

Despite a steady flow of bad news, some reports appeared upbeat. By noontime, both Adan and Sharon had arrived with forward elements of their two reserve armored divisions. Gonen promptly divided the front into three divisional commands: Adan with the 162d Armored Division in the northern sector, Sharon with the 143d Armored Division in the central sector, and Mandler with the 252d Armored Division in the southern sector. With this redeployment, the IDF had theoretically begun a transition from Dovecoat to Rock (its new operational plan)—although events on the battlefield had by now made both defensive plans obsolete.

That afternoon, Elazar received encouragement from Peled, his air chief. The air force had knocked out seven bridges and expected to finish off the remainder by nightfall. In actuality, several of the destroyed or damaged bridges were dummies. The Egyptians, meanwhile, were

able to repair the real bridges in quick order. Unaware of this fact but buoyed by the positive reports, Elazar decided to visit Southern Command in person to meet with the theater and division commanders to formulate a plan for the next day.⁷² Taking with him his aide, Colonel Avner Shalev, and the former chief of the General Staff, Yitzak Rabin (of 1967 fame), Elazar arrived at Gonen's forward command post at Gebel Umm Hashiba at 1845. The three men joined Gonen, Adan, and Mandler; Sharon missed the conference entirely, arriving after it had just broken off.

Gonen began the meeting by presenting a review of the war, followed by a summary of the current tactical situation.⁷³ By the next day, Southern Command expected to have 640 tanks, with 530 of them dispersed among three divisions: Adan with 200, Sharon with 180, and Mandler with 150. Intelligence estimates placed the number of Egyptian tanks on the east bank at 400 (when in fact 800 was closer to the mark). In light of the Israelis' low estimate, Gonen recommended a frontal, two-division attack conducted at night against the Egyptian bridgeheads, with Adan crossing to the west bank at Qantara and Sharon doing likewise at Suez City. Adan, who lacked sufficient infantry and artillery, urged a more cautious approach, that of waiting until all the reserves arrived at the front before embarking on a major operation.

Elazar also opted for a cautious course. His plan, however, deviated from an Israeli strategic principle that called for an offensive on one front while assuming a defensive posture on other



An exhausted Israeli soldier after the intensive fighting



Major General Albert Mandler (standing) briefs the chief of staff on Sunday, 7 October.
Seated left to right are Gonen, Elazar, Adan, Ben Ari, and Rabin.

