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March, 2019

Kiwi to command peacekeeping force in ISIS-threatened Sinai

Thomas Manch · 05:00, Oct 07 2019

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Tourists wounded in bus blast near Egypt's Giza Pyramids

Government campaign to stamp out armed groups in Sinai Peninsula results in increasing attacks on tourists there.

Retreating Israeli troops were tearing down buildings when New Zealand peacekeepers reached an embattled Sinai in 1982. The desert peninsula, a nose of land wedged between Egypt and its invading neighbour, was pocked with landmines that shifted as rainfall spread over the punishing terrain.

the south, after a plane crash killed 224 passengers and extremist group ISIS claimed responsibility.

Major General Evan Williams is also returning to the arid land he served in as military assistant to the commander in 1998. The deputy chief of New Zealand's Army will lead the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) and its 1150 troops from 13 countries, come December.

Both Egypt and Israel asked for a Kiwi to be put in charge of the peacekeeping mission, though Britain was next in line to fill the position. Why New Zealand was favoured over the Brits, Defence Minister Ron Mark – also a Sinai veteran — won't say.

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At least 12 wounded in Egypt blast targeting tourist bus

The blast set off near the museum close to the Giza Pyramids. Security sources told Reuters that most of the injured were foreign tourists.

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Williams was happy to answer the call, saying commanding the MFO is a privilege in a 35-year career of many deployments, highs and certainly a low.

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from school. He has lived a fair portion of his life in the cold, high-desert between deployments.

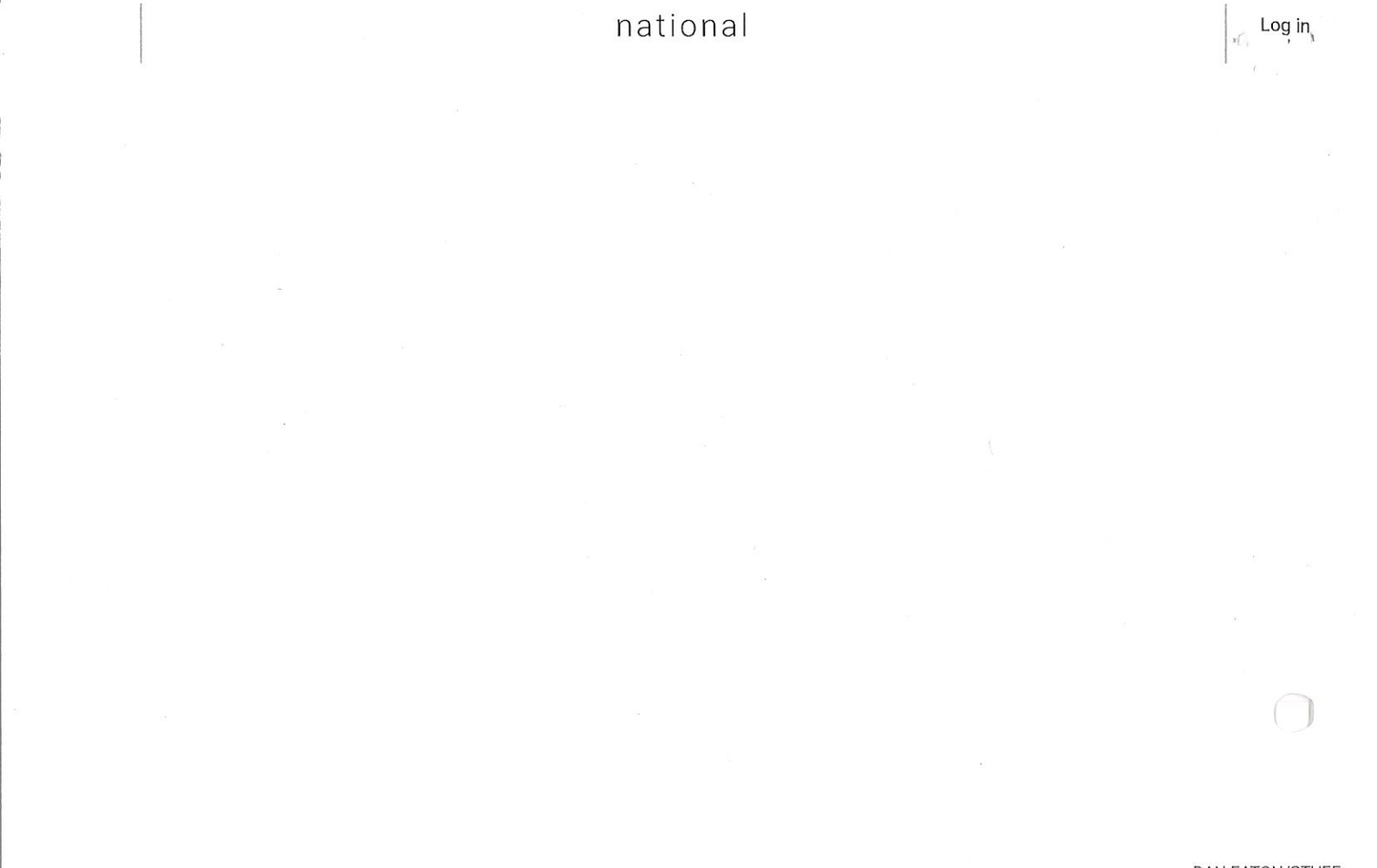
He served in Bosnia in 1995, when there "wasn't much peace to keep". He saw "despair at its most significant" in Sumatra, Indonesia, when 100,000 died in the 2003 Boxing Day tsunami.

