

Glimpses of the Egyptian Army, 1940

Introduction

During a recent meeting in Chakoten, I came into possession of an article originating from Billedbladet, mid-1941. The headline is "Ægypten ... A neutral Theater of War" (Source 1) and it gave me the opportunity to look more closely at the background of this headline. In the first place, it was the visual material in particular that called my attention, partly because of my research in connection with Britain's 54 etc. figures of Sudanese soldiers in the Egyptian army, see Britain's figures - Sudanese Infantry.

Egypt's role during the Second World War was quite special: on the one hand, Egyptian lands were the subject of fierce battles between German, Italian and allied units, but on the other hand, Egypt was a neutral country right up until February 1945, when King Farouk declared war on Germany .

Granted, there are sources that describe the subject in greater depth, but I have not been able to find any. The following is therefore composed of various fragments that naturally often appear as side notes in sources dealing with the early part of the war in North Africa. Among other things. Military Ally or Liability - The Egyptian Army 1936-1942 (Kilde 2) anbefales.

The Egyptian Army in the 1930s



Egyptian infantry, c. 1939 1). [__](#)

By the mid-1930s, the Egyptian army included:

- 11 infantry battalions
- 2 cavalry squadrons
- 4 artillery batteries
- 1 fortress artillery battery
- 1 armored car squadron
- 1 engineer company

The army was organized into 3 brigades and in peacetime numbered approx. 13,000 men.

In addition, there was a guard unit that numbered approx. 1,200 men, including cavalry, infantry and motorcyclists, whose job it was to act as bodyguards for the king and guard the royal palaces.

The length of service in the army was 5 years, and all male citizens between 19 and 27 were in principle conscripts. However, it was possible to exercise conscription through deputies and this option was used to a large extent. Service in the army did not give high status in the population, whereby the army came to consist of the poorest part of the population.

The relationship with the British presence in Egypt, whose primary purpose was to secure the Suez Canal, was at times rather strained, and both among the officer corps and the higher layers of society, the Italian neighbors in Libya and from 1936 in Ethiopia were viewed with greater sympathy. Egypt had been an English protectorate from the time around the First World War, but in 1922 the country gained a certain form of independence, with England however reserving the right to intervene if English interests were threatened.

Despite the prevailing lack of sympathy for England, however, Egypt signed a 20-year friendship agreement on 14 November 1936. The agreement meant that the defense of Egyptian lands, apart from the Suez Canal, was handed over to the Egyptian army, whose structure, following the English pattern, was placed in the hands of an English military mission, under the leadership of Major General J. Marshall Cornwall, who arrived in Egypt in January 1937. Until the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, an English general had acted as Inspector General of the Egyptian Army.

Despite the sympathy for Italy, however, the military presence in Libya and Ethiopia posed a threat to Egypt and a gradual modernization of the army and air force (see Postscript) was initiated.

The modernization



English 4.5 inch howitzers with Egyptian crew 2).

The medium battery is perhaps the howitzer battery shown here.

Among the measures that were initiated was a modernization of the artillery. The field artillery in 1939 consisted of:

- 3.7-inch howitzer battery (transported on trucks)
 - 25-pdr battery
 - medium battery
 - anti-tank detachment
- (towed and motor-borne pamphlets).



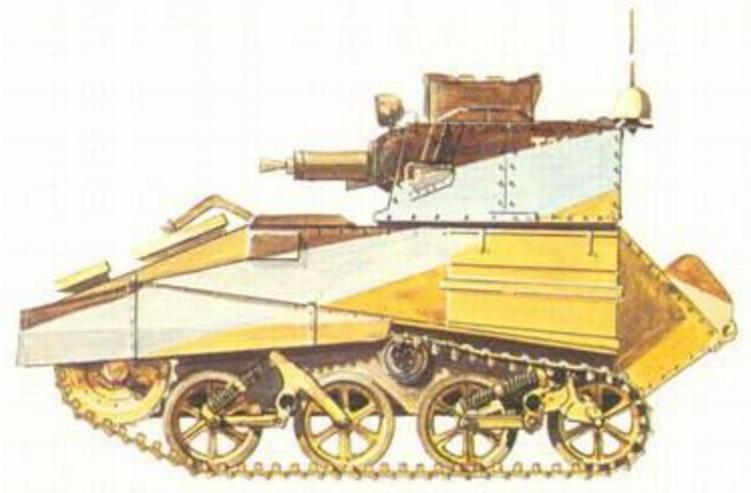
18-pdr field gun, trial edition, Woods made, in service with the Egyptian army 3). —

In the 1930s, a larger series of experiments was carried out with the English 18-pdr field cannon, which led to the 25-pdr cannon/hau-bits known from the Second World War.