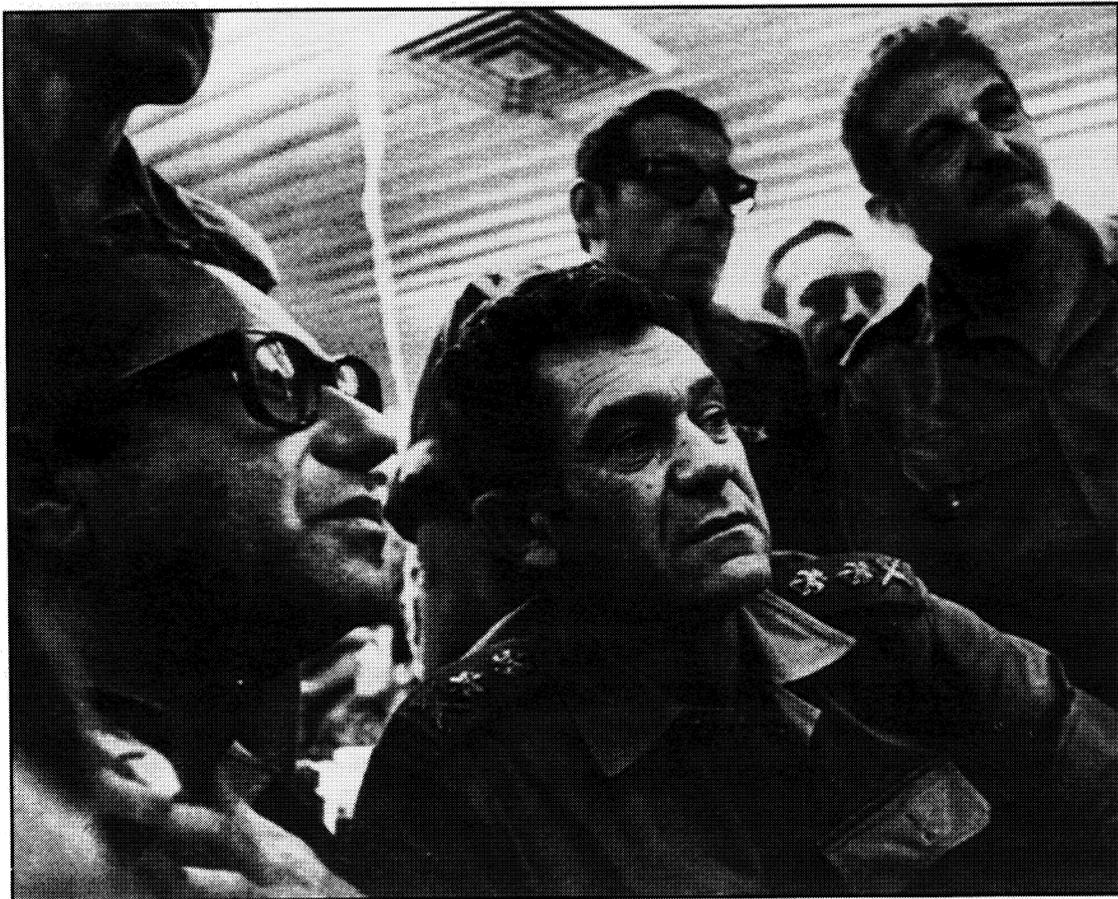
fronts. The Golan clearly was the more critical front at the time and thus required a major counterattack. But rather than adopt a defensive posture in the Sinai, Elazar instead decided on a limited counterattack for the next morning. Adan would attack with the 162d Armored Division southward from the Qantara area, staying at least three to five kilometers east of the canal to avoid the heavy concentration of Egyptian antitank weaponry. Meanwhile, Sharon would remain at Tasa with the 143d Armored Division, acting as a reserve ready to move northward to assist Adan if needed. Should Adan succeed in his mission, Sharon would then head south and attempt to roll up the Egyptian Third Field Army's bridgehead by moving in a similar manner to that of Adan. Meanwhile, Mandler would remain on the defensive, reorganizing his badly battered division, now down to a few dozen tanks, essentially Dan Shomron's brigade and elite infantry units holding the Giddi and Mitla Passes. Elazar was clear and emphatic about two items: under no circumstances would either Adan or Sharon attempt a crossing to the west bank without his approval, and no attempt would be made to approach the strongpoints. The conference finally broke up at 2200.

As Elazar headed toward his helicopter, Sharon suddenly arrived, having missed the entire meeting. Rather than brief him personally, Elazar exchanged a few words with Sharon and then directed him to obtain his instructions from Gonen. Sharon, a maverick general noted for a predilection for bold action, disliked Elazar's cautious approach for the next day. Instead, Sharon recommended a concentrated two-division attack to destroy an Egyptian bridgehead, an idea that appealed to Gonen more than the plan developed by Elazar. Although eager to attempt a

countercrossing, Gonen had his orders, and all he could do was to offer general approval to Sharon's idea without endorsing it. A final decision would have to await developments on the battlefield.

THE FOILED ISRAELI COUNTERATTACK. The day of 8 October 1973 would prove one of the darkest days in the history of the IDF.⁷⁴ The day began with the Egyptians clearly possessing the initiative, but the Israelis were determined to stall the expected Egyptian attack to the passes with their own major countermove. A combination of Israeli mistakes and Egyptian resilience, however, would defeat the Israeli counterattack. At the end of the day, further shocks reached Israeli senior commanders, who now began to grasp the seriousness of their military situation in the Sinai.

