
PROLOGUE

BROKEN ARROW

“Like the wolf on the fold.” In recounting the Syrian attack on the Israeli-held Golan Heights at 1400 local time on Saturday, the 6th of October, 1973, most commentators automatically recalled Lord Byron’s famous line. There is also little doubt that that is precisely what the more literarily inclined Syrian commanders had in mind when they placed the final touches on the operations plans that would hurl more tanks and guns at the Israelis than any of Hitler’s vaunted panzer generals had ever dreamed of having.

However, the sheep found by the Syrian Army that grim October day were more like big-horned rams in autumn rut than the more docile kind found in pastoral verse. Outnumbered by roughly nine to one, the two Israeli brigades on the Golan were crack units. The 7th Brigade held the northern Golan and scarcely budged, its defensive network a delicate balance of rigidity and flexibility. Individual strongpoints held stubbornly, channeling the Syrian penetrations into rocky defiles where they could be pinched off and smashed by roving bands of Israeli armor which lay in wait behind the Purple Line. By the time reinforcements began arriving on the second day, the situation was still in hand—but barely. By the end of the fourth day, the Syrian tank army that had fallen upon the 7th lay a smoking ruin before it.

The Barak (“Thunderbolt”) Brigade held the southern heights and was less fortunate. Here the terrain was less well suited to the defense, and here also the Syrians appear to have been more ably led. Within hours the Barak had been broken into several fragments. Though each piece would later prove to be as dangerous as a nest of vipers, the Syrian spearheads were

quick to exploit the gaps and race toward their strategic objective, the Sea of Galilee. The situation that developed over the next thirty-six hours would prove to be the gravest test of Israeli arms since 1948.

Reinforcements began arriving on the second day. These had to be thrown into the battle area piecemeal—plugging holes, blocking roads, even rallying units that had broken under the desperate strain of combat and, for the first time in Israeli history, fled the field before the advancing Arabs. Only on the third day were the Israelis able to assemble their armored fist, first enveloping, then smashing the three deep Syrian penetrations. The changeover to offensive operations followed without pause. The Syrians were hurled back toward their own capital by a wrathful counterattack, and surrendered a field littered with burned-out tanks and shattered men. At the end of this day the troopers of the Barak and the 7th heard over their unit radio nets a message from Israeli Defense Forces High Command:

YOU HAVE SAVED THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL.

And so they had. Yet outside Israel, except for schools in which men learn the profession of arms, this epic battle is strangely unremembered. As in the Six Day War of 1967, the more freewheeling operations in the Sinai were the ones that attracted the excitement and admiration of the world: bridging the Suez, the Battle of the “Chinese” Farm, the encirclement of the Egyptian 3rd Army—this despite the fearful implications of the Golan fighting, which was far closer to home. Still, the survivors of those two brigades knew what they had done, and their officers could revel in the knowledge that among professional soldiers who know the measure of skill and courage that such a stand entails, their Battle for the Heights would be remembered with Thermopylae, Bastogne, and Gloucester Hill.

Each war knows many ironies, however, and the October War was no exception. As is true of most glorious defensive stands, this one was largely unnecessary. The Israelis had misread intelligence reports which, had they been acted on as little as twelve hours earlier, would have enabled them to execute pre-set plans and pour reserves onto the Heights hours before the onslaught commenced. Had they done so, there would have been no heroic stand. There would have been no need for their tankers and infantrymen to die in numbers so great that it would be weeks before the true casualty figures were released to a proud but grievously wounded nation. Had the information been acted

upon, the Syrians would have been massacred before the Purple Line for all their lavish collection of tanks and guns—and there is little glory in massacres. This failure of intelligence has never been adequately explained. Did the fabled Mossad fail so utterly to discern the Arabs' plans? Or did Israeli political leaders fail to recognize the warnings they received? These questions received immediate attention in the world press, of course, most particularly in regard to Egypt's assault-crossing of the Suez, which breached the vaunted Bar-Lev Line.

Equally serious but less well appreciated was a more fundamental error made years earlier by the usually prescient Israeli general staff. For all its firepower, the Israeli Army was not heavily outfitted with tube artillery, particularly by Soviet standards. Instead of heavy concentrations of mobile field guns, the Israelis chose to depend heavily on large numbers of short-range mortars, and attack aircraft. This left Israeli gunners on the Heights outnumbered twelve to one, subject to crushing counter-battery fire, and unable to provide adequate support to the beleaguered defenders. That error cost many lives.

