



## **Sinai, October 29, 1956: the first wartime parachute drop by Israeli paratroopers at Mitla Pass, 70 years ago**

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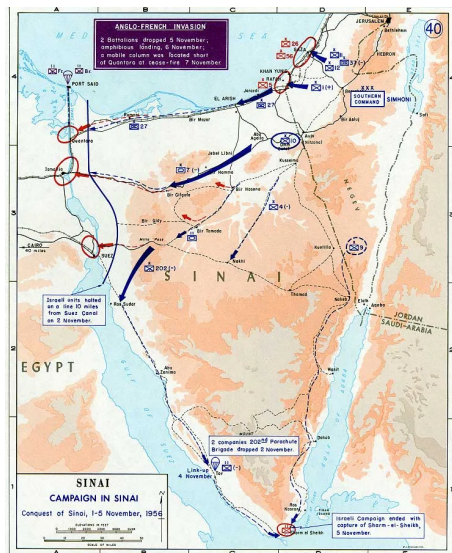
**In the autumn of 1956, the Middle East was experiencing a period of growing tension. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal on July 26, triggering an international crisis that directly involved France and the United Kingdom.**

At the same time, relations between Egypt and Israel had deteriorated due to armed infiltrations along the border, retaliatory military operations, and Egyptian restrictions on Israeli shipping through the Straits of Tiran.

Israel, France, and the United Kingdom reached a secret agreement for military intervention against Egypt. The plan called for an Israeli offensive in the Sinai to create the conditions for a subsequent Anglo-French intervention in the Suez Canal area.

On October 29, 1956, under the direction of Israeli Chief of Staff General Moshe Dayan, **Operazione Kadesh**, also known as the Sinai Campaign, began.

The operation was opened by **395 paratroopers from the 890<sup>o</sup> Battaglione of the Israeli 202<sup>a</sup> Brigata Paracadutisti, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rafael Eitan**, who conducted an airdrop near the eastern approaches to Mitla Pass.



Caption: Map of Israeli military operations during the Sinai Campaign (October 29 – November 5, 1956), showing IDF advance routes and the airdrop zones of the 202<sup>a</sup> Brigata Paracadutisti, including Mitla Pass. Public Domain photo – work of the United States federal government.

## The first Israeli airdrop at Mitla Pass

On the afternoon of October 29, 395 paratroopers from the 890<sup>o</sup> Battaglione, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rafael Eitan, boarded Douglas C-47 Dakota transport aircraft of the Israeli Air Force.

The unit was part of the 202<sup>a</sup> Brigata Paracadutisti, commanded by Colonel Ariel Sharon, who would go on to become one of the most important figures in Israeli military and political history.

The objective was the area of the eastern approaches to Mitla Pass, a narrow route through the Sinai highlands along the axis leading toward the Suez Canal.

**At around 5:00 p.m., the paratroopers began jumping into Egyptian territory.**

The airdrop was an absolute first for the IDF: for the first time, an Israeli battalion was inserted by air into enemy territory as part of an actual combat operation.

Once on the ground, the troops regrouped, recovered their supplies and equipment, and established initial defensive positions while awaiting link-up with the rest of the brigade.

The drop zone was relatively isolated, at a considerable distance from the main Israeli forces. The success of the mission therefore depended on the battalion's ability to hold its positions until reinforcements arrived.

## **The maneuver of the 202<sup>a</sup> Brigata Paracadutisti**

**While the 890<sup>o</sup> Battaglione completed its airborne drop, the rest of the 202<sup>a</sup> Brigata, led by Ariel Sharon, advanced overland through the desert.**

The plan called for a converging maneuver: the paratroopers would establish a bridgehead in the pass area, while the ground elements would travel hundreds of kilometers to link up with them.

It was a combination of tactical airborne insertion, deep infiltration, and ground maneuver, designed to pressure Egyptian defenses and open an axis toward the Suez Canal.

The operation presented considerable difficulties. The distance from the departure bases, the limited availability of heavy equipment, and the nature of the terrain required the paratroopers to maintain a high degree of self-sufficiency.

Supply and equipment drops, including supporting weapons, were also carried out to sustain the battalion.

In the following days, the brigade's forces managed to link up with Eitan's men, setting the conditions for the advance toward the pass.

## **The Battle of Mitla Pass**

The bloodiest moment of the operation came on October 31, 1956, when elements of the 202<sup>a</sup> Brigata entered the pass and encountered heavy Egyptian resistance.

The terrain favored the defenders. The rocky walls and high ground overlooking the road offered ideal positions for ambushes and fire from above, significantly restricting the freedom of maneuver of Israeli units.

The fighting unfolded at close quarters, with paratroopers engaged against Egyptian positions along the gorge.

The action resulted in heavy losses and later prompted debate within Israeli military circles, particularly over the tactical necessity of committing troops in the pass and the command decisions involved.

The battle showed that a successful airborne insertion did not automatically guarantee control of a complex objective, especially in the presence of organized defenses and terrain favorable to the enemy.

**For Israeli paratroopers, Mitla thus became not only the symbol of the first wartime airborne drop, but also one of the harshest combat experiences of the IDF's early years.**

## **The toll of the Campagna del Sinai**

Israeli operations continued rapidly across the peninsula. By November 5, the IDF had taken control of Sinai and the Gaza Strip, while France and the United Kingdom had intervened militarily against Egypt.

The Battle of Mitla Pass came at a particularly high cost: according to the account of the National Library of Israel, 38 Israeli servicemen were killed, one was reported missing, and more than one hundred were wounded.

**Internationally, the crisis generated intense diplomatic pressure, particularly from the United States and the Soviet Union. Anglo-French forces were forced to halt their intervention, and Israel subsequently withdrew from the occupied Egyptian territories.**

The outcome of the campaign demonstrated the IDF's ability to mobilize and maneuver, but also highlighted the political limits of using military force in an international crisis.

## **The legacy of the 1956 airdrop**

From a military history perspective, the action of October 29, 1956, marked a key milestone in the development of Israel's airborne component.

The operation demonstrated the ability to rapidly deploy a light infantry unit deep into enemy territory, exploiting surprise and air mobility to reach objectives far from friendly lines.

At the same time, the difficulties encountered by the paratroopers underscored the importance of communications, timely reinforcements, and coordination between airborne forces and ground units.

The Sinai experience contributed to the development of subsequent Israeli operational doctrines, based on speed of action, commanders' initiative, and integration among the different branches of the Armed Forces.

Seventy years after that first airdrop, the Mitla Pass remains one of the symbolic sites in the history of Israeli paratroopers.

**An operation that marked the IDF's entry into the combat employment of airborne forces and continues to be studied for its tactical implications, the challenges faced, and the human cost of the fighting.**