

Special Forces - Egypt

Part Five of a series that takes a look at Special Forces units around the world. This month we look at Egypt.

The Egyptian Armed Forces are the state military organisation responsible for the defence of Egypt. They consist of the Egyptian Army, Egyptian Navy, Egyptian Air Force and Egyptian Air Defence Command.

In addition, Egypt maintains 397,000 paramilitary troops. The Central Security Forces comes under the control of the Ministry of Interior. The Border Guard Forces falls under the control of the Ministry of Defence.

The modern Egyptian armed forces have been involved in numerous crises and wars since independence, from the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Suez Crisis, North Yemen Civil War, Six-Day War, Nigerian Civil War, War of Attrition, Yom Kippur War, Egyptian bread riots, 1986 Egyptian conscripts riot, Libyan–Egyptian War, Gulf War, War on Terror, Egyptian Crisis, Second Libyan Civil

War, War on ISIL and the Sinai insurgency.

Sa'ka

The Egyptian Army has two organisations that operate under the Administration of Special Units - the Paratroopers and *Sa'ka* (Thunderbolt).

The Sa'ka Forces were established in the 1950s by Major General Galal Haredi after the experiences of Egyptian Officers with the United States Army Rangers.

They were created to fulfil a number of specialised roles that required small, agile, and resilient units. Infiltration behind enemy lines, ambushing supply lines, assaulting command posts, and anti-armour to name a few.

The Sa'ka consists of eight Special Forces Regiments/Groups (Brigade level) (117th, 123rd, 129th, 135th, 141st, 147th, 153rd, 159th) (1 H.Q.) (of which three are Lightning/Saaqa regiments and three Commandos regiments, the remaining two are the Marine Commandos and the Infiltration Anti-terror units).

- 18 Commandos Battalions: (230th to 247th)
- 72 Commandos Companies
- Three Marine Commandos

- 12 Marine Commandos Companies
- Three Infiltration Anti-terror Battalions (777th, 888th, 999th)
- 12 Infiltration Companies.

Sa'ka, like the rest of the Armed Forces primarily recruits through conscription. It does have a core of professional officers and NCOs.

Conscripted recruits are chosen based on their general physical health and an analysis of their personality. There are, however, problems with this method.

Sa'ka's history and impact on Egyptian pop culture makes it popular with young conscripts. Many will pay a bribe or use

personal contacts to ensure that they are conscripted into the organisation.

Recruits report to the Sa'ka School in Inshas, Alsharqiya. Unlike the rest of the Army which has almost spartan infrastructure the School has relatively decent training areas and accommodation.

The training program itself is split into two, Initial Training (basics) and the Primary Sa'ka Course.

The initial training follows the same basic syllabus as the rest of the Egyptian Army.

A lot of time is spent doing parade ground drill to install discipline and the recruits are also taught basic firearm skills, section tactics and field craft.

The syllabus hasn't had any



Unit 777 Weapons



Heckler & Koch MP5



Heckler & Koch MP7



Heckler & Koch G36



Colt M1911



AKM



SIG SG 550



Heckler & Koch USP



major changes in decades and, coupled with the short training period of only six weeks, it means that many of the recruits are of poor standard.

What is different during initial training at the Sa'ka school is the heavy emphasis placed on physical fitness to prepare recruits for the Primary Sa'ka Course.

It's a pass or fail month long ordeal that is both physically and mentally challenging. It focuses on very demanding PT sessions, brutal assault courses, traditional martial arts, and instilling an ethos which puts personal sacrifice for the country, corps, and soldier's comrades before all else.

After a recruit passes the Primary Sa'ka Course is no longer regarded as a soldier but rather as a Fida'i or a sacrificial warrior. The theme is so entrenched into the corps that their motto is literally "Victory or Martyrdom".

In the end the School produces Conscripts who are physically robust, motivated, and have a unique ethos but are poorly skilled for what should be elite Special Forces soldiers in the 21st Century.

Unit 777

Unit 777, also known as Task Force 777, is an Egyptian military counter-terrorism and special operations unit.

It was created in 1978 by the government of Anwar Sadat in response to concerns of increased terrorist activity following the expulsion of Soviet military advisors from the country by Sadat and his efforts to achieve peace with Israel.