One step in this development was the design shown here made by a captain named Woods.

The purpose of the bow was to allow the gun crew to quickly turn the magazine, i.e. a precursor to the circular brisk, which became part of the 25-pdr magazine. A number of these experimental pamphlets found their way to the Egyptian army, but apart from the picture, nothing is known about the pamphlets' further history.

Border control

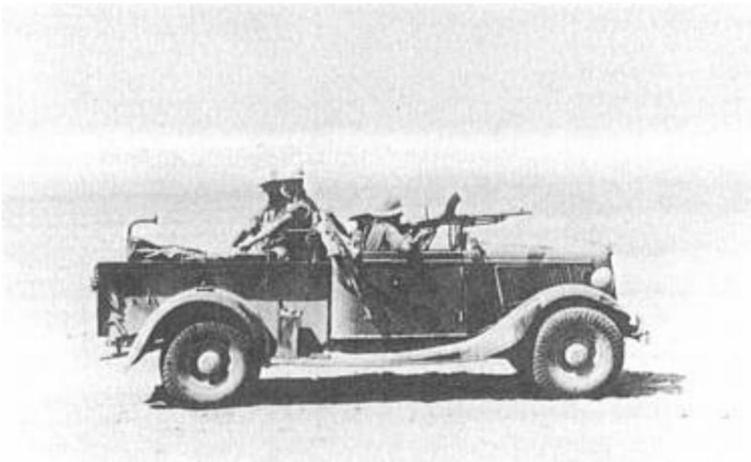


Light tank of the type Light Mk. VI A 4). —

At the end of 1930, a motorized unit was created, later referred to as *the Egyptian Mobile Force*. The force consists of five motorized squadrons, equipped with Ford trucks.

The majority of the soldiers are referred to as Sudanese, and it thus appears that the earlier recruitment of Sudanese soldiers has been retained in the Egyptian army.

In 1938 or 1939, a light tank squadron was created, equipped with six tanks of the type *Light Mk. WE*.



8th Hussars fighting car, Ægypten, 1936 5). —

I am not in possession of any pictures of the Egyptian Motorized Unit, but the vehicles may well have been those used in 1936 by the *8th Royal Irish Hussars* while the regiment was garrisoned in Egypt.

The vehicles are described as Ford V8 pick-up cars, equipped with extra wide tires for driving in sand. The carriages were equipped with a light machine gun of the Vickers-Berthier type.



"C" Squadron, 8th Royal Irish Hussars, Egypt, 1936

The regiment took part in troop trials with this machine gun, which was later opted out in favor of the light Bren Gun. However, the Vickers-Berthier machine gun was introduced in the Indian Army.

The two light machine guns are very similar, and it can be difficult to distinguish the types.

The motorized units used e.g. along the borders, where they worked together with camel-mounted units, and one sought, among other things, to prevent the smuggling of drugs.



Desert Patrol.

From Source 1.

The original caption reads: *"Desert Patrol manned by the world's most picturesque soldiers, the Egyptian Camel Cavalry, serves to guard the border with Libya. Patrols of this type constantly move in the desolate districts between border stations, which are in radiotelephone contact with army headquarters."*

My sources do not mention the Camel Corps among the units of the Egyptian army, but even if the corps is described as Egyptian, it may very well be the Camel Corps that formed part of the Sudan Defense Force [6](#)).



"The camels are trained for military service, and the soldiers for camel service, in both cases endurance is particularly important.

The front legs are tied when the camel lies in the camp."

From Source 1.

The connection is not 100% certain, but it is possible that the camel corps became part of the troops in Sudan when this force was separated from the Egyptian army in 1925.

I have come across an account in The Coleraine Battery (6 LAA Battery Old Comrades Association) in which the Egypt section mentions a meeting between *The Sudan Camel Corps* and 6 *Aircraft Battery* at the Suez Canal th *Light Anti* in 1940. The account also contains a few pictures of the Sudanese camel corps.



"Sudan negro attached to the border patrol as a desert expert guide.

Situations may occur where the lives and well-being of others depend on him.

Look at him right. Perhaps not everyone would feel completely reassured knowing their fate in his care."
From Source 1.

Of particular interest, rather than the journalist's assessment of the soldier, is the good reproduction of the knitted uniform blouse that was often used by African units in particular.

The cartridge belt has pulled the blouse askew, so that the shoulder protection on the soldier's left shoulder almost takes on the character of a shoulder badge, but if you look at the soldier's right shoulder, you get an impression of how the blouse should sit.

