ICC Perspectives
מבט מלא"ם

On the Bank of The Suez Canal
War Diary
Sergeant Major (Ret.) David Kanaan

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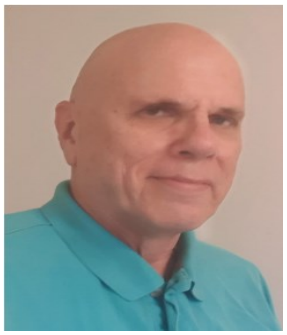
Intelligence Preparations and Deployment

Towards the end of September 1973, I went from my base at Baluza in the northern Sinai Peninsula, where I served as a signals traffic analyst NCO, to spend the Jewish High Holidays at the headquarters of the IDF's 8200 unit (848 at the time), in the central part of Israel. The head of the southern section at the headquarters, **Major Noam Shapira**, briefed us about unusual recent Egyptian military activity near the Suez Canal, and a few days



David Kanaan today (picture courtesy of the interviewee)

before the war broke out it was clear to us the Egyptians weren't conducting an ordinary military exercise but were probably actively preparing for war.

Wednesday and Thursday, October 3-4, 1973, D-Day minus 2 and 3

On Wednesday, October 3, four days before the war broke out, I received orders from **Lt. Col. Yossi Zeira**, head of the signals traffic analysis branch, to go to the Tasa Base in the Sinai Peninsula, about 20 miles east of Ismailia, for radio reception from Egyptian communications networks. Because of the distance, there was concern that some broadcasts couldn't be received at other bases, including traffic from Soviet-made communications systems installed in Egyptian tanks.

We were told to leave early the following morning for a stronghold called Purkan on the Suez Canal near Ismailia, which was as close as we could get to the Egyptian forces.

I flew from Sde Dov Airport in Tel Aviv to Baluza in the northwestern Sinai Peninsula, and from there I was driven to the base at Tasa, where I was joined by **Roni Levi** and **Abraham Tawig**, both wireless operators, and **Baruch Zilbershatz**, a technician, all three of them from the 848 Unit's main Sinai base. On the evening of Thursday, October 4, we were told to leave early the following morning for a stronghold called Purkan on the Suez Canal near Ismailia, which was as close as we could get to the Egyptian forces, where we might have better radio reception.

Friday, October 5, 1973, Yom Kippur eve, D-Day minus 1

The following morning, we were on our way. The Unit's regional operations officer said that the previous night some of the Egyptian networks had broadcast a codeword for transition from exercise to operation. Apparently, he was referring to sha'ban, a codeword we had already heard as part of the preparations for the exercise.

Our Work at the Stronghold

We arrived at around 8 in the morning. We were given an empty bunker and set up our equipment as quickly as possible. We hung blankets over the bunker's openings so none of the other soldiers could see our operations. We could see Egyptian soldiers right across the Suez Canal from us. At that point the Canal was quite narrow, about a hundred yards. The situation on the opposite bank seemed routine: the soldiers weren't wearing helmets or carrying arms.

We set up our equipment and antennas and went to work. Because we were without encrypted communications equipment or reference materials, it had been agreed that if we heard something unusual, we would use the stronghold's ordinary telephone to call the Unit. If it was out of commission for any reason, I was to use the stronghold's communication equipment and try to hint, using a complex, clumsy code employed by the IDF at the time.

Most of the soldiers at the stronghold were reserves, and the rest were regular army conscripts with various assignments. I joined the shifts monitoring radio traffic as a wireless operator. We didn't hear anything out of the ordinary; everything seemed routine. We didn't receive any broadcasts from the Soviet-made tank communication devices, and what we could hear was familiar.

Saturday, October 6, 1973, Yom Kippur, D-Day

The Timetable

Morning: We continued our routine monitoring of Egyptian radio traffic.

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11 a.m. I climbed to the top of the observation tower and saw Egyptian soldiers armed and wearing helmets. The reconnaissance observer (one of the reservists) told me it was unusual.