After the conference at Gebel Umm Hashiba, Adan hurried back to his division, which was deployed along the Baluza-Tasa road. (See map 3.) The unit was comprised of Colonel Natke Nir's Armored Brigade with seventy-one tanks, Gabi Amir's Armored Brigade with only fifty M-60 tanks, and Aryeh Keren's Armored Brigade (still en route to the area) with sixty-two tanks, for a grand total of 183 tanks. A mechanized infantry brigade with forty-four Super Shermans was expected to join the operation by late morning.⁷⁵ For his attack north to south, Adan planned to lead with Gabi's and Nir's brigades and to keep Keren's as his reserve. For fire support, the



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

Generals Gonen (left), Elazar (middle), and Weizman being briefed

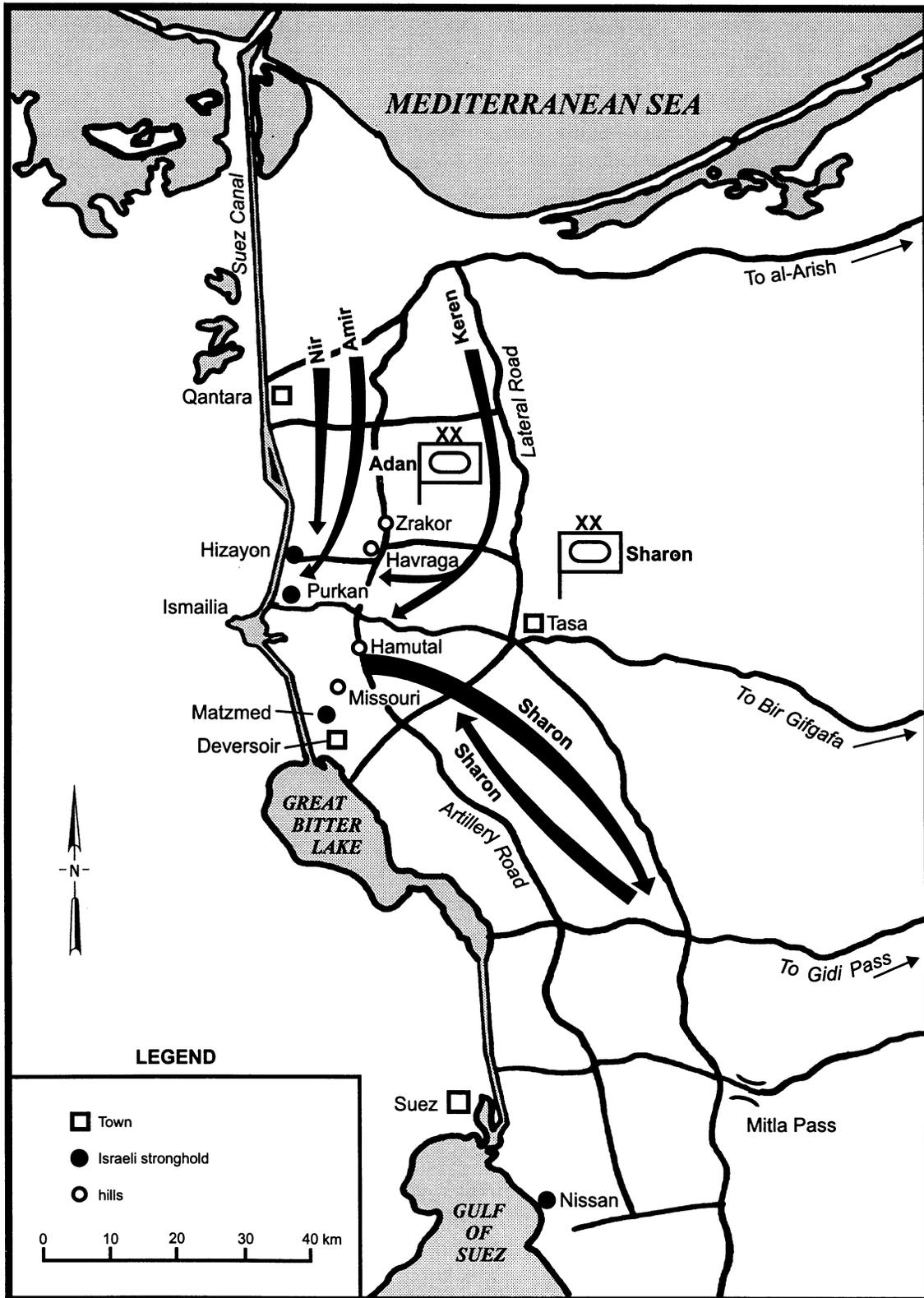
division possessed but a single battery of four self-propelled 155-mm artillery guns along Artillery Road, but Adan expected sufficient air support. This, however, failed to materialize. The Israeli Air Force had concentrated its main effort on the Golan to prevent a collapse of defenses on the strategic terrain that overlooked Israel proper; there, Israel could ill afford to give ground.