The war is coming to Egypt

On 10 June 1940, Italy declares war on England, but not Egypt, which retains its neutral status until February 1945, when war is declared on Germany.

The English plans for the defense of Egypt included units of the Egyptian army, which included guarded the border areas. The units had to operate under English command, as there was no confidence in the ability of the Egyptian officers to lead larger units. The turnover among the higher-ranking Egyptian officers was great, and in the period 1939 to 1942 there were five different chiefs of the general staff.

In one area, however, they were dependent on Egyptian units, namely in the air defense of the Suez Canal and the Nile Delta. Here, Egyptian anti-aircraft artillerymen manned approx. half of the anti-aircraft guns and searchlights, as well as an Egyptian coastal battery secured the port of Alexandria (4 pcs. 6-inch and 4 pcs. 4-inch coastal defense pamphlets) as well as Port Sudan.

The Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries had 38 units. 3-inch air guns, 4 pcs. 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns and 4 pcs. 40 mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns 7). There was talk of letting the Egyptians take over a greater part of the responsibility, but this view did not resonate with the Royal Navy.

Table 1: Egyptian anti-aircraft units, 1940 (From Source 2)

Location	Unit	Armament
Alexandria	1. batteries	(3-inch guns)
	Luftværnsregiment 2.	
	Searchlight regiment	24 searchlights
Cairo		1 battery (3.7-inch guns) and 2 batteries (3-inch guns) 16 searchlights
	Air Defense Regiment	40 mm
	Unknown unit	guns and 1 pc.
Suez	Unknown device	3.7-inch cannon as well as 6 searchlights



Egyptian anti-aircraft artillerymen from the 1st Air Defense Regiment 8).

Not all of the pamphlets mentioned appear in the overview, but an unknown number were located along the connecting lines in Egypt.

The rank and file anti-aircraft gunners look considerably more "workmanlike" than the officers.

The guns in the background are mobile 3-inch anti-aircraft guns.

It is not clear from the available sources whether all pamphlets have been mobile, or whether some have been the stationary version.

When Italian troops launched their attack against British units on Egyptian territory on 13 September 1940, the Egyptian units were quickly withdrawn from the border areas. Apart from anti-aircraft units which successfully defended their targets, Egyptian units as such did not enter combat during the war.



"Captain Abd-el-Daim, writing today's report in his tent, is a handsome representative of the Egyptian soldier, an energetic and fanatical warrior."
From Source 1.

Other pictures

The captain's lapel mirror may indicate that he is a staff officer.

Most remarkable is probably the captain's headdress, which shows that the tradition of earlier times with different types of covering over the fez - see Britain's figures - Sudanese Infantry - was continued.



"King Farouk of Egypt, standing in the middle, conceals his twenty-year-old youth with impressive fullness. He is the commander-in-chief of the army, here photographed at a parade in Cairo."

From Source 1.

About King Farouk

King Farouk I of Egypt (1920-1965). Crowned 28 April 1936, but due to his age only effectively king from 29 July 1937 to 23 July 1952.

Deposed by a military coup, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, and then in exile in Italy. Throughout his life, King Faruk was known for his extravagant lifestyle and his sympathy for Italy.

For further information on the Egyptian king, refer to Faruk (The Royal House of Mehmet Ali) and King Faruk I of Egypt (Wikipedia), from which sources the above information originates.

Feltgudstjeneste i Ørkenlejren, hvor ingen Moské er til Raadighed, foregaar paa et indviet Stykke Jord, som Soldaterne beknæler barfodede.



"Field worship in the desert camp, where no mosque is available, takes place on a consecrated piece of ground, on which the soldiers, barefoot, kneel."

From Source 1.

Sources

1. Egypt ... A neutral theater of war, article in Biledbladet, approx. mid 1941.
2. Military Ally or Liability - The Egyptian Army 1936-1942 af Steve Rothwell (British & Commonwealth ORBATs).
3. The Egyptian Military in World War II (Information Technology Associates).
4. Egypt in World War II (Country study from Library of Congress).
5. British Camel Corps and the Egyptian Army 1884-1885 (Richard Brooks).
6. Egyptian Air Force (Wikipedia).
7. The EAF History (Egyptian Air Force, uofficiel side).
8. Egypt's Forgotten Lysanders by David Nicolle (ACIC.org).
9. Royal Egyptian Air Force use of the Gloster Gladiator during the Second World War (Håkans Aviation Page).
10. Royal Egyptian Air Force (Aviation Uniforms and Insignia of WWII).
11. Royal Egyptian Air Force (Alex Crawford)
12. Egyptian Air force until the beginning of 1940 (The Egyptian air force official Homepage).

