outskirts of Jerusalem where David rushed in and bought some books and magazines to take back into Egypt.



We drove down the coast road, past the Palestinian refugee camps at Gaza and came to the Israeli border post near El Arish as the sun was setting. The Israelis, always businesslike and efficient, checked our UN IDs and let us through without any problem.

We drove to the UN post leading into the buffer zone which was manned by Swedish troops. David knew the officer-in-charge; a captain, who was on duty at the time. The camp was located by the road and the officer invited us into a tent to have dinner with him and his men. The meal comprised of steaming hot potato soup and slices

of black bread which I looked at suspiciously. *Was that old bread?* I had never seen anything like it before. But the others were digging in so I took a tentative bite and dipped it into the potato soup which made it a little bit more palatable. Coming from a country like Sri Lanka, where all the food was spicy and very tasty, I had never eaten anything like this before.

We finished our meal and it was well after dark when we finally left the camp. Driving through the desert at night was like nothing I had ever experienced before. The sky was filled with stars. I had never seen so many in my life. Living in a big city does not allow you to see many of the distant stars and galaxies. The total darkness of the desert, without any ambient light, made many more visible. We drove through the UN buffer zone in the dark, following the narrow tarred road shining in our headlights. After about an hour we came to the UN checkpoint which allowed us to leave the buffer zone into the area controlled by the Egyptian army.

Driving into the Egyptian controlled portion of Sinai was much more dangerous. We had to first negotiate a large minefield. We slowly zigzagged through the unmarked field, following the tyre tracks of vehicles that had preceded us. The wind was whipping up the sand in gusts and swirls exposing mines as large as dinner plates on either side of us.



Swedish soldier on duty

After about 20 minutes we came to an Egyptian checkpoint which was just a ramshackle wooden hut by the side of the road. A broken wooden pole sitting on two barrels across the road impeded any further progress. An Egyptian soldier manning the barrier had been watching us drive through the minefield. He walked over. The young soldier looked irritated and tired. He was unshaven, his uniform crumpled and dirty like he had been sleeping in it. He carried an AK-47 automatic rifle on his shoulder. I noticed that the barrel had been painted in blood red. *Not standard issue*, I thought to myself.

The soldier put out his hand to David. 'Pass?' he grunted, peering into the vehicle.



Exposed minefield

David wound down the window and handed our two UN IDs to the soldier. The soldier looked at them briefly and handed them back. 'Pass?' he grunted again, in heavily accented English.

'Mafeesh,' David said in Arabic, shaking his head. In the short time I had been in Egypt I had learnt a few words of Arabic but 'mafeesh' was beyond my comprehension.

The soldier scowled at David, shifted his eyes to me and then straightened his back. He turned towards the hut and shouted something loudly in Arabic. A short, curt answer, also in Arabic, was shouted back at him from inside the hut.

The soldier motioned to David to park the vehicle by the side of the road and returned to his post behind the barrier, tiredly leaning against the wooden shack.

'What did you tell him?' I asked David anxiously. 'He's not going to let us through.'

David looked at me. 'I told him that I have nothing more to give him.' David turned off the jeep engine. 'Don't worry, we'll get through.'

Picking up the radio handset, David called in our situation to the duty officer in Ismailia. The duty room was manned 24 hours a day and everyone in the field was tracked and monitored. After he finished his report, David started rummaging in the seat behind him.

Not confident of David's ability to get us past the border post, I was fully expecting to wait the night out in the jeep. With my fear of overstaying my travel permit somewhat allayed by crossing the border out of Israel, I tried to

make myself comfortable by pushing the back of the seat into a reclining position so I could get some sleep.

David turned on the inside light of the vehicle and pulled out a magazine from the bag he dragged out from behind his seat. It was an old Playboy magazine. He leafed through the tattered magazine, pulling out the centrefold picture, turning it around and looking at it from different angles.

Suddenly I felt the presence of faces pressing against the jeep windows. Other soldiers manning the checkpoint had appeared from nowhere. They had all left their posts and were crowding around the jeep looking in excitedly. David was having a great time, turning the magazine this way and that so that the soldiers would only get tantalising glimpses of the centrefold model.

Soon there was a knock on the window and a sergeant, clearly the person in charge of the checkpoint, gestured to David, motioning him to open the window. David shook his head. The sergeant kept knocking on the glass insistently so David wound down the window halfway.

‘Whad’ya want?’ he asked the sergeant, closing the magazine as he spoke.

‘Want magazine us,’ the sergeant replied in broken English, pointing at the magazine.

David shook his head, putting the magazine on the floorboard beside him. ‘No, I cannot give you the magazine. It’s mine.’

‘Yes, yes! Please give magazine. We want,’ the sergeant insisted.

David shook his head emphatically. ‘You are not my friend so I cannot give you the magazine.’ David looked across at me and smiled. I sat up straighter in my seat, this was beginning to look interesting.

The sergeant was getting agitated. The soldiers were all talking to him and he shouted at them until they quietened down. He looked impatiently at David. ‘Yes! We are your friend. Give magazine.’

David responded calmly. ‘No, you won’t let me go home so you are not my friend.’

The sergeant shook his head. ‘Cannot go home without pass. But I am still your friend. You can stay here until morning. No problem!’