1:15 p.m. Beni, the deputy commander of our base in Tasa, called and told me to dismantle all our equipment, he was sending a car for us. I asked if we were being sent to another stronghold and he said he didn't know. We started dismantling and packing our equipment. Suddenly someone entered the bunker shouting, "They're coming for us" and left by the back exit.

David Kanaan 1973 (picture courtesy of the interviewee)

1:40 p.m. A Command Car came from Tasa with two soldiers, **Edward Dagan and Shimon**. As soon as it arrived the stronghold commander, **Major Meir Visel**, used the internal PA system to announce that shelling could hit at any minute. Someone shouted, "Is this a drill?" and Visel answered "No, it's the real thing." We waited in the bunker for three or four minutes and when nothing happened, we started loading our equipment on the Command Car.

1:50 p.m. Just as we finished it began raining mortar and artillery shells. We immediately took our helmets and load-bearing gear out of the Command Car (we had our weapons with us) and went back into the bunker. Suddenly someone entered the bunker shouting, "They're coming for us" and left by the back exit.

It was immediately clear to us that the Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal at several locations and we were at war.

2:05 p.m. I knew where the stronghold's operations room bunker was because of previous coordination with the commander, but the other guys on my team didn't, so I told them to run after me in single file. We reached the bunker in the midst of a terrible barrage, and I told the commander that from now on we were stronghold soldiers like everyone else and would follow his orders, no matter what.

2:10 p.m. In the operations room bunker we joined the others, who were crouched around the field radio, and listened to reports on the IDF network. It was immediately clear to us that the Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal at several locations and we were at war.

2:15 p.m. I knew we had to destroy our equipment but we had already loaded it on the Command Car. The Command Car was in the courtyard and was under heavy fire, covered with dust and beginning to be covered with rocks from the *gabions* – wire mesh boxes filled with rocks which were part of the stronghold's defenses and were being shattered by the shelling. In the midst of it all I raced to the Command Car and at the entrance to the bunker burned the recorded tapes and logs which we had put on top of the equipment and which I could easily reach. I couldn't reach the rest of the equipment because it was covered with debris and rocks.

2:40 p.m. Following initial concerns of a chemical warfare attack when smoke shells fell on the stronghold, we became apprehensive that they might indicate preparations for an Egyptian assault on the stronghold. Since we had not been prepared for such a state of affairs, and as intelligence soldiers our situation would be precarious if we were taken by the Egyptians, I had to think quickly. I invented a cover story and told the other guys on my team that if the Egyptians asked, we would tell them we were support personnel from the Tzrifin camp in central Israel, sent to the stronghold to perform field fortification duties.

Soldiers Sent to Monitor the Enemy Become Regular Infantry

I ran along the communication trenches from one post to the next asking if anyone needed anything. People in one post asked for water, in another for a machinegun, things like that. I ran back to the operations room bunker to fulfill the requests. In one post the soldiers told me Egyptian soldiers ran towards them but retreated when they shot at them.

From the northernmost post I saw, about 550 yards away, a kind of bridge. It looked like a line of boats placed side-by-side with a metal covering stretching from the west bank of the Canal to the east. On our side of the Canal, I saw Egyptian jeeps and soldiers under fire from our machine guns. In the evening I heard IDF tanks were trying to reach us but couldn't get closer than a couple of miles because we were encircled by the Egyptian army.

Having heard them so often as voices on communications devices, it was weird to hear them live in real time.

I heard the sounds of Egyptian heavy vehicle convoys crossing the Canal, and soldiers shouting which direction to take. Having heard them so often as voices on communication devices, it was weird to hear them live in real time. I used our internal communications system to report what I had heard to the operations room bunker.

Sunday, October 7, 1973

5 a.m. Sunrise, accompanied by heavy artillery shelling, all of us at our posts. Suddenly, a mile or a mile and a half to the west, on the Israeli side of the Canal, we saw dozens of Egyptian tanks. The stronghold commander immediately reported to the operations room in Tasa. Then a company of Egyptian infantry and several APCs approached the stronghold, attempting to advance towards it. We opened fire with everything we had and they retreated.