In war, battles never conform exactly to plans, even the best prepared ones, and the offensive of 8 October proved no exception. Israeli plans began to unravel even before the commencement of the operation. Shortly after midnight on 8 October, Gonen suddenly changed plans for no apparent reason, which sowed confusion for the remainder of the day. Instead of focusing on clearing the area between Lexicon and Artillery Roads, Gonen wanted Adan to approach the strongpoints at Firdan and Ismailia and prepare for the possibility of crossing to the west bank at Matzmed in the Deversoir area at the northern tip of the Great Bitter Lakes.⁷⁶ Apparently, optimistic reports from the field, coupled with wishful thinking in the rear, spawned the expectation of an imminent Egyptian collapse.

But the change in plans, formulated without precise tactical intelligence, smacked of bravado. At the same time, the Israelis appeared to let their doctrine blindly dictate their tactical and operational objectives. As noted by Adan, "Today it is easy enough to see that we were prisoners of our own doctrine: the idea that we had to attack as fast as possible and transfer the fighting to enemy territory."⁷⁷ The ghost of the Six Day War beckoned a quick resolution to the armed conflict.

Despite Gonen's new order, Adan still planned to avoid the heavy concentration of Egyptian antitank weaponry by keeping his brigades at least three kilometers from the canal. His scheme of maneuver north to south envisaged the following. Amir and Nir would move between Lexicon and Artillery Roads, with Amir on the western avenue and Nir on his left. Keren would move his brigade east of Artillery Road. Each brigade would reach positions designed to link up with the strongpoints of the Bar-Lev Line: Gabi opposite the Hizayon strongpoint at Firdan and the Purkan strongpoint at Ismailia; Nir opposite Purkan; and Keren facing Matzmed or Deversoir at the northern tip of the Bitter Lakes. At this juncture of the operation, the brigade commanders would await orders from Adan as to the feasibility of attempting a crossing operation to the west bank, a decision Elazar had reserved for himself.

A second major change in plans occurred at 0753 or just before the attack. In the Qantara sector, Israeli forces suddenly found themselves engaged in a heavy firefight with the right side of the Egyptian 18th Infantry Division. Brigadier General Fuad 'Aziz Ghali, the division commander, released two companies of T-62 tanks from the 15th Armored Brigade to support his southern brigade.⁷⁸ This unexpected Egyptian assault eastward threatened to outflank Israeli forces in the area. To help contain the Egyptians, Gonen wanted Nir's brigade to stay behind at Qantara under the command of Brigadier General Kalman Magen. This decision left Adan with only Amir's two battalions of twenty-five tanks each—a far cry from the divisional attack expected by Elazar after the previous night's conference. Rather than delay or abort the counterattack, Adan opted to follow Gonen's order, and at 0806, Amir began moving south, even though Keren's brigade was still en route to the area. Adan ordered Amir to be prepared "to link up with the Hizayon and Purkan strongpoints, but to do so only upon a specific order." Keren



