

Reg Ashton
Caught by history: a Bradwell man in the Suez Crisis, 1956.

Reg Ashton, younger son of Charles Bradwell Ashton, was working as an engineer for Suez Contractors Ltd (SCL) in Egypt when President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. At the time, the canal, which joins the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, was of enormous strategic and economic importance - 80% of the oil for Europe passed through it- and was in a Canal Zone controlled jointly by Egypt, France and Britain. Diplomacy and attempts at military intervention by Britain and France were a failure and British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden resigned. The Suez Crisis was also a crucial point after which Britain turned away from the remnants of the imperial past towards closer alliance with the United States - a change whose repercussions are still being felt.

Reg's wife Doreen and their daughter Susan had fortunately left just before events came to a head, but Reg and several hundred other British men working in the Canal Zone were interned and taken to Cairo. Reg's family was consumed with worry and did all they could to find out what had happened to him, bombarding the authorities with letters: some of the replies to his mother, Mary, are quoted below. Diplomatic relations had been broken off and only scraps of information emerged via the Swiss Legation and the few British subjects who were allowed to leave. At first, the men were housed in the Khedevial School in Cairo, but later were split up: Reg's group was moved on Nov 18th to the English School in Heliopolis, a Cairo suburb. News, when it finally came, was mixed.



Reg Ashton in Egypt

From: Suez Contractors Ltd

To: Mrs Mary Ashton, Bradwell 27.11.56

... 'living conditions are now much better...but there is still shortage of food. Internees are allowed out for one hour...and are permitted a cold bath daily. There has been no epidemic...Internees in the Victoria school can buy food.'

It was only later that the family found out that Reg was at the other school! Many internees had had to leave all their possessions and personal documents in their houses, and money was short, though the Swiss Legation tried to supply their needs.

From: British Red Cross Society, International Relations and Relief.

To: Mrs Mary Ashton 30.11.56

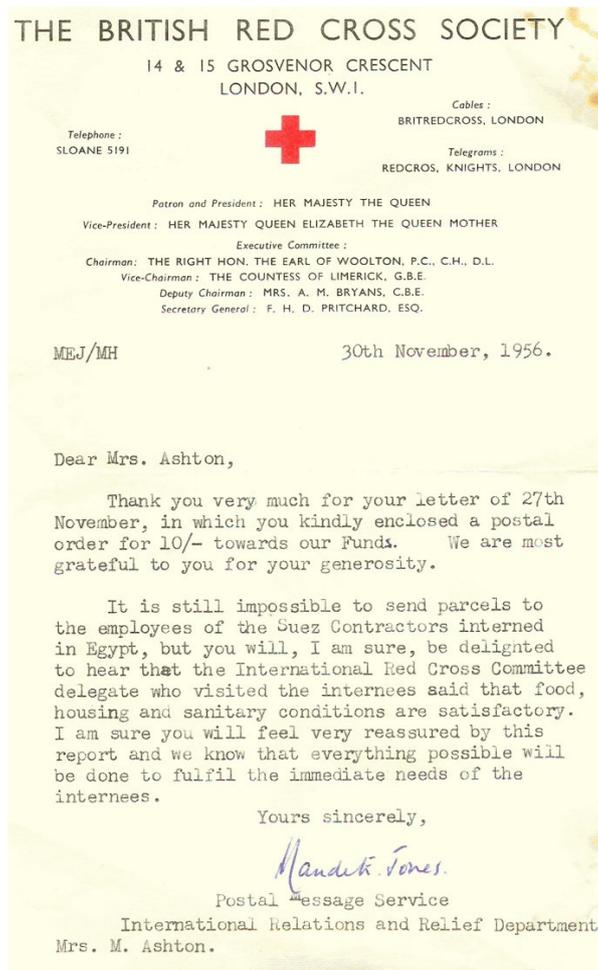
... 'it is still impossible to send letters or parcels to the employees interned in Egypt. ...the delegate who visited the internees said that food, housing and sanitary conditions were satisfactory.'

More detailed news followed when Brandon Laight, ex- headmaster of the English School, was allowed to leave Egypt, and reported to SCL:

From: Brandon Laight 4.12.56

To: Sir John M. Duncanson, Chairman, SCL.

... 'we were put out of the building on 2.11 and your personnel were moved in on 18.11... Naturally, no kind of detention is tolerable to British people, but apart from this they seem to be looked after and in good health.....the men seem to have organised themselves into Committees...everyone seems to be cheerful...'