The screams and shouts we heard were terrible, but when they stopped in the late afternoon, we knew the stronghold had fallen.

Afternoon. The Egyptians began shelling us relentlessly. Only after the war did we find out they were using Soviet 240mm mortar shells, and that was apparently what hit us. The shelling was so heavy that the stronghold couldn't withstand it, and we were ordered to enter the operation room bunker, which was supposed to be more bomb-resistant than the other bunkers, but it also began to fall apart and we had to use hand pumps to introduce air. Two soldiers were wounded in the attack, one of them our technician **Baruch Zilbershatz**. At nightfall the Egyptians were still shelling us. One of the things I couldn't stop thinking about, and shared with the others, was the possibility we would be taken prisoners. How would we survive, how would we remain alive and preserve our anonymity and secrets?

Monday, October 8, 1973

In the meantime, the Egyptians escalated their attack on a stronghold called Hizayon, about four miles to the north. Listening to the communications network we could hear screams and shouting, but in the late afternoon there was silence, and we understood the stronghold had fallen. In the evening we again came under heavy Egyptian mortar and artillery fire, and the stronghold commander ordered us to enter the operation room bunker. I was running through the communication trenches when a mortar shell fell about a yard and a half in front of me, on the other side of a turn, and blocked the trench.

In the meantime, the sole survivor of a tank crew arrived after having spent 24 hours wandering alone until he reached us. Counting him there were now 33 of us. We began

speaking honestly and openly in the operations room's bunker, all of us, including the commander, it was like a kibbutz general meeting, because it was obvious that help wasn't on the way and we had to decide what to do next. Since I knew what the Egyptian OOB (Order of Battle) was, I said in effect we were a tiny enclave of 33 soldiers surrounded by an immense Egyptian force. As we were speaking, the stronghold to the south of us called Matzmed reported that an Egyptian force was deploying to attack them, and we knew we would be next.

We decided we had to leave before the Egyptians arrived because it was clear we would be unable to withstand their attack. The commander consulted with his second in command and decided to contact **General Arik Sharon**, the commander of the 143rd division, which was responsible for the area, to tell him we wanted to evacuate the stronghold. Sharon immediately authorized us to leave and go east. The stronghold commander coordinated with the commander of the 14th Brigade on where to join the IDF forces, which were about 9 miles east of us.

Tuesday, October 9, 1973

The stronghold commander decided we would leave at 2:30 a.m., when the moon set. At 1:30 a.m. we organized in two lines, one headed by the commander and the other by his second in command. Before we left, the commander briefed the soldiers, explaining what had to be done militarily and raising morale. We set out, walking eastward as quickly as we could, about 110 yards from the road to Tasa. We carried our personal weapons and machineguns and a bazooka from the stronghold.

The commander wanted to put Baruch, who had been wounded, on a stretcher, but he insisted on walking and even carried a communications device on his back. We were walking through an area packed with Egyptian forces and our main problem was how to keep from being discovered. The commander ordered radio silence and no talking. I suggested that one of the radio operators, who spoke Egyptian Arabic quite well, walk with him, and if an Egyptian soldier spotted us and asked something he could say we were an Egyptian commando on our way to hit the Jews, in the hopes the moonless dark would help us get away with it; my suggestion was accepted.

After a few miles we heard people shouting in Arabic only a few yards from us. An Egyptian APC drove along the road and directed a searchlight toward us. We froze. Luckily, the Egyptians didn't see us, but apparently, they heard something. A couple of minutes later the APC drove off and the shouting subsided. Later the stronghold commander told us we had entered an Egyptian forces' overnight bivouac area.

Once the Egyptians calmed down, we ran to the dunes to distance ourselves from the road and kept walking quickly eastward. We often passed Egyptian forces but were careful to bypass them. At around 5:30 a.m. the east began to lighten, and according to our calculations we had walked more than nine miles. I saw tire tracks in the sand and told the

commander they looked like Soviet-made BTR APCs and we were still in enemy territory. We kept walking and all around us were burning tanks, and realized we had wandered into the middle of a tank battle.