Postscript - The Egyptian Air Force

The Egyptian Air Force was established by Royal Decree of 2 November 1930 as part of the Army. The pilots were trained at the Royal Air Force and airplanes etc. was purchased in England. The first machines were 10 units. De Havilland Tiger Moth trainers, the first 5 of which, amid much public attention, landed in Cairo on 2 June 1932, flown from England by three Egyptian and two English pilots.

Euro 626

Span 10.37 m Length 8.08 m
Height 2.92 m Starting weight
1,211 kg Maximum speed
209 km/h Practical top height
4,511 m



Euro 626.

Fra Avro 626 and Avro Perfect (Jaap Teeuwen).
As far as I can decipher the nationality mark, the picture
appears to be of two of the Egyptian machines.

In 1934, the first actual military airplanes were delivered from England - 10 pcs. Avro 626 9). —



Hawker Audax.

Fra Sergeant Geoffrey Grierson (No. 211 Squadron RAF).

In 1937, the Egyptian Air Force received six Hawker Audax aircraft, a variant of the Hawker Hart fighter-bomber [10](#)). In 1938, [another 18](#) were received. Hawker Audax.

In the late 1930s, the Egyptian Air Force consisted of 15 officers and 200 men. On the technical side, they were largely serviced by mechanics etc. from the Royal Air Force [11](#)).

New aircraft were added before the start of the war: In January 1939 18 pcs. Westland Lysander reconnaissance aircraft and in March 1939 18 pcs. Gloster Gladiator fighter. In 1940, a further 18 were purchased. Gloucester Gladiators.

Table 2: The Egyptian Air Force, June 1940 Squadron

Location	Fly	Assignment
1. Squadron	Almaza (Cairo) 18 stk. Westland Lysander	Connection tasks
2. Squadron	El-Dekheila (Alexandria) 18 stk. Gloster Gladiator	Air Defense
3. Squadron	Almaza (Cairo) 8 stk. Avro Anson og 6 stk. Avro 626.	Transport task
4. Squadron	? Almaza (Cairo) 18 stk. Hawker Audax	Fighter bombers
5. Squadron	El-Dekheila (Alexandria) 18 stk. Gloster Gladiator	Air Defense
Flight school	Almaza (ved Cairo) 5 pieces. De Havilland Tiger Moth, 18 pcs. Hawker Audax and 9 pcs. Miles Magister training aircraft	Education



Westland Lysander of the Egyptian Air Force's 1st Squadron, 1939. From Source 8.

1st Squadron's 18 machines were from May 1939 organized into two divisions (*flights*), each with 5 active machines and 4 in reserve.

The article Egypt's forgotten Lysanders (Source 8) is recommended as an exciting review of the squadron's history and the air force in general. From this it appears that No. 1 Flight operated alongside army units along the border with Libya; these aircraft were camouflaged.

Source 8 also mentions a rather fantastic account from 1948, where on July 9 the later Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Air Force, Air Commodore Muhammad Abd al-Munaim Miqaati, was

involved in a skirmish with an Israeli Avia C210 (a Czech-built version of the Messerschmitt Me109).

The Egyptian Lysander luckily escaped the skirmish, while the Israeli pilot, an American volunteer named Bob Vickman [12](#)), crashed into the sea. Such an outcome to an unequal battle should not have been possible, but Brigadier General Miqaati, who was an experienced Lysander pilot, believes that Bob Vickman must have been surprised by the Lysander's ability to dive very steeply.

Uniforms and badges



Brigadier General Ali Islam Bey, Chief of the Egyptian Air Force (right), photographed with Air Lieutenant Salih Mahmud Salih (left) and his observer. In the background one of the first Westland Lysanders delivered to Egypt in January 1939.

From Source 8.

In the beginning, army uniforms were used, but in 1937, when the Egyptian air force became an independent defense force, aviator blue uniforms of largely the same model as the Royal Air Force were introduced.

The pilots apparently wore two aviator wings - over the right breast pocket the RAF wing and over the left breast pocket the Egyptian aviator wing. (Source 10)

Flight Lieutenant Salih Mahmud Salih, with the rank of *Squadron Leader* (major), became commander of the Egyptian Air Force's 1st Squadron. English sources described the squadron commander as *outstanding*, while the air force commander was described as *pleasant, but totally ineffective*.

Unfortunately, the picture does not allow for confirmation of the information about the two pilot wings.