Letter from British Red Cross

This was comforting, though not everything was as peaceful as it seemed: after he arrived home Reg told of hearing the Cairo mob yelling for blood outside the school. Luckily, the

Egyptian commandant was in control of the situation. Diplomatic efforts redoubled and by mid December contingency plans were being made for the evacuation of the internees.

From: Suez Contractors Ltd

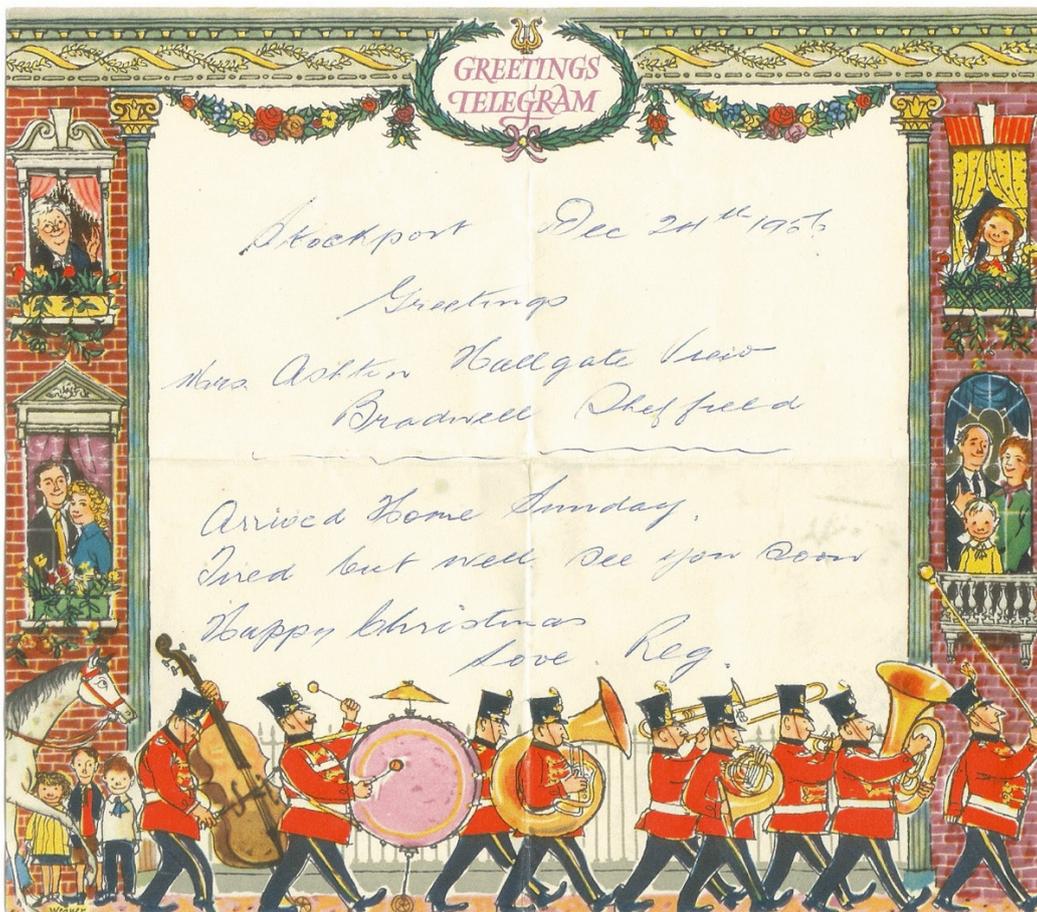
12.12.56

To: Mrs Mary Ashton

... 'we do not yet know when our men will leave Egypt...arrangements cover the reception at airports, including the provision of food, heavy clothing and comforts. ...a fully qualified medical service will be available...Our men will be put in funds...we will provide, where necessary, food especially suited to personnel who have been on a restricted diet. Wives and next of kin are earnestly asked not to meet them, but to remain...at home. Please on no account send any clothes or suitcases. '

It was made clear that any movement would be at short notice and that it wouldn't be known who was on which aircraft, keeping uncertainty high till the end.

Finally, on Christmas Eve 1956, a telegram arrived in Bradwell:



Brief biographical note on Reginald Charles Ashton. He was born on 24th August 1923 to Charles Bradwell and Mary Ashton. He was their second son, his elder brother Henry Neil was born in 1918. Reg had two sisters Joan Mary and Dorothy Anne born in 1920 and 1927 respectively. Reg married Doreen Aldred in 1950, they had three children Susan Louise, Robert James and Pater David. Reg died on 22nd August 2004. This piece was written by Christine Skerrow who was Joan Ashton's daughter and so Reg was her uncle.