



Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War

An Egyptian BTR-50 APC climbs the steep rampart on the Israeli side of the Suez Canal



Egyptian Armor crossing the Suez in the first days of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War

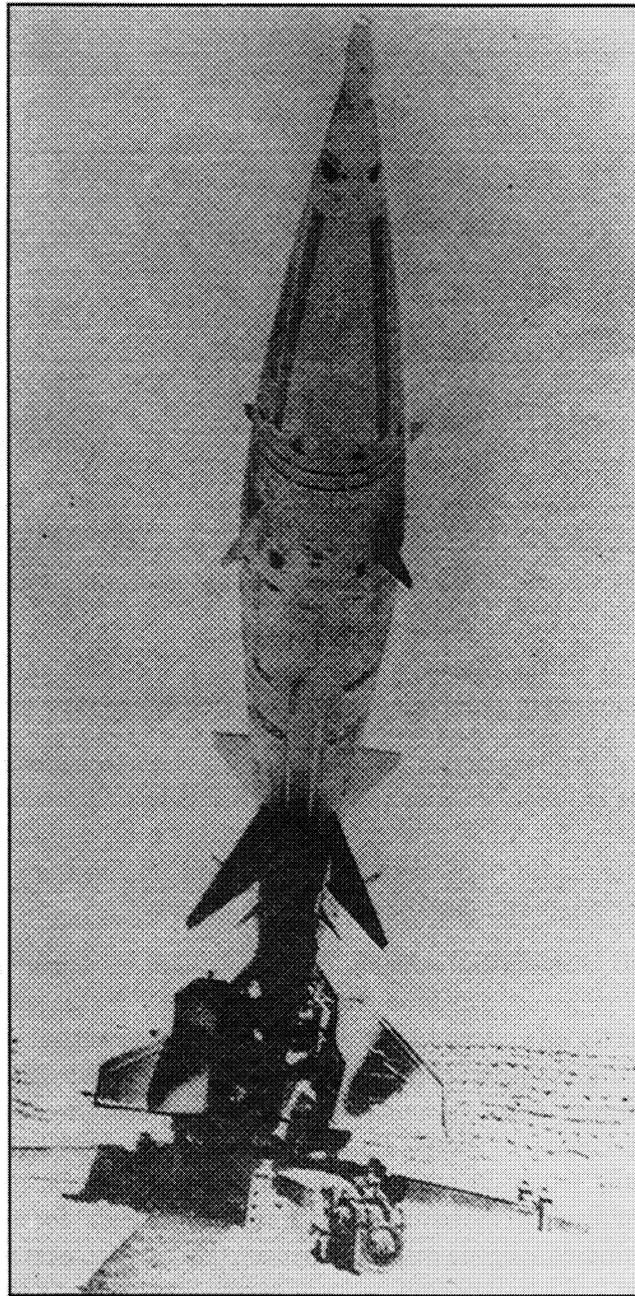
The sudden and unexpected mobilization of reserves created its own set of problems. As Dayan noted: “Despite our self-confidence, there was disquiet in our hearts. It was not only that we were not used to a campaign where the initiative was in the hands of the enemy. The entire situation was out of keeping with our character and with the organic structure of our army, based as it is on reserves and their orderly mobilization. The transition within twenty-four hours from desk, tractor, and lathe to the battlefield is not at all easy.”<sup>51</sup> Getting equipment quickly out of storage and to the front created numerous difficulties. Traffic jams developed along the few routes across the Sinai as reservists rushed to the front. One Israeli general who had fought in the Sinai in both 1956 and 1967 noted the golden opportunity missed by the Egyptians to take advantage of these congested arteries: “Had the Egyptian Air Force attacked our stalled convoys on the Qantara [to] al-Arish Road, I doubt that we would have escaped the same disastrous fate that befell the Egyptian forces from the Israeli air attacks on that same road in the 1956 and 1967 wars.”<sup>52</sup>

Most important from the point of view of military operations, the Arab surprise negated the very foundations of Israel’s war plans. The Sinai garrison numbered only 18,000 troops, 291 tanks, and forty-eight artillery pieces. Major General Avraham Mandler commanded the 252d Armored Division, while Major General Shmuel Gonen headed Southern Command. However, only 460 Israeli reservists from the Jerusalem Infantry Brigade—with little or no combat experience—manned the sixteen strongpoints of the Bar-Lev Line. Behind them stood the required three armored brigades: Colonel Amnon Reshef’s Armored Brigade in the forward tactical zone of the canal, with Colonel Dan Shomron’s Armored Brigade east of the Giddi and Mitla Passes, and Colonel Gabi Amir’s Armored Brigade near Bir Gifgafa. Though placed on C alert and informed of the anticipated Egyptian attack, none of the three brigades deployed according to Dovecoat (the defensive plan)—a failure of which Elazar only became aware after the war. Gonen had ordered armor units to commence their final deployments at 1600, or only two hours before the expected invasion hour—actually two hours too late! Apparently, only