Principle
sketch: Egyptian
nationality marking,
used until 1952.
Own design.



The drawing was inspired by the photographs of Egyptian aircraft shown here as well as the article [Kingdom & Republic of Egypt 1923-58, Military & Naval Flags & Ensigns \(The War Flag\)](#), from which the illustration of the Egyptian air force flag is also taken.

Postscript: Sudan Defense Force



Sudan Camel Corps, photographed at the corps barracks in Khartoum, Sudan, 1930.
Fra Understanding Sudan - A teaching and learning Resource.

The Sudanese Camel Corps is mentioned in the book - *The Wind of Morning: An Autobiography* - written by Colonel Hugh Boustead in 1971.

The Colonel, after a checkered career, served with The Sudan Camel Corps from 1924 to 1929, and was Commander of the Corps from 1931 to 1937, when he retired from the army and became the District Commissioner of Dafur.

During the Second World War, he became the commander of *the Frontier Battalion, Sudan Defense Force*, established in 1940. The battalion consisted of a cadre of hand-picked officers and NCOs from the Sudan Defense Force, while the majority of the men were new recruits. Part of the officer corps came from the civil administration and the privately owned cotton company, the Sudan Plantations Syndicate.



Unidentified African soldiers, perhaps from the Sudan Defense Force.

After intensive training, the battalion, together with a battalion of Ethiopian volunteers (2nd Ethiopians) was deployed in the liberation of Ethiopia, as part of the so-called Gideon Force, which was under the command of the eccentric English general Orde Charles Wingate [13](#)), who perhaps is best known as the head of the Chindit units in Southeast Asia.

The above image of the Sudan Camel Corps may also serve as a solution to a small puzzle.

The image on the right is from the war game rules *Contemptible Little Armies, Army List Part 2: East Africa & The Middle East, 1914-1918*, HLBS Publishing, 2005.

I have contacted the publishers to see if they could identify the soldiers shown in the photo, but unfortunately my inquiry has remained unanswered.

There is a certain resemblance to the soldiers of the Sudan Camel Corps, and thus perhaps talk about this unit.

Referrals

- Colonel Boustead's biography, see Boustead Collection.
- Major General Arthur Reginald Chater, see Liddell Hart Center for Military Archives, King's College London. General Chater was the commander of the Sudan Camel Corps from 1927 to 1930.

- Copies of *The Wind of Morning* for sale, see Abebooks.
- Frontier Battalion, Sudan Defense Force, see the book *An improvised War - The Abyssinian Campaign of 1940-1941* by Michael Glover, Leo Cooper, London 1987, ISBN 0-85052-241-2. Can be borrowed from the Royal Garrison Library.

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) Fra *Pocket Book of the Army* by Kurt Passow, JF Lehman Verlag, Munich / Berlin, 1939.
- 2) Fra *The Wonder Book of Soldiers* af Harry Golding (red.), Ward, Lock & Co., London, ca. 1940.
- 3) Fra *The Workhorse - The 18-pdr. - Warrior of two World Wars, Part 2* af Terry Gander, Airfix Magazine, september 1980.
- 4) Fra *Focus on Armour Camouflage & Markings: No. 2. British North Africa* af Kenneth Jones., Almark Publications, New Malden 1977, ISBN0-85524-279-2.
- 5) From *Palestine Memories* by Tom Louch, British Army Review, No. 102, December 1992.
- 6) On the Sudan Defense Force, see Britain's figures - Sudanese Infantry. See also Sudan Defense Force (The Melik Society) which contains some very interesting pictures of Sudanese armored car units.
- 7) *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - The Years of Defeat 1939-41* af Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1996, ISBN 1-85753-080-2.
- 8) Fra *Operation Compass 1940 - Wavell's Whirlwind Offensive* af Jon Latimer, Osprey Campaign Series nr. 73, London 2000, ISBN1-85532-967-0.
- 9) A total of 198 examples of the Avro 626 were built and the 191 were exported. See Avro 626 Perfect (Wikipedia). From this it appears that a total of 27 copies were delivered to the Egyptian Air Force.
- 10) See Hawker Hart (Wikipedia).
- 11) The official website of the Egyptian air force provides the strength figure per 26 April 1937 as: 27 officers, of which or in addition 3 Englishmen, a number of technicians, a total of 415 men.
- 12) Bob Vickman was one of the 3,500 volunteer men and women from around the world who took part in took part in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. The website Machal - Volunteers in Israel's War of Independence contains a photograph of the American pilot..
- 13) The Order of Charles Wingate (1903-1944) (Wikipedia).