Ibrahim al-Rifa’i: 
Egypt’s Most Decorated Soldier

Christopher Weeks

In June 1967, Egypt – and the Arab world as a whole – suffered the most humiliating military defeat in its modern history. In six days, the Israeli military destroyed the Egyptian Air Force on the ground, routed its Army, and occupied the Sinai Peninsula, an area nearly four times larger than the entire state of Israel itself. Egypt’s faith in its military and its leader, the charismatic Gamal abdel Nasser, was shattered. Nasser began a “war of attrition” against Israel, largely to remind Israel – as well as Egypt – that it was not defeated. During these dark years, an Army officer named Ibrahim al-Rifa’i emerged as a rare Egyptian military hero, and would become one of Egypt’s most decorated soldiers.

After attending training courses in the Soviet Union in 1959, he was assigned as an instructor at Egypt’s Commando School. He served with the Egyptian expeditionary forces during the grueling intervention in Yemen in the early 1960s and in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, probably in special-forces units in both cases. But it was in the War of Attrition that al-Rifa’i came to prominence.

As a colonel, al-Rifa’i commanded the 39th Special Operations Group (Figure 2), a joint Army/Navy unit that specialized in crossing the Suez Canal separating Egypt from the Israeli-occupied Sinai. Al-Rifa’i often directly led missions, conducting 39 operations between July 1967 and August 1968, an average of over three a month. Another dozen or so operations were conducted through early 1970. Although most were short-range raids and reconnaissance operations of little military value, all gave invaluable experience and confidence to Egyptian forces.

Born in the Cairo district of Abbasiyya in 1931, al-Rifa’i (Figure 1) was educated in the Nile Delta provinces of Gharbiyya and Sharqiyya, graduating from the War College in Cairo on his 23rd birthday, June 27, 1954.

Figure 1: Al-Rifa’i as a captain, in a photo probably taken in the early 1960s. He wears the ribbons of nine medals, including the commemorative medals for Liberation, the United Arab Republic, Evacuation, Independence, Victory, and Army Day (Hamad, p. 632).

The best known of these operations was a raid on November 16, 1969 on the port of Eilat, in Israel proper, not the Sinai, and nearly 300 kilometers from the nearest Egyptian port. Probably inserted by submarine, frogmen from the 39th Group attached limpet mines to three Israeli landing craft, sinking them. The most-daring and longest-range Egyptian operation of the conflict, it was...
embarrassing to Israel, and a great boost to Egyptian public morale. Another raid on Eilat was conducted on February 6, 1970, during which two more Israeli landing craft were sunk. It is unknown if al-Rifa'i led this raid himself, but he likely was involved to some degree, at least in the planning.

The War of Attrition ended in early 1970, and Egypt prepared for its offensive to retake the Sinai Peninsula. The 39th Group was broken up to provide personnel for a large number of new special operations units being created. Personnel from the unit were awarded 214 gallantry decorations during the War of Attrition, and the unit collectively received the Military Order of the Republic, which is “granted to any military unit or formation for outstanding achievements,” according to official Egyptian criteria.

Figure 3: As a Brigadier, al-Rifa'i wears the ribbons of no less than 23 medals, in this photo probably taken in 1973. He also wears full-sized medals for three Military Stars, two Military Medals of Courage, the Star of Honor, and an unidentified foreign award (al-Sayyid, p. 18).

Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal on October 6, 1973, placing Israel on the defensive for the first week of the war. However, Israeli General (and current Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon’s 143rd Armored Division counterattacked on 16 October, driving between a gap in Egyptian forces just south of the city of Ismailia. His forces threw two bridges over the Canal and drove deep into Egyptian lines. With Israel gaining the upper hand, all available Egyptian forces were needed.

Al-Rifa'i’s early wartime service is unknown. According to Heikal, al-Rifa’i – then a Brigadier (Figure 3) – led a unit that was inserted behind Israeli lines several days before the outbreak of the war, but if this is true, he must have returned to Egyptian lines within several days. When Israel crossed the Canal, al-Rifa’i was placed in command of a unit charged with destroying Sharon’s bridges, possibly as early as October 16. (Hamad calls the unit “the special intelligence group,” but this may not be its actual designation.) While standing on the bank of the Canal on October 19, supervising the placement of explosives under the bridge, al-Rifa’i was hit and instantly killed by a round from an Israeli tank.

In February 1974, al-Rifa’i was posthumously awarded the Sinai Star, First Class, the country’s highest medal for military gallantry, which is awarded “to any member of the armed forces who displays exceptional courage or resource, which results in the infliction of casualties on the enemy whilst in action.” This medal joined seven other gallantry medals he had previously been awarded: the Military Star of Honor (for “exceptional services or performing deeds of sacrifice or courage when confronting the enemy”), two Military Medals of Courage First Class (for “courage and sacrifice”), three Military Stars (for “exceptional service with courage and a spirit of self-sacrifice”), and one Military Medal of Duty First Class (for “performing duties faithfully and courageously”). While it is not known for certain if he is Egypt’s most decorated soldier, he must be among its most highly decorated combat veterans. Multiple awards of a gallantry medal are rare, as is a wide variety of awards such as al-Rifa’i’s.

Today, a street in the east Cairo suburb of Madinat Nasr is named after al-Rifa’i. Appropriately, it lies a few miles from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, built shortly after the 1973 War.

Al-Rifa’i’s Medals

This is a partial list of al-Rifa’i’s medals and the dates of award compiled from the al-Sayyid article and photographic evidence:

Order of Liberation (1952)
Military Medal of the Evacuation (1955)
Military Medal of Independence (1956)
Victory Medal (1957)
Commemorative Medal of the United Arab Republic (1958)
Army Day Commemorative Medal (1959)
Military Medal of Courage, First Class (1963?), and second award (1968)
Tenth Anniversary of the Revolution Commemoration Medal (1962)
Military Star (1968), and two subsequent awards (both 1969)
Military Medal of Duty, First Class (1971)
Star of Honor (1971)
Twentieth Anniversary of the Revolution Commemoration Medal (1972)
Sinai Star, First Class (1974) (posthumous)
Exceptional Promotion Medal (1965)
Mobilization Medal (unknown date of award)
At least five other medals including foreign awards

Thanks to Owain Raw-Rees for his advice and comments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Odd Fellows Commemorative Badge

Peter J. Eisert

Last year I came across an Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) souvenir badge in a small shop. Odd Fellow badges are not something I normally collect, but I immediately took a liking to its design.

Figure 1: Obverse of the Odd Fellows badge.

Odd Fellows Commemorative Badge

The bronze medal was struck to commemorate the dedication of the new Odd Fellows Temple in Philadelphia. The obverse of the badge (Figure 1) has the temple building as the central motif. In a circular fashion the medal is inscribed ODD FELLOWS TEMPLE.