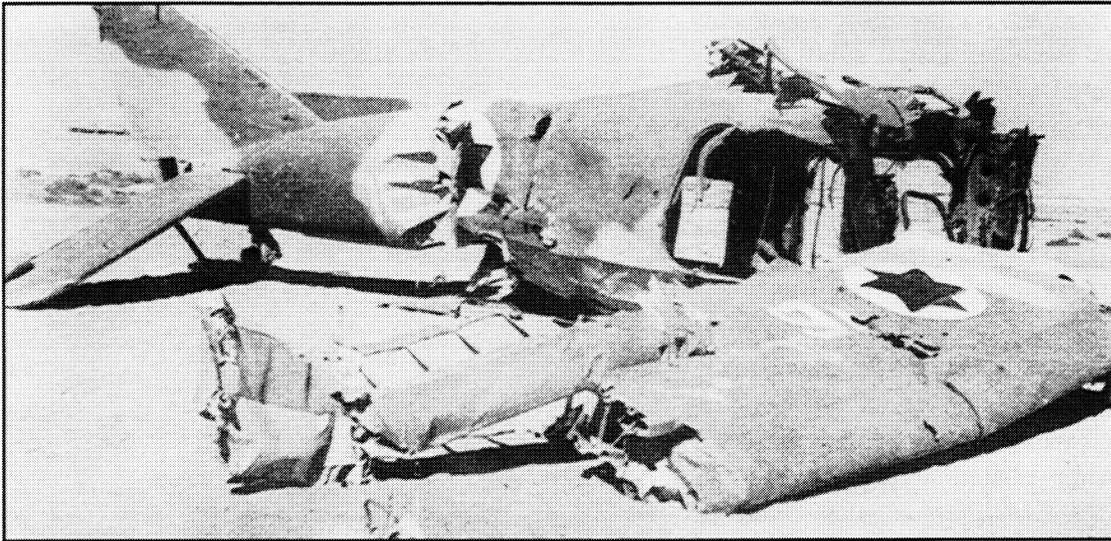
Orkal, the northernmost strongpoint on the Suez Canal south of Port Fu'ad, was reinforced by a tank platoon according to Dovecoat.<sup>53</sup>

The speed of the Arab attack surprised the IDF at all levels of command, catching Israeli units completely unprepared. The Israeli Air Force had expected to concentrate its effort on destroying the Egyptian air defense system but instead found itself providing ground support to stop the Egyptians attempting to cross the Suez Canal. Israeli pilots flying to the front thus encountered the dense Egyptian air defense system over the battlefield. The mobile SAM-6s, new to the theater, proved especially troublesome, but it was the sheer density of fire that inflicted havoc on the Israeli Air Force. As described by one Skyhawk pilot: "It was like flying through hail. The skies were suddenly filled with SAMs and it required every bit of concentration to avoid being hit and still execute your mission."<sup>54</sup> The barrage of missiles downed a number of Israeli planes. One pilot avoided five missiles before the sixth destroyed his plane. This onslaught forced pilots to drop their bombs in support of ground troops at safer distances, and they frequently missed targets altogether.

Meanwhile, on the ground, war plans called for a positional defense of the Bar-Lev Line. In accordance with Dovecoat, Reshef rushed his tank units forward to support the strongpoints and defeat the Egyptian effort to cross to the east bank. None of the Israelis expected to find swarms of Egyptian soldiers waiting in ambush, so company commanders had failed to conduct reconnaissance beforehand. Consequently, Egyptian antitank teams succeeded in ambushing a number of Israeli units attempting to reach the water line. Those Israelis who managed to reach the canal found themselves in the midst of massive Egyptian fires, some of them emanating from the Egyptian sand barrier constructed on the west



An Egyptian SAM missile, a bane to Israeli planes in the early days of the war



An Israeli jet, the victim of an Egyptian missile

bank of the Suez Canal. A number of Egyptian units failed to encounter Israeli forces and managed to avoid casualties on the first day of the war.