Map 3. The southern front, 8 October 1973

would conduct offensive operations against the 16th Infantry Division's bridgehead toward Matzmed.⁷⁹

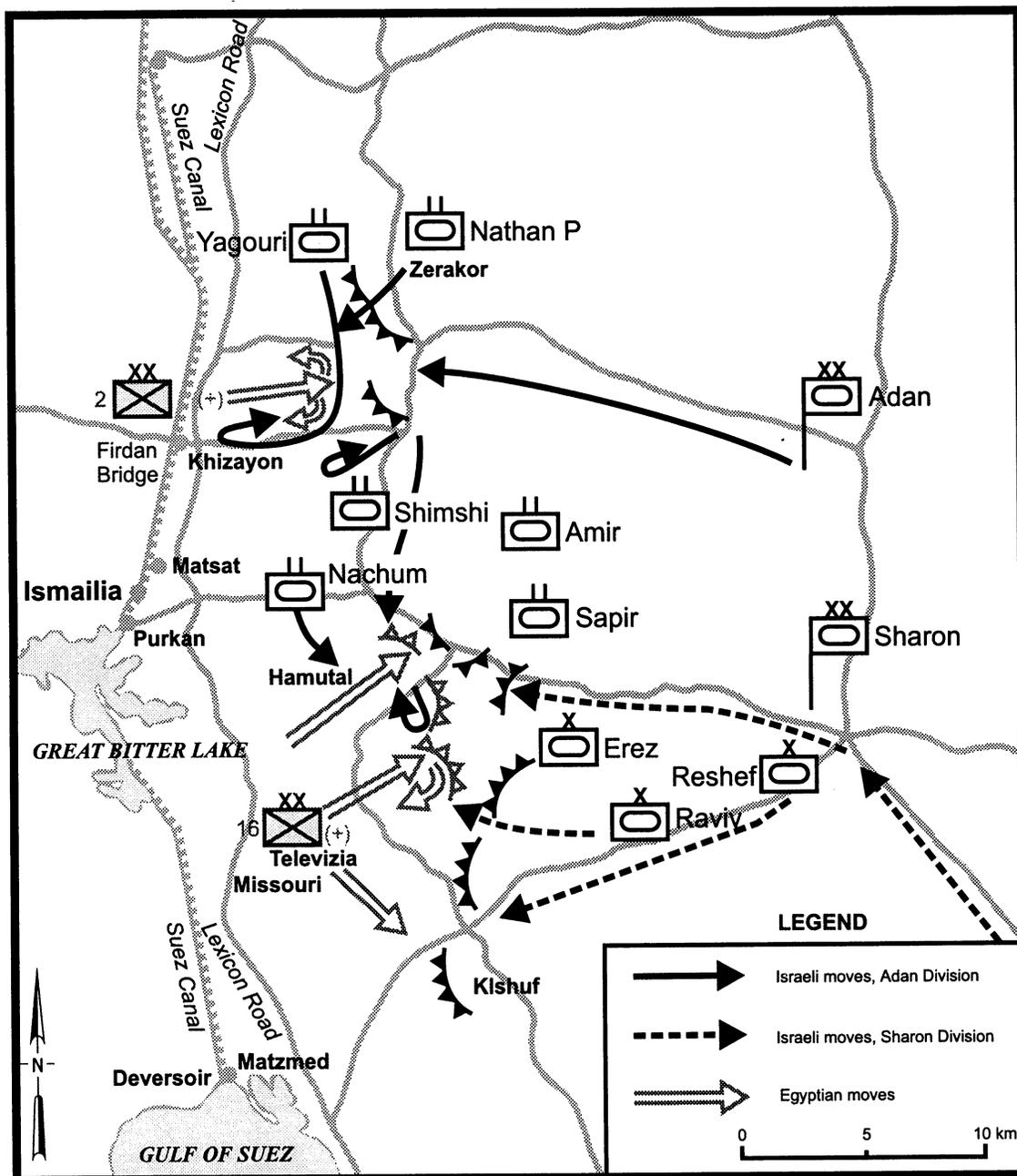
The move south quickly ran amiss. Instead of moving three kilometers from the canal just east of Lexicon, Amir advanced along Artillery Road, completely missing the Egyptian bridgeheads. For his part, Keren moved through Sharon's sector to get into position. As a result of his error in navigation, Amir would eventually have to attack east to west instead of north to south. The frontal, instead of flank, assaults would play directly into the strong Egyptian defenses and cause heavy Israeli casualties, aiding Sadat's war strategy of bleeding the IDF.