David reached into the bag and pulled out two more magazines. Loud bursts of Arabic directed at the sergeant from the other soldiers looking in made him pause. He shouted angrily back at them and a loud argument broke out.

After a lot of shouting and hand waving, the sergeant looked back at David. ‘Okay,’ he said resignedly. ‘If you give magazines you can go home.’

David winked at me and let the sergeant have the magazines through the half opened window. The sergeant grabbed the magazines and walked to the hut surrounded by the soldiers who were trying to grab the magazines from

him. Before he went in he shouted at one the soldiers, pointing to the barrier. The soldier ran to the barrier, knocking it over before rushing back to the shack.

David was laughing as we drove over the broken wooden pole and into Egyptian territory. 'We always keep a few girly magazines in the car for the soldiers,' he said. 'You can't get them in Egypt and they are worth their weight in gold.'

I could not believe what I had just witnessed. We had just crossed the frontlines of a country that was still in an official state of war with its neighbour, using a magazine! And without any record of us getting through. To be perfectly honest I was petrified that the soldiers would shoot us and take the magazines. They could easily have buried us and the jeep in one of the sand dunes and no one would ever have known where we were.

As we drove further and further away from the border post I settled myself comfortably into the seat knowing that we were almost home. David was in good spirits, loudly singing a song in Gaelic as we drove down the road.

I wouldn't have felt so relaxed if I had known that the adventure was not yet over.

We continued down the sandy desert road towards the Suez Canal trying to avoid unfilled shell holes from when the Israelis counter attacked and pushed the Egyptians back during the war.

It was close to midnight when we saw the lights of the canal ahead of us. Large cargo ships brightly lit up for the night were sailing from the right to the left of us. We could not see over the dunes so it looked like the ships, each framed by thousands of bright stars, were sailing across the desert sands. It was quite a spectacular sight.



The Suez Canal below Lake Timsah

When we got closer to the canal the road dipped into a lower section of the desert. As we drove down the road we could see that it was completely filled with water. The Egyptians were widening the canal so that ships could pass in both directions at the same time. The water came from three dredging barges that were blasting the side of the canal with water cannons to widen the waterway. The watery sludge was sucked up and flung hundreds of feet into the air by

gigantic hoses pointed into the desert.

We had no choice. The pontoon bridge would go up in the next half-an-hour and we would have an hour to get across the canal before they dismantled it. If we wanted to get to Ismailia by morning we would have to drive through the flood.

David drove into the water slowly, following the road which we could see emerging from the water about 300 metres away. The water was dark and oily and stank of diesel. David speeded up as we got close to the other side when we drove into a shell hole concealed by the floods. Water splashed up and the engine coughed and stalled. We were right in the middle of the shell hole; water washing over the floorboards of the jeep was rising rapidly. David swore in his inimitably Scottish way and tried starting the engine but it would not start. The engine kept misfiring and would not catch.

The flood water was still rising so we got out of the vehicle into the flooded road, the water coming up above our knees. With great difficulty we dragged the vehicle out of the shell hole and pushed it slowly onto the road, out of the water.

We were on dry land but just barely out of the flooded portion of the road. We did not have the energy to push the jeep up the incline to the top of a small dune. We could not see over the sandy mound but we could hear the pounding of the dredges as they kept pouring the watery sand into the desert. David opened the bonnet of the jeep and had a look inside but without a proper light we could not see much. He removed the distributor cap, cleaning it with a rag before reconnecting it.



David tried to start the engine but it kept misfiring, water spitting out of the exhaust pipe. He didn't give up, trying to get the starter motor to turn over but as the engine dried out the sound of the misfires got louder and louder, sounding like gunshots over the pounding of the dredges.

Once the machine gun started firing we knew we were in trouble. David stopped trying to start the vehicle and we huddled together in the jeep hoping that the Egyptians would not shell the area. We had been instructed to always remain in the vehicle if we got into trouble or there was a problem. The jeep

was painted in white with large UN signs plastered on the roof top, bonnet and sides and no one could mistake it for anything else.

David called the UNEF HQ duty room in Ismailia on the jeep radio and advised them that we had got stuck in the water being pumped out of the canal and that the Egyptians, mistaking the engine misfires as gunshots, were panicking and shooting at us. The duty officer told us that he would contact the Egyptian UN liaison officer right away and advise him of the situation. He ordered us to stop what we were doing and wait to hear back from him.

After what seemed like a long time (later I realised it was only about 30 minutes), the Egyptian soldiers calmed down. The soldiers stopped firing their machine guns, not hearing 'gunshots' anymore, but they kept shooting flares up every few minutes to make sure that no one was sneaking up on them. We were in constant touch with the duty officer at UNEF HQ during this time and once things got quiet, he advised us to remain in the vehicle and that he would arrange for a mechanic to be helicoptered to us in the morning.

We remained in the jeep for the rest of the night, not able to sleep. Our clothes and shoes were soaked with water and we reeked of diesel oil and other unknown fluids which had been pumped out of the canal. I was worried that an Egyptian patrol would sneak up on us and shoot us while we slept.

I'd been in the country for only six weeks and had already experienced enough to last me a lifetime. I remember wondering at the time, *What the next few months would bring?*