While Israeli units confronted the tactical challenge of defeating larger Egyptian forces on the east bank, Southern Command sought to determine the Egyptian main effort. There was none! Egyptian strategy had opted for a broad-front attack instead. As a result, Southern Command lost precious hours attempting to discover something their training suggested should exist for a military operation of this scope.

Caught by surprise, the Israeli high command failed to withdraw its troops from the strongpoints, a decision that haunted the IDF for the next several days. Dovecoat anticipated that the Israeli military would defeat Egyptian crossings at or near the water line. But all war planning had presumed adequate advance warning, which failed to materialize. Despite the Egyptian surprise attack, senior Israeli commanders felt no sense of urgency to order the immediate evacuation of strongpoints. Rather, the troops were left to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, rear units sought to reinforce them without a clear understanding of what to do next, given the confusion of the battlefield. During the first night, for example, an Israeli tank force from Amir's Armored Brigade managed to reach the strongpoint at Qantara, but Southern Command ordered the tanks to withdraw without evacuating the fort's troops. Ironically, the Israeli tanks had to fight their way back to the rear while the garrison troops were left to their fate.<sup>55</sup>

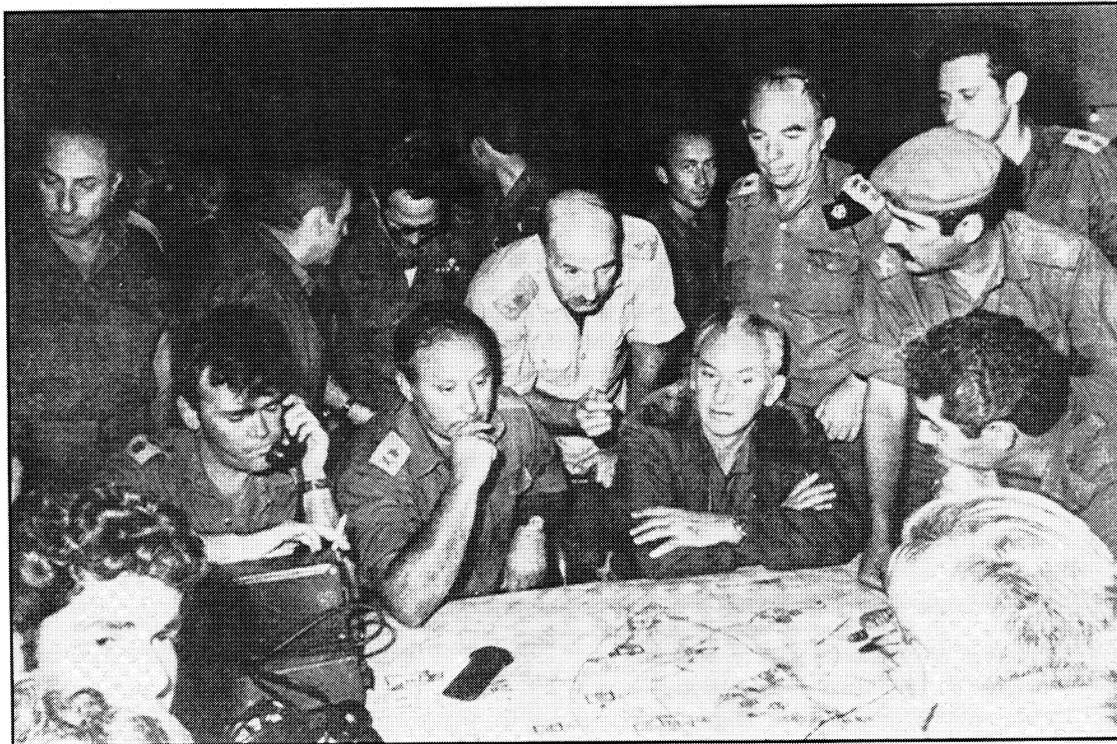
Until midmorning of 7 October, Elazar kept instructing Gonen to evacuate only those outposts not in the proximity of major enemy thrusts—even though, by the late evening of 6 October, Egyptian soldiers had in fact surrounded virtually all the strongpoints. Only after some twenty hours into the war did Gonen finally order those troops able to evacuate their positions to do so.<sup>56</sup> But by then, it was too late for the men remaining at the strongpoints, and they would remain a thorn in Southern Command's side. The troops inside the strongpoints had become, in effect, hostages requiring rescue.

The Israeli delay in evacuating their strongpoints actually abetted the Egyptians in their strategic objective of inflicting as many casualties in men, weapons, and equipment as possible.