As is the case with most grave mistakes, this one was made by intelligent men, for the very best of reasons. The same attack-fighter that struck the Golan could rain steel and death on the Suez as little as an hour later. The IAF was the first modern air force to pay systematic attention to "turn-around time." Its ground crewmen were trained to act much like a racing car's pit crew, and their speed and skill effectively doubled each plane's striking power, making the IAF a profoundly flexible and weighted instrument. And making a Phantom or a Skyhawk appear to be more valuable than a dozen mobile field guns.

What the Israeli planning officers had failed to take fully into account was the fact that the Soviets were the ones arming the Arabs, and, in doing so, would inculcate their clients with their own tactical philosophies. Intended to deal with NATO air power always deemed better than their own, Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) designers had always been among the world's best. *Russian* planners saw the coming October War as a splendid chance to test their newest tactical weapons and doctrine. They did not spurn it. The Soviets gave their Arab clients a SAM network such as the North Vietnamese or Warsaw Pact forces of the time dared not dream about, a nearly solid phalanx of interlocking missile batteries and radar sys-

tems deployed in depth, along with new mobile SAMs that could advance with the armored spearheads, extending the "bubble" of counter-air protection under which ground action could continue without interference. The officers and men who were to operate those systems had been painstakingly trained, many within the Soviet Union with the full benefit of everything the Soviets and Vietnamese had learned of American tactics and technology, which the Israelis were correctly expected to imitate. Of all the Arab soldiers in the October War, only these men would achieve their pre-war objectives. For two days they effectively neutralized the IAF. Had ground operations gone according to plan, that would have been enough.

And it is here that the story has its proper beginning. The situation on the Golan Heights was immediately evaluated as serious. The scarce and confused information coming in from the two stunned brigade staffs led Israeli High Command to believe that tactical control of the action had been lost. It seemed that their greatest nightmare had finally occurred: they had been caught fatally unready; their northern kibbutzim were vulnerable; their civilians, their *children* lay in the path of a Syrian armored force that by all rights could roll down from the Heights with the barest warning. The initial reaction of the staff operations officers was something close to panic.

But panic is something that good operations officers also plan for. In the case of a nation whose enemies' avowed objective was nothing short of physical annihilation, there was no defensive measure that could be called extreme. As early as 1968, the Israelis, like their American and NATO counterparts, had based their ultimate plan on the nuclear option. At 03:55 hours, local time, on October 7th, just fourteen hours after the actual fighting began, the alert orders for OPERATION JOSHUA were telexed to the IAF base outside Beersheba.

Israel did not have many nuclear weapons at the time—and denies having any to this date. Not that many would be needed, if it came to that. At Beersheba, in one of the countless underground bomb-storage bunkers, were twelve quite ordinary-looking objects, indistinguishable from the many other items designed to be attached to tactical aircraft except for the silver-red striped labels on their sides. No fins were attached, and there was nothing unusual in the streamlined shape of the burnished-brown aluminum skin, with barely visible seams and a few shackle points. There was a reason for that. To an

unschooled or cursory observer, they might easily have been mistaken for fuel tanks or napalm canisters, and such objects hardly merit a second look. But each was a plutonium fission bomb with a nominal yield of 60 kilotons, quite enough to carve the heart out of a large city, or to kill thousands of troops in the field, or, with the addition of cobalt jackets—stored separately but readily attachable to the external skin—to poison a landscape to all kinds of life for years to come.

On this morning, activity at Beersheba was frantic. Reserve personnel were still streaming into the base from the previous day's devotions and family-visiting all over the small country. Those men on duty had been so for too long a time for the tricky job of arming aircraft with lethal ordnance. Even the newly arriving men had had precious little sleep. One team of ordnancemen, for security reasons not told the nature of their task, was arming a flight of A-4 Skyhawk strike-fighters with nuclear weapons under the eyes of two officers, known as "watchers," for that was their job, to keep visual track of everything that had to do with nuclear weapons. The bombs were wheeled under the centerline hardpoint of each of the four aircraft, lifted carefully by the hoisting arm, then shackled into place. The least exhausted of the ground crew might have noticed that the arming devices and tail fins had not yet been attached to the bombs. If so, they doubtless concluded that the officer assigned to that task was running late—as was nearly everything this cold and fateful morning. The nose of each weapon was filled with electronics gear. The actual exploder mechanism and capsule of nuclear material—collectively known as "the physics package"—were already in the bombs, of course. The Israeli weapons, unlike American ones, were not designed to be carried by alert aircraft during time of peace, and they lacked the elaborate safeguards installed in American weapons by the technicians at the Pantex assembly plant, outside Amarillo, Texas. The fusing systems comprised two packages, one for attachment to the nose, and one integral with the tail fins. These were stored separately from the bombs themselves. All in all, the weapons were very unsophisticated by American or Soviet standards, in the same sense that a pistol is far less sophisticated than a machine gun, but, at close range, equally lethal.

