

General Service Medal with clasp 'Canal Zone' 21st October 1952 – 17th November 1956

Qualifying Period - Awarded for 30 days continuous service during the period October 1951 – October 1954 within certain specified geographical boundaries in Egypt. This GSM was awarded some 50 years later following representation to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

British troops had been in Egypt since 1882 and in 1914 the country became a British Protectorate until it gained its independence in 1922, with Britain being allowed to keep a military presence there.

In 1936 an Anglo-Egyptian treaty was signed which agreed that the British Military should remain in the country but be concentrated in the Suez Canal Zone area, the Zone effectively remaining in British hands for another 20 years, finally withdrawing completely by July 1956.

Soon after the Second World War, in 1946, the Egyptian government made certain demands for a revision of the 1936 Treaty, one of which was the immediate withdrawal of all British troops. This was the time of the 'Cold War', with Russia amassing her troops near the Turkish border with a possible threat to the oil fields in the Gulf, and there was general political unrest all through the Middle East, both of which could threaten the safety of the Canal. Britain regarded the protection of the Canal, an international waterway, and the free passage of ships, as being paramount, therefore could not agree to the unreasonable demands made by the Egyptian government and insisted on complying with the terms agreed to in the 1936 Treaty.

In 1951 the then Egyptian Government unilaterally declared the 1936 treaty void, abrogated it, and ordered its police and troops to start harassing British troops in the Zone. This harassment escalated into more serious terrorist ('Fedayeen') activities against British personnel and property and resulted in the 'Emergency' period of October 1951 to October 1954. The situation became so serious that towards the end of 1951 the garrison in the Zone was increased from about 20,000 troops to 80,000, plus equipment, in just ten days, the swiftest ever build-up by the British Armed Forces in peacetime. Service families 'living out' were hurriedly evacuated to the safety of guarded camps, or even in some cases, back to Britain. Some families arriving at that time from the UK on the Troopship 'Empress of Australia' were returned home on the same ship without disembarking.

From 16th October 1951 to 19th October 1954 the troops were on an 'Active Service' situation, it was a dangerous time and many lives were lost through organised terrorist attacks on camps and vehicle convoys, sniping, abductions, murder and sabotage etc. It is estimated that around 70% of the British Armed Forces stationed in the Canal Zone during this Emergency period were Conscripts completing their 'National Service' and were not fully trained in anti terrorist fighting. For years it was called by many as 'The Forgotten War fought by a Forgotten Army', but in July 2003 the British Government decided that, after a long campaign by Suez Veterans and their numerous supporters, those who had served in the Canal Zone from 16th October 1951 to 19th October 1954 were to be awarded the General Service Medal or the Naval General Service Medal with 'Canal Zone' clasp, 50 years after the event.

Because of incomplete records it is doubtful the exact number of people killed as the result of terrorist activities will ever be known. British Service personnel and members of their Families, Commonwealth troops and Civilians also lost their lives through illness, accidents and disease due to the poor conditions that prevailed.