*In the Memory of the Passing of 2 Years . . .*

Fortifications along the Bar-Lev Line being assaulted by Egyptian infantry



*The War of Atonement: October, 1973*

Major General Hofi confers with Lieutenant General Bar-Lev at the Northern Command headquarters. Major General Mordechai Hod leans between the two men.



Some of the more than 200 Israeli prisoners who experienced a relatively new phenomenon for Israeli soldiers—mass capture

Because the Israeli military's doctrine and ethos calls for Israelis not to abandon their fellow soldiers—whether alive or dead—many commanders and soldiers experienced great anxiety and desired to relieve or support the isolated troops—especially since desperate calls for help occasionally emanated from them. There was thus a tendency, as noted by Major General Avraham Adan, for tank units to react “instinctively—just as they had learned to do during the War of Attrition—by rushing to the strongpoints.”<sup>57</sup> During the first several days of the war, the area around these fortifications served as killing grounds for Egyptian troops, who aggressively ambushed Israeli counterattacks. The majority of the high losses experienced by the IDF during the first two days of the war can be attributed, in large measure, to the Israelis' stubborn determination to relieve their troops at the strongpoints.

To enhance their troops' chances for successful crossings, Egyptian planners included two types of special operations designed to strike into the operational depth of the IDF. The purpose of both was to delay the arrival of Israeli reservists and to increase the effects of shock and confusion in the Israeli rear. The first special mission involved an amphibious operation across the Bitter Lakes, conducted by the 130th Amphibious Mechanized Brigade under the command of Colonel Mahmud Sha'ib. This marine brigade was composed of 1,000 men organized into two mechanized battalions, one antitank Sagger battalion, one antiair battalion, and a 120-mm mortar battalion. Each mechanized battalion contained ten PT-76 light tanks and forty amphibious armored personnel carriers. The brigade crossed the Bitter Lakes on 6 October in a half hour, a feat accomplished without casualties. Each reinforced battalion then made a dash for the Mitla or Giddi Passes to capture the western entrances to the Sinai and prevent the arrival of Israeli reserves heading toward the canal. The battalion heading toward Mitla Pass ran into M-60 Patton tanks, and its PT-76 light tanks proved no match for the heavier American-made armor. The

battalion sustained heavy losses and retreated in great haste. Egyptian sources claim the second battalion passed through Giddi Pass to disrupt communications east of the passes. Remnants of the 130th Brigade managed to retreat westward to Kibrit East, where the commander established a bridgehead.<sup>58</sup> Overall, however, these Egyptian special operations proved largely unsuccessful.

The second type of Egyptian special operation employed airborne commandos, or *sa'iq* (lightning) forces, to conduct “suicide attacks” in the operational depth of the Sinai. These elite forces were to establish ambushes along the major roads and in the passes for the purpose of delaying the arrival of Israeli reserves; they were also intended to add to the shock and confusion experienced by the IDF. For their transportation, the Egyptian commandos relied mainly on a fleet of Soviet-made Mi-8 medium-transport helicopters, each capable of ferrying approximately twenty-five soldiers. These craft were very vulnerable to combat planes, but General Command was determined to risk its elite forces. At 1730 on 6 October (at dusk), thirty helicopters departed on their assigned missions. The Egyptians repeated these dangerous operations over the next couple of days.

The report card on these air assault special operations remains controversial. Israeli sources have tended to downplay their significance, whereas the Egyptians have attributed great importance to them. In a number of cases, the Israeli Air Force discovered the helicopters and shot them down easily; other instances saw the accomplishment of missions—but at a generally very high cost in lives. One Israeli source estimates that seventy-two Egyptian sorties composed of 1,700 commandos were attempted, with the Israeli Air Force shooting down twenty Egyptian



When God Judged and Men Died

Egyptian commandos who were dropped behind Israeli lines in the Sinai

helicopters and claiming to have killed, wounded, or captured 1,100 commandos.<sup>59</sup> Whatever the exact figures of missions and casualties, the commandos achieved some damage to the Israeli rear. One commando force, for example, captured the Ras Sudar Pass south of Port Tawfiq and held it until 22 October. In perhaps the most famous case, Major Hamdi Shalabi, commander of the 183d *Sa'iq*a Battalion, landed a company along the northern route between Romani and Baluza and established a blocking position at 0600 on 7 October. About two hours later, this small force stopped the advance of a reserve armored brigade under the command of Colonel Natke Nir. In the ensuing battle, the Egyptian commandos killed some thirty Israeli soldiers and destroyed a dozen tanks, half a dozen half-tracks, and four transports, at a loss of seventy-five men killed (“martyrs,” or *shahid*, in Egyptian parlance).<sup>60</sup>