Once the nose and fin packages were installed and activated, the only remaining activation procedure was the installation of a special arming panel within the cockpit of each fighter, and

the attachment of the power plug from the aircraft to the bomb. At that point the bomb would be “released to local control,” placed in the hands of a young, aggressive pilot, whose job was then to loft it in a maneuver called The Idiot’s Loop, which tossed the bomb on a ballistic path that would—probably—allow him and his aircraft to escape without harm when the bomb detonated.

Depending on the exigencies of the moment and the authorization of the “watchers,” Beersheba’s senior ordnance officer had the option to attach the arming packages. Fortunately, this officer was not at all excited about the idea of having half-live “nukes” sitting about on a flight line that some lucky Arab might attack at any moment. A religious man, for all the dangers that faced his country on that cold dawn, he breathed a silent prayer of thanks when cooler heads prevailed in Tel Aviv, and gave the order to stand JOSHUA down. The senior pilots who would have flown the strike mission returned to their squadron ready-rooms and forgot what they had been briefed to do. The senior ordnance officer immediately ordered the bombs removed and returned to their place of safekeeping.

The bone-tired ground crew began removing the weapons just as other teams arrived on their own carts for the task of rearming the Skyhawks with Zuni rocket clusters. The strike order had been put up: *The Golan*. Hit the Syrian armored columns advancing on the Barak’s sector of Purple Line from Kafr Shams. The ordnancemen jostled under the aircraft, two teams each trying to do their jobs, one team trying to remove bombs that they didn’t know to be bombs at all, while the other hung Zunis on the wings.

There were more than four strike aircraft cycling through Beersheba, of course. The dawn’s first mission over the Suez was just returning—what was left of it. The RF-4C Phantom reconnaissance aircraft had been lost, and its F-4E fighter escort limped in trailing fuel from perforated wing tanks and with one of its two engines disabled. The pilot had already radioed his warning in: there was some new kind of surface-to-air missile, maybe that new SA-6; its radar-tracking systems had not registered on the Phantom’s threat-receiver; the recce bird had had no warning at all, and only luck had enabled him to evade the four targeted on his aircraft. That fact was flashed to IAF high command even before the aircraft touched down gingerly on the runway. The plane was directed to taxi down

to the far end of the ramp, close to where the Skyhawks stood. The Phantom's pilot followed the jeep to the waiting fire-fighting vehicles, but just as it stopped, the left main tire blew out. The damaged strut collapsed as well, and 45,000 pounds of fighter dropped to the pavement like dishes from a collapsed table. Leaking fuel ignited, and a small but deadly fire enveloped the aircraft. An instant later, 20mm ammunition from the fighter's gun pod started cooking off, and one of the two crewmen was screaming within the mass of flames. Firefighters moved in with water-fog. The two "watcher" officers were the closest, and raced toward the flames to drag the pilot clear. All three were peppered by fragments from the exploding ammunition, while a fireman coolly made his way through the flames to the second crewman and carried him out, singed but alive. Other firemen collected the watchers and the pilot and loaded their bleeding bodies into an ambulance.

The nearby fire distracted the ordnancemen under the Skyhawks. One bomb, the one on aircraft number three, dropped a moment too soon, crushing the team supervisor's legs on the hoist. In the shrieking confusion of the moment, the team lost track of what was being done. The injured man was rushed to the base hospital while the three dismounted nuclear weapons were carted back to the storage bunker—in the chaos of an airbase on the first full day of a shooting war, the empty cradle on one of the carts somehow went unnoticed. The aircraft line chiefs arrived a moment later to begin abbreviated pre-flight checks as the jeep arrived from the ready shack. Four pilots jumped off it, each with a helmet in one hand and a tactical map in the other, each furiously eager to lash out at his country's enemies.