Around 0900, advance elements of Amir's brigade reached the plain between Artillery Road and the Firdan bridge without encountering any significant Egyptian opposition. (See map 4.) Awaiting Amir, however, was the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division reinforced with the 24th Armored Brigade from the 23d Mechanized Infantry Division. Two Egyptian infantry brigades formed the first echelon, with a mechanized infantry brigade constituting the second echelon. The 24th Armored Brigade formed the divisional reserve, but Brigadier General Hasan Abu Sa'ada could commit the tank brigade only in the event of an Israeli penetration into the divisional bridgehead.⁸⁰

In the face of a reinforced Egyptian infantry division, Amir's two-battalion force lacked light reconnaissance units, 81-mm self-propelled mortars, and armored infantry. Without air cover and artillery, Amir had to rely on tanks alone to attack defended positions. A malfunction in his direct communications with Adan further complicated matters. Despite all of these problems, Gonen was confident of certain victory. After all, Adan's division had managed to advance virtually unimpeded from north to south. Consequently, Gonen wanted Adan to link up with the strongpoint at Hizayon for the purpose of crossing to the west bank and telephoned to Tel Aviv for permission to do so. At 1005, Southern Command even reported the imminent collapse of the Egyptian Army.

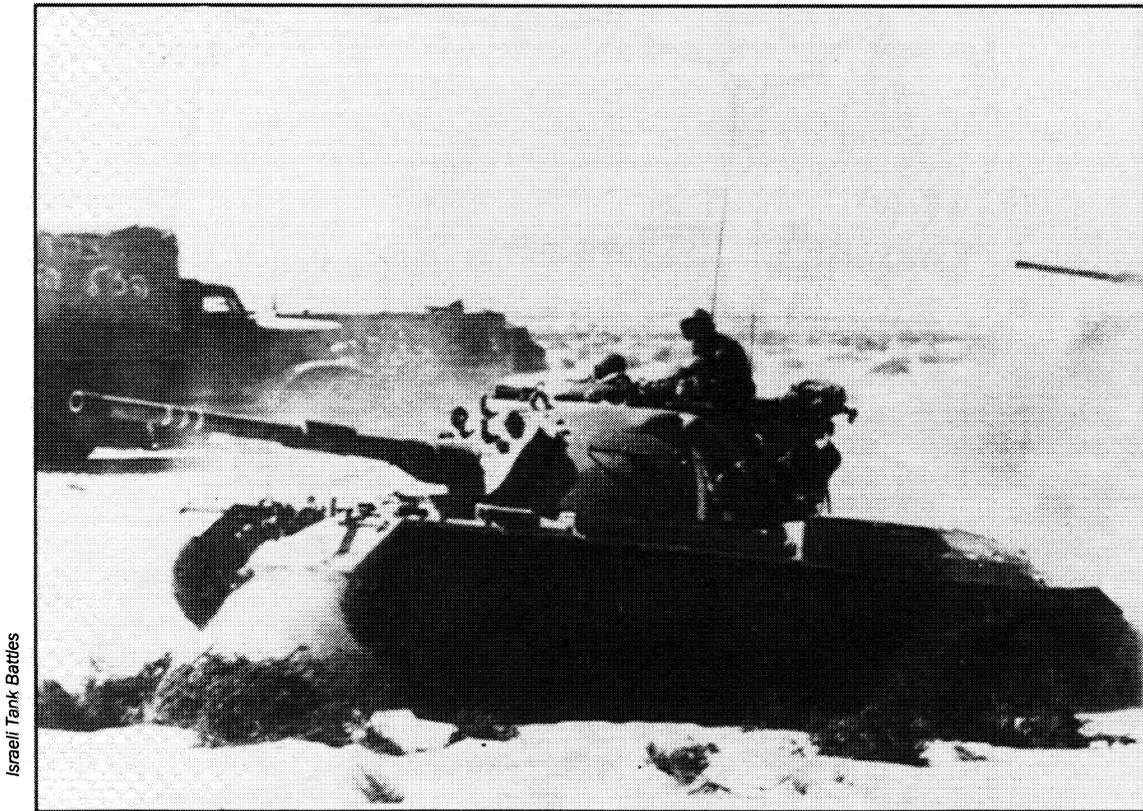
At 0955, choosing to ignore or downplay negative reports reaching him, Gonen reported only positive developments on the battlefield to General Headquarters and requested permission to cross to the west bank. His request found Elazar attending an important meeting of Meir's war cabinet. Rather than excuse himself from the session, the chief of the General Staff preferred to deal with Gonen through his assistant at the Pit. As a result of this peculiar arrangement, some miscommunication occurred during the transmissions between Gonen, the Pit, and Elazar. With each interruption at Meir's cabinet meeting—there were at least five over the span of an hour—Elazar found himself gradually accepting the optimistic reports from Southern Command and approving a countercrossing and release of Sharon to head south—all without ever having talked directly with Gonen!⁸¹ After the war, many would criticize Elazar for operating in such an unorthodox manner.