In Nir’s case, the Egyptian ambush delayed reservists rushing to the battlefield; it also sent a new message to Israeli war veterans. Adan, Nir’s division commander, noted the significance of this commando interdiction: “Natke’s experience fighting against the stubborn Egyptian commandos who tried to cut off the road around Romani showed again that this was no longer the same Egyptian army we had crushed in four days in 1967. We were now dealing with a well-trained enemy, fighting with skill and dedication.”<sup>61</sup> The presence of Egyptian commandos in the rear caused anxiety among senior Israeli commanders, who subsequently allotted forces for special security. Southern Command even assigned its elite reconnaissance companies to hunt down *sa'iq*a troops and protect command centers. Moreover, installations in the rear were placed on high alert, which diverted combat forces from the front lines to be used for guard duties.<sup>62</sup> While at present it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion, the Egyptian airborne commando assaults appear to have presented more than a minor nuisance. These special operations slowed the Israelis and caused confusion, anxiety, and surprise in the Israeli rear, although at a high cost in lives of highly trained and motivated Egyptian troops.

The Egyptians could claim a major victory by the evening of the first day, 6 October, for nightfall brought them the cover necessary for the transfer of their tanks, field artillery pieces, armored vehicles, and other heavy equipment to the east bank. Egyptian planners had conducted detailed planning and countless training exercises to ensure the rapid transportation to the east bank of five infantry divisions, each reinforced with an armored brigade. To get across as fast as possible, each piece of equipment, each bridge, each unit, and each headquarters had a fixed time of arrival and destination. To facilitate efficient movement, the Corps of Engineers had constructed an elaborate road system—some 2,000 kilometers of roads and tracks—to move troops rapidly and efficiently to the Suez Canal with maximum protection and minimum congestion. Extensive field exercises and rehearsals removed glitches and improved final execution. Military police, in cooperation with engineers, worked to keep the system working according to set timetables whenever possible.

Much of the crossing operation’s success hinged on the ability of the Egyptian Corps of Engineers to construct and maintain bridges across the canal. At first, the Israeli Air Force targeted bridges as an efficient means of defeating the crossing. Israeli morale subsequently rose whenever word reached the high command of the destruction of a bridge. But after several days of fighting, Elazar realized the limited results of such missions: “We destroyed seven of their bridges, and everyone was happy. The next day the bridges were functional again. [The Israeli Air Force] destroyed every bridge twice . . . [The aircraft] drop a bomb weighing a ton, one of

the bridge's sections is destroyed, and after an hour another piece is brought in and the bridge continues to function."<sup>63</sup>

Egyptian engineers performed commendably in keeping the bridges and ferries operational. Although much credit must go to junior officers and soldiers, many senior Egyptian commanders performed with exemplary dedication and heroism. When the Third Army experienced delays in breaching the earthen embankments, for example, Major General Gamal Ali, the director of the engineer branch, visited the affected sector to help tackle the problem personally. For his part, Brigadier General Ahmad Hamdi, commander of the engineers in the Third Army, lost his life on October 7 while directing bridge construction. The 15,000 members of the Corps of Engineers played a major role in the success of the crossing operation.

Despite the surprising onset of the war, the Israeli senior political and military leadership remained confident of a victory in quick order. At 2200, the Israeli cabinet met to hear Elazar's report on military operations. Dayan, on his part, appeared to take a pessimistic evaluation of the military situation and recommended a pullback to a second line some twenty kilometers from the Suez Canal. Elazar, however, believed optimistically in an early victory and was averse to any withdrawals unless absolutely necessary.<sup>64</sup> Washington had reached a similar assessment and adopted a wait-and-see policy, confident in an early Israeli victory, one that stood only a few days or more away.<sup>65</sup> Although diplomatic moves would await Israeli success on the battlefield, Washington agreed to send some sophisticated equipment to Israel for the war effort.

**THE SECOND DAY.** Tel Aviv and Washington greatly underestimated the fighting capabilities of the Egyptian and Syrian Armies, especially the former, and more time would elapse before Israel's senior commanders grasped the extent of the Arabs' tactical successes on the battlefield. Even then, Israeli commanders generally expected a quick recovery and resolution of the conflict. Once again, their timetables proved dead wrong. More surprises would occur in the latter part of the war, as the Egyptians and Syrians continued to demonstrate unexpected combat mettle in the face of the clearly superior Israeli military machine.