"What the hell's that?" snapped eighteen-year-old Lieutenant Mordecai Zadin. Called Motti by his friends, he had the gangling awkwardness of his age.

"Fuel tank, looks like," replied the line chief. He was a reservist who owned a garage in Haifa, a kindly, competent man of fifty years.

"Shit," the pilot replied, almost quivering with excitement. "I don't need extra fuel to go to the Golan and back!"

"I can take it off, but I'll need a few minutes." Motti considered that for a moment. A *sabra* from a northern kibbutz, a pilot for barely five months, he saw the rest of his comrades strapping into their aircraft. Syrians were attacking toward the home of his

parents, and he had a sudden horror of being left behind on his first combat mission.

"Fuck it! You can strip it off when I get back." Zadin went up the ladder like a shot. The chief followed, strapping the pilot in place and checking the instruments over the pilot's shoulder.

"She's ready, Motti! Be careful."

"Have some tea for me when I get back." The youngster grinned with all the ferocity such a child could manage. The line chief slapped him on the helmet.

"You just bring my airplane back to me, *menchkin. Mazeltov.*"

The chief dropped down to the concrete and removed the ladder. He next gave the aircraft a last visual scan for anything amiss, as Motti got his engine turning. Zadin worked the flight controls and eased the throttle to full idle, checking fuel and engine-temperature gauges. Everything was where it should be. He looked over to the flight leader and waved his readiness. Motti pulled down the manual canopy, took a last look at the line chief, and fired off his farewell salute.

At eighteen, Zadin was not a particularly young pilot by IAF standards. Selected for his quick boy's reactions and aggressiveness, he'd been identified as a likely prospect four years earlier, and had fought hard for his place in the world's finest air force. Motti loved to fly, had wanted to fly ever since as a toddler he'd seen a Bf-109 training aircraft that an ironic fate had given Israel to start its air force. And he loved his Skyhawk. It was a pilot's aircraft. Not an electronicized monster like the Phantom, the A-4 was a small, responsive bird of prey that leaped at the twitch of his hand on the stick. Now he would fly combat. He was totally unafraid. It never occurred to him to fear for his life—like any teenager he was certain of his own immortality, and combat flyers are selected for their lack of human frailty. Yet he marked the day. Never had he seen so fine a dawn. He felt supernaturally alert, aware of everything: the rich wake-up coffee; the dusty smell of the morning air at Beersheba; now the manly scents of oil and leather in the cockpit; the idle static on his radio circuits; and the tingle of his hands on the control stick. He had never known such a day and it never occurred to Motti Zadin that fate would not give him another.

The four-plane formation taxied in perfect order to the end

of runway zero-one. It seemed a good omen, taking off due north, toward an enemy only fifteen minutes away. On command of the flight leader—himself a mere twenty-one—all four pilots pushed their throttles to the stops, tripped their brakes, and dashed forward into the cool, calm morning air. In seconds all were airborne and climbing to five thousand feet, careful to avoid the civilian air traffic of Ben-Gurion International Airport, which in the mad scheme of life in the Middle East was still fully active.

The Captain gave his usual series of terse commands, just like a training flight: tuck it in, check engine, ordnance, electrical systems. Heads up for MiGs and friendlies. Make sure your IFF is squawking green. The fifteen minutes it took to fly from Beersheba to the Golan passed rapidly. Zadin's eyes strained to see the volcanic escarpment for which his older brother had died while taking it from the Syrians only six years before. The Syrians would not get it back, Motti told himself.

"Flight: turn right to heading zero-four-three. Targets are tank columns four kilometers east of the line. Heads up. Watch for SAMs and ground fire."

"Lead, four: I have tanks on the ground at one," Zadin reported coolly. "Look like our Centurions."

"Good eye, Four," the Captain replied. "They're friendly."

"I got a beeper, *I got launch warning!*" someone called. Eyes scanned the air for danger.

"*Shit!*" called an excited voice. "SAMs low at twelve coming up!"

"I see them. Flight, left and right, break NOW!" the Captain commanded.

The four Skyhawks scattered by elements. There were a dozen SA-2 missiles several kilometers off, like flying telephone poles, coming toward them at Mach-3. The SAMs split left and right too, but clumsily, and two exploded in a midair collision. Motti rolled right and hauled his stick into his belly, diving for the ground and cursing the extra wing weight. Good, the missiles were not able to track them down. He pulled level a bare hundred feet above the rocks, still heading toward the Syrians at four hundred knots, shaking the sky as he roared over the cheering, beleaguered troopers of the Barak.