KEVIN STENT

Major General Evan Williams will lead the Multinational Force and Observers come December.

But it was in East Timor where the worst came. Private Leonard Manning, under William's command, was shot and killed in an ambush by pro-Indonesian militia in the jungle; the first combat fatality since the Vietnam War.

"When you lose a soldier, every individual reacts in a different way," Williams said. "But collectively as a group we realised that we needed to turn that emotion into a determination. We realised when the local population of East Timor see a New Zealand soldier being killed, it does affect their sense of security."



DAN EATON/STUFF

New Zealand soldier Private Gemma Knight, 22, navigates a local market in an MFO water tanker en route to re-supply Fijian troops stationed Check Point One Charlie on the Egyptian border with Israel, in 2007. New Zealand has been part of the peacekeeping force in the Sinai since 1982. (file photo)

Today the MFO faces a tricky challenge, managing the risk of an insurgency they're not tasked with dealing to. Twice in 2015 MFO vehicles were struck by improvised-explosives, pushing the force into its southern base. Militants attacked the peacekeeper's north camp in 2012, injuring four.

Its eyes in the northern desert flats have been replaced with cameras, sensors and aerial surveys. The MFO is not a target itself, according to many, as the peacekeepers employ so many local Bedouin in service jobs.

"The threat level now has largely reduced since the insurgency commenced," Williams said.

William's mandate is observe and report, with protection of more than a peace treaty in mind. The Sinai acts as a buffer for the Suez Canal, on its east, a significant shipping route through which New Zealand's trade travels.

This makes Williams part-commander, part-diplomat. If Egypt or Israel errs from the treaty, placing soldiers or military equipment where it shouldn't, Williams talks with both sides to find a resolution. This happens irregularly, he says.

DAN EATON/STUFF

Kiwi peacekeepers in the Sinai practice their haka at their compound in North Camp. The international peacekeeping contingent has since left the North Camp due to risk of insurgency.

Defence Minister Ron Mark is pleased to have Williams lead what he deems "one of the world's most successful deployments".

He visited the MFO, and its 28 New Zealand soldiers, in January and said it was an "emotional" return. Mark was given five days notice before his first deployment, the beginning of the MFO in 1982.

United States President Jimmy Carter, seeking to maintain peace and preserve access to the Suez Canal, called like-minded countries to arrange an independent peacekeeping force after Russia vetoed a proposal at the UN.

KEVIN STENT/STUFF

Major General Evan Williams is currently Deputy Chief of Army. He was asked to command of an international peacekeeping force in the Sinai Peninsula.

Mark recalls the Israelis demolishing the facilities the peacekeepers were promised. He remembers the mines, the punishing terrain, a dogged Kiwi officer who led a brutal road-building mission, and heavy vehicles so poorly equipped they lost men off the side of the hills.

"It was not smooth, let's just leave it at that."

Williams will not return with such stories. The insurgency presents "a whole bunch of new pressures" on the commander, but New Zealand soldiers won't be dragged into that battle.

DAVID DEGNER/GETTY

A bedouin guide adjusts his head scarf while on top of Mount Kathrine, standing above the mountainous South Sinai.

Security analyst Paul Buchanan, speaking broadly, says New Zealand has a reputation for autonomy and independence, none of which Britain has.It's also facing leadership problems.

New Zealand may simply be more palatable than its old colonial power, he said.

"It could well be that part of the thought process is ... go with someone who's more consistent and reliable, particularly someone that seems to have a leadership committed to multi-lateralism."

Sunday Star Times

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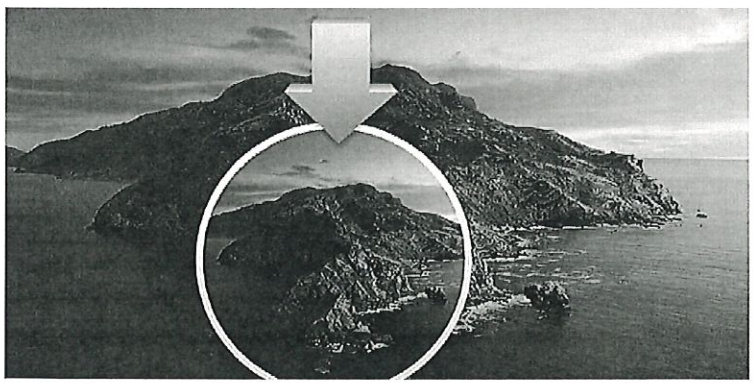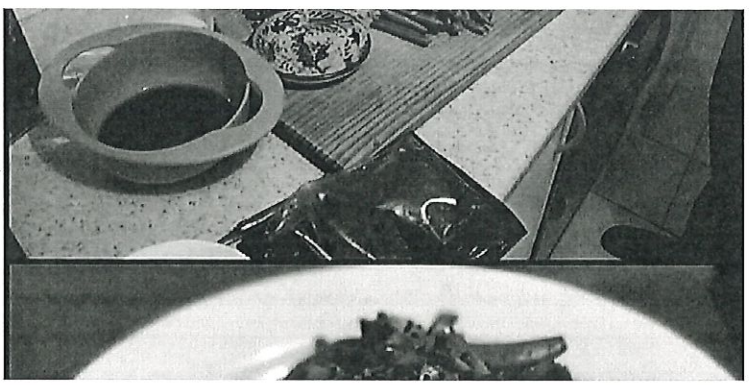
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