At 1040, Southern Command ordered Adan to cross to the west bank and gave Sharon the green light to head south toward Suez City. Short of forces, both Adan and Amir appealed to Gonen, asking for Sharon to detach an armored battalion to protect the 162d Armored Division's southern flank. Gonen consented to the request, but Sharon refused to comply—a refusal that would later result in the loss of several critical positions to the Egyptians.⁸²



Map 4. The Israeli counterattack at the Firdan bridge, afternoon, 8 October 1973

While unnecessary haggling took place between two division commanders, a new and unexpected problem beset Amir. Lieutenant Colonel Haim Adini was ready to attack with his battalion, but Lieutenant Colonel Amir Joffe's battalion had to disengage in order to replenish its fuel and ammunition supply. Now, only a tank battalion of some twenty-five tanks would carry out the entire division's attack! At 1100, Adini attacked with two companies in line and a third in reserve. His assault ran into the right side of the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division. At first, success shined upon the Israelis, who broke through the first Egyptians and penetrated to within



Israeli Tank Battles

Israeli M-48 tank racing to counterattack Egyptian armor concentrations near the canal

800 meters of the canal. But then, a torrential downpour of antitank, tank, and artillery fire descended upon Adini's meager force, destroying eighteen of his twenty-five tanks within minutes and wounding Adini along with two company and two platoon commanders. The battalion suffered twenty killed, including two platoon commanders. Making the situation worse, Adan lost communications with Gabi Amir and was therefore initially unaware of the fate of the attack.⁸³

Despite this first setback, the Israelis had the opportunity to regroup to conduct a coordinated three-brigade assault toward Firdan bridge, but this attack proved no more successful than the previous one.⁸⁴ Nir had disengaged at Qantara and, having left one battalion behind, arrived at 1230 in the area of the Firdan bridge with two tank battalions. Nir and Amir held a brief conference to discuss plans for attacking toward the bridge. Meanwhile, Keren moved into the area as well, and Adan ordered him to support Amir and Nir by attacking in the direction of Purkan.

Once again, the situation began unraveling for the Israelis. Gonen, confident of an Egyptian collapse, had already ordered Sharon to vacate the area around Tasa for a move to Suez City. In its tracks, the 143d Armored Division left only a reconnaissance company to hold the critical ridges of Hamadia and Kishuf, but not the hills north of them, such as Hamutal. Sharon's departure suddenly exposed Adan's southern flank at a time when the battle with the Egyptians

was going badly. Keren's Armored Brigade, by default, gained responsibility for Adan's left side. After the war, Adan and Sharon exchanged several verbal salvos over this turn of events.

Meanwhile, the anticipated attack by Nir and Amir faced enormous difficulties. Nir possessed some fifty tanks in two battalions, one under Lieutenant Colonel Asaf Yaguri and the other under Lieutenant Colonel Natan. Gabi Amir, for his part, was in dire need of additional forces to assault entrenched positions. He had virtually lost Adini's entire battalion and had released Natan to replenish this battalion. Suddenly and fortuitously, Lieutenant Colonel Eliashiv Shemshi appeared with his armored (reserve) battalion with twenty-five tanks, two half-tracks, and two jeeps. Shemshi had just arrived on the battlefield in an attempt to join up with Keren's Armored Brigade. Desperate for more armor, Amir quickly received Adan's permission to commandeer Shemshi's battalion to use in coordination with an assault on Firdan bridge. Amir then ordered Shemshi to provide covering fire for Nir's assault on Firdan bridge.

Such "theft" of units and equipment happened frequently during the war, as field commanders responded to immediate threats and urgent orders in the midst of the fog and friction of war. The confusion often left tactical commanders without a clear picture of the battlefield and their particular part in it, and the myriad kinks in execution accentuated each commander's immediate concerns and threats. The fact that the initiative lay squarely in Egyptian hands compounded the confusion and uncertainty and forced Israeli commanders to be more reactive than proactive. As a result, Israeli battalion, brigade, and division commanders experienced difficulty in coordinating their units to counterattack toward what were not always clearly defined and attainable objectives.

Though affected by the stress and chaos of the battlefield, the Israelis, nonetheless, pressed a second attack toward Firdan bridge at 1330. As the first attempt of that morning, this combined attack again lacked proper coordination in the face of overwhelming enemy forces. Natan and Yaguri began to move their battalions at the same time, the former on the right, the latter on the left. Suddenly, heavy Egyptian fire stopped Natan's tank battalion, leaving only Yaguri to proceed with twenty-five tanks. Shemshi, who had no idea of Yaguri's identity, assumed that the battalion belonged to Amir when in fact it formed part of Nir's brigade. The assault thus involved two battalions, from two different brigades, which had no direct communication between their two tactical headquarters. Yaguri charged in line, cavalry style, leaving Shemshi to watch helplessly as fellow Israeli tankers charged into the jaws of disaster.

The second assault on Firdan failed miserably. Warned in advance by intelligence, Brigadier General Abu Sa'ada, the commander of the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division, had prepared his forces for the expected attack. Yaguri now stumbled into a killing zone (*ard qatl*) between the two forward brigades and straight into the Egyptian mechanized infantry brigade. Within minutes, an avalanche of Egyptian fire destroyed eighteen tanks and killed thirty-two Israelis. Yaguri and three other soldiers were captured. By the end of the day, Nir reported fifty-four men missing in action. Among the Egyptians killed were Colonel Fatin Diyab and Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim Zeydan, the latter a battalion commander. That evening, the Egyptian military displayed its prize captive, Lieutenant Colonel Asaf Yaguri, on national television to bolster public morale. (A military spokesman in Cairo wrongly identified Yaguri as a brigade commander.) The next day, Egyptian newspapers carried exclusive stories and pictures of Israeli prisoners of war.

Unknown to the Israelis, Operation Badr called for the expansion of the bridgeheads on 8 October to a depth of ten to twelve kilometers, with each field army forming one continuous bridgehead in its sector. To accomplish this mission required a redeployment of forces. In the crossing operation, each Egyptian infantry division placed two infantry brigades forward with the mechanized infantry brigade in the second echelon. Behind these three brigades stood the attached armored brigade. For the widening of the bridgeheads, Operation Badr required the mechanized infantry brigade to push forward between the