The mission was a washout as a coherent strike, Motti already knew. It didn't matter. He'd get some Syrian tanks. He didn't have to know exactly whose, so long as they were Syr-

ian. He saw another A-4 and formed up just as it began its firing run. He looked forward and saw them, the dome shapes of Syrian T-62s. Zadin toggled his arming switches without looking. The reflector gunsight appeared in front of his eyes.

"Uh-oh, more SAMs, coming in on the deck." It was the Captain's voice, still cool.

Motti's heart skipped a beat: a swarm of missiles, smaller ones—are these the SA-6s they told us about? he wondered quickly—was tracing over the rocks toward him. He checked his ESM gear; it had not sensed the attacking missiles. There was no warning beyond what his eyes told him. Instinctively Motti clawed for altitude in which to maneuver. Four missiles followed him up. Three kilometers away. He snap-rolled right, then spiraled down and left again. That fooled three of them, but the fourth followed him down. An instant later it exploded a bare thirty meters from his aircraft.

The Skyhawk felt as though it had been kicked aside ten meters or more. Motti struggled with the controls, getting back level just over the rocks. A quick look chilled him. Whole sections of his port wing were shredded. Warning beepers in his headset and flight instruments reported multiple disaster: hydraulics zeroing out, radio out, generator out. But he still had manual flight controls, and his weapons could fire from backup battery power. At that instant he saw his tormentors: a battery of SA-6 missiles, four launcher vehicles, a Straight Flush radar van, and a heavy truck full of reloads, all four kilometers away. His hawk's eyes could even see the Syrians struggling with the missiles, loading one onto a launcher rail.

They saw him, too, and then began a duel no less epic for its brevity.

Motti eased as far down as he dared with his buffeting controls and carefully centered the target in his reflector sight. He had forty-eight Zuni rockets. They fired in salvos of four. At two kilometers he opened fire into the target area. The Syrian missileers somehow managed to launch another SAM. There should have been no escape, but the SA-6 had a radar-proximity fuse, and the passing Zunis triggered it, exploding the SAM harmlessly half a kilometer away. Motti grinned savagely beneath his mask as he fired rockets and now 20-millimeter cannon fire into the mass of men and vehicles.

The third salvo hit, then four more as Zadin kicked rudder to drop his rockets all over the target area. The missile battery

was transformed into an inferno of diesel fuel, missile propellant, and exploding warheads. A huge fireball loomed in his path, and Motti tore through it with a feral shout of glee, his enemies obliterated, his comrades avenged.

Zadin had but a moment of triumph. Great sheets of the aluminum which made up his aircraft's left wing were being ripped away by the four-hundred-knot slipstream. The A-4 began shuddering wildly. When Motti turned left for home, the wing collapsed entirely. The Skyhawk disintegrated in midair. It took only a few seconds before the teenaged warrior was smashed on the basaltic rocks of the Golan Heights, neither the first nor the last to die there. No other of his flight of four survived.

Of the SAM battery almost nothing was left. All six vehicles had been blasted to fragments. Of the ninety men who had manned them, the largest piece recovered was the headless torso of the battery commander. Both he and Zadin had served their countries well, but as is too often the case, conduct which in another time or place might have inspired the heroic verse of a Virgil or a Tennyson went unseen and unknown. Three days later Zadin's mother received the news by telegram, learning again that all Israel shared her grief, as if such a thing were possible for a woman who had lost two sons.

But the lingering footnote to this bit of unreported history was that the unarmed bomb broke loose from the disintegrating fighter and proceeded yet farther eastward, falling far from the fighter-bomber's wreckage to bury itself fifty meters from the home of a Druse farmer. It was not until three days later that the Israelis discovered that their bomb was missing, and not until the day after the October War ended that they were able to reconstruct the details of its loss. This left the Israelis with a problem insoluble even to their imaginations. The bomb was somewhere behind Syrian lines—but where? Which of the four aircraft had carried it? Where had it gone down? They could hardly ask the Syrians to search for it. And could they tell the Americans, from whom the "special nuclear material" had been adroitly and deniably obtained?

And so the bomb lay unknown, except to the Druse farmer, who simply covered it over with two meters of dirt and continued to farm his rocky patch.