Dawn on 7 October found the Israelis facing some 50,000 Egyptian troops and 400 tanks on the east bank of the Suez Canal. On the average, each Egyptian infantry division's bridgehead was six to eight kilometers in frontage and three to four kilometers in depth. And the Egyptians had achieved this amazing feat with minimal casualties: only 280 men killed and the loss of fifteen planes and twenty tanks.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, by this success, the Egyptian Armed Forces were now entrenched in defensive positions ready to inflict more losses in men, arms, and equipment on the Israelis.

To dislodge the Egyptians from their bridgeheads would require the Israelis to mount frontal attacks on hastily prepared defensive positions without the aid of adequate air support. The Egyptian air defense system had for the most part neutralized the Israeli Air Force over the battlefield, forcing Elazar to commit the bulk of his air assets to stabilize the more threatening Golan front. Without air support and lacking in sufficient artillery and infantry, Israeli tankers in the Sinai found themselves vulnerable. Israeli doctrine had become too armor heavy, few Israeli artillery pieces were self-propelled, and their mechanized infantry formed a weak link in their maneuver operations. While the Egyptian troops established ambushes and killing zones to handle Israeli counterattacks, the IDF's tank forces resorted to cavalry attack tactics that

culminated in serious losses. The full impact of the Egyptian and Syrian tactical achievements began to surface slowly on the second day of the war.

By the end of the morning of 7 October, General Mandler reported that his armored division numbered some 100 tanks—down from 291 at the commencement of the war. Especially hard hit was Shomron's Armored Brigade in the south, whose tank count fell from 100 to 23.<sup>67</sup> In light of such heavy losses, Gonen decided at noon to form a defensive line along Lateral Road, thirty kilometers east of the canal, and ordered his division commanders to deploy their forces accordingly. Small mobile units were to patrol along Artillery Road, ten kilometers from the canal, with the mission to report and delay any Egyptian advances. Concurrent with this decision, Southern Command ordered the evacuation of all strongpoints, an order issued too late, for all were surrounded by Egyptian troops.<sup>68</sup>

Then at 1600, Elazar learned to his great dismay that the Israeli Air Force had lost thirty planes in the first twenty-seven hours of the war—a staggering figure given that the IDF was still on the defensive while engaged in fierce fighting on both fronts.<sup>69</sup> Rather than concentrate on destroying the Egyptian and Syrian air defense systems, the Israeli Air Force suddenly found itself forced to provide ground support. On the Golan Heights, the situation had become especially desperate. Syrian forces had virtually wiped out the Barak Armored Brigade (down from ninety to fifteen tanks) in the southern half of the Golan, leaving the road to the escarpment open for a rapid Syrian dash. Fortunately for Israel, the Syrian high command procrastinated in exploiting this golden opportunity, thereby allowing the Israelis time to bring up enough tanks for spoiling counterattacks. On 8 October, the IDF began slowly pushing Syrian forces back to the prewar Purple Line. Top priority for Israeli air assets naturally went to the Golan front.

The initial Israeli setbacks on the northern and southern fronts took a heavy toll on Israeli soldiers. Sharon later recalled his observations of the troops pulling back from the Suez Canal on 7 October: "I . . . saw something strange on their faces—not fear but bewilderment. Suddenly something was happening to them that had never happened before. These were soldiers who had been brought up on victories—not easy victories maybe, but nevertheless victories. Now they were in a state of shock. How could it be that these Egyptians were crossing the canal right in our faces? How was it that *they* were moving forward and *we* were defeated?"<sup>70</sup> The lethality and intense fighting of the 1973 war would bring a new type of casualty to the IDF—one resulting from combat stress.

Back at the Pit, the command center for the IDF (located in Tel Aviv), the tensions and stress ran high. Especially hard hit among the senior officials was Dayan, the defense minister since June 1967. His confidence seemed shattered on 7 October after a morning visit to the Sinai front. In a meeting at 1430 at General Headquarters in Tel Aviv, Dayan offered a dismal report, making doomsday references to the "fall of the Third Commonwealth" and the Day of Judgment. The temporary spectacle of witnessing the symbol of Israeli military prowess caving in to the pressures of war proved quite unsettling for the politicians and senior officers present. "Even first-hand accounts can scarcely convey the emotional upheaval that gripped them as they witnessed the collapse of an entire world view and with it the image of a leader who had embodied it with such charismatic power."<sup>71</sup> Cooler heads, however, prevailed and brought a modicum of calm to an otherwise very tense situation.