We took shelter in a land fold while the battle raged around us. The commander contacted the other file of soldiers, which was close by, and they joined us. Suddenly we heard tanks approaching and massive light arms fire. We were being attacked by three Israeli tanks, the lead tank firing its machine gun; they thought we were Egyptians. We were lucky again: no one was hurt.

The stronghold commander reported our location. A bit later we were told to go to the foot of a nearby ridge. When we arrived, the Egyptians shot at us from the top of the ridge, bullets whistled by our ears and hit the sand around us. Again, we were lucky: no one was hit. At that moment we saw four Israeli APCs charging towards the Egyptian force and engaging them in battle, and they stopped firing at us. The APCs were followed by two tanks. The commander was asked to fire a green flare so they would be able to identify us.

We got up on the tank, grasping any projection we could find and each other. We were a human bunch of grapes hanging off a tank.

The tanks identified us and rushed towards us. One stopped next to us and a lieutenant shouted we were to get on the tank. We didn't know how 33 people could get on one tank, but he kept shouting and waving us forward. We got up on the tank, grasping any projection we could find and each other. We were a human bunch of grapes hanging off a tank which drove off as quickly as possible. The other tank covered us from behind.

Our tank was commanded by **Lieutenant Colonel Shaul Shalev**, commander of the 184th Battalion, who was killed later the same day. He zigzagged to avoid the Sagger missiles chasing us. Several miles later the tank brought us to a waiting convoy of half-tracks and we were driven to the base at Tasa. I later learned that five soldiers from the Yod Company in the 184th Battalion were killed in the four APCs that attacked the Egyptian force on the ridge.

A missile had hit the tank as it came towards us. Unbelievable. We were riding in a tank with an unexploded missile sticking out of its side.

In 2020, almost 50 years later, I spoke with the tank gunner, and he told me the following story: after they let us off and went to service the tank they found an unexploded Sagger missile lodged diagonally in its right front fender. It was still encased in its copper bands. He said that judging by the location and angle, the missile hit the tank as it was sliding down the ridge towards us. Unbelievable. We were riding on a tank with an unexploded missile sticking out of its side. It was a miracle we got out alive.

Wednesday, October 10, 1973

In the morning, **Colonel Yoel Ben-Porat**, the Unit 848 commander, came to Tasa. He asked what we wanted to do, we said return to our duties. He sent us to the Unit's main base in the

Sinai Peninsula. We arrived and joined its shifts. That was the end of our active infantry duty, and we continued our more familiar work as soldiers in Unit 848 (today Unit 8200).

Beyond telling my own personal story, I feel I have to relate to the professional military lessons we learned from our traumatic experience:

1. During a war any soldier can find himself in a difficult combat situation. Therefore, soldiers being trained as radio operators, signal traffic analysts (NCOs and officers), or any other role, **must have infantry training. Every soldier and officer in the non-combatant units has to have some kind of infantry training**.
2. The 848 Unit's presence on the Suez Canal line, only a few yards from the enemy, **was important, valuable in and of itself, and a source of pride**.
3. **A very good, thorough and well-based cover story** should be provided for every soldier and officer who is sent on a mission where they might find themselves on the front line.
4. Every team sent to a mission in the field, especially if the area could be dangerous, should be provided with **encrypted communications equipment** to report to the unit and receive instructions in real time.
5. At the beginning of the war, I immediately burned recorded tapes and logs which I was lucky enough to be able to access. **Existing procedures have to relate to intelligence equipment and materials (destruction, burning, etc.)**

Kobi Lapid, The tank
33 soldiers evacuated from "Purkan" stronghold, are hung like a "cluster of grapes" on the tank of the 184-battalion commander, Ltc. Shaul Shalev, on their unbelievable rescue. Unfortunately, Ltc. Shalev was killed in battle, shortly afterwards.
(**Picture courtesy of the painter**)