In 1978, Egyptian Army Special Forces were dispatched to Larnaca International Airport, Larnaca, Cyprus in response to the hijacking of a Cyprus Air passenger aircraft by operatives of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

The operation was organized hastily, and Egyptian authorities failed to notify Cyprus of the arrival of the unit. As the Egyptian commandos approached the plane on the tarmac, they were mistaken by the Cyprus security forces as terrorist reinforcements. Cypriot security forces opened fire on the approaching Egyptian SF members, who were without nearby cover and conspicuous in desert camouflage clothing. The fire-fight cost the lives of 15 members of the 79 members of the Egyptian commando force sent, however there were no reported Cypriot fatalities.

The incident resulted in a major row between the governments, with the Egyptians accusing the Cypriots of a lack of cooperation and recklessly killing their troops.

The Cypriots accused the Egyptians of failing to inform them of the arrival of Egyptian troops and of blatantly disregarding their national sovereignty.

The aftermath of the failed night-time incident and the need of a professional counter-terrorism unit in Egypt resulted in the creation of Unit 777.

EgyptAir Flight 321

On August 23, 1976, three armed terrorists claiming to be from the Abd Al-Nasir Movement hijacked the EgyptAir



Unit 777

Flight 321, a Cairo-Luxor flight, and asked the pilot to land in Tripoli.

They demanded the release of five Libyans imprisoned in Cairo in connection with two assassination attempts. The context was the deterioration of relations between Egypt and Libya after the Yom Kippur War due to Libyan opposition to Sadat's peace policy.

There had been a breakdown in unification talks between the two governments, which subsequently led to the Libyan-Egyptian War.

Fifteen minutes after take off from Cairo International Airport, an Italian pilot called the airport to report that he had received a beam aerial from the Egyptian aircraft heading to Luxor that it had been hijacked and the flight was under terrorist control.

President Sadat ordered the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense to make the necessary decisions to protect the passengers and arrest the terrorists. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense quickly flew to Luxor International Airport where they started a secret meeting in the airport's tower,

while Major General Abdul Hafiz Al-Bagori, Governor of Qena started negotiations with the three terrorists in order to gain time.

The terrorists were persuaded to allow the aircraft to land in Luxor for refuelling. Negotiations continued until 15h00, when the governor told the terrorists that engineers were ready. The engineers were two disguised Sa'ka officers, who went inside and outside the aircraft several times in order to appear to be maintenance workers. Minutes later three officers stormed the aircraft and captured the hijackers. The force that stormed the aircraft was later announced to be a special unit within the Sa'ka Forces and further information was classified, the same force which was later named 777.

EgyptAir Flight 648

In 1985, Unit 777 was dispatched again to deal with a hijacking, this time to Malta.

An Egypt Air Boeing 737 (EgyptAir Flight 648) had landed in Luqa Airport under the control of Abu Nidal faction terrorists, purportedly as retaliation for Egypt's failure to protect the terrorists that had hijacked the MS Achille Lauro earlier that year.

Although the operation was planned more carefully this time, the TF 777 operators committed several mistakes that would eventually prove fatal to many of the hostages.

As explosives were detonated to attempt to blow a hole on the top of the airframe, the explosion ripped through the cabin area, immediately killing 20

passengers. Using the same hole, the operators gained entry to the plane but in the confusion opened fire indiscriminately and killed and injured more passengers.

In the ensuing chaos, passengers that managed to flee the plane were then gunned down by snipers in positions around the airport who mistook them for terrorists attempting to escape. The total number of passengers killed was 57, out of 88 total.

Aftermath

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had been assassinated during a military parade in October 1981.

Despite that, and the failure of two of Unit 777's missions, it became clear that the Egyptian authorities were determined to take immediate and forceful action against terrorists. Since then there have been no major hijacking incidents involving Egyptian aircraft.

Current status

After the outcomes of their first two major operations, Unit 777 was temporarily disbanded, and formed again later to deal with internal threats. The unit is currently located in southern Cairo and is equipped with Mi-8 helicopters.

Unit 777 is known to have received training from US Special Operation Forces (Delta and SEALs), as well as from European forces, including the British SAS, French GIGN, and the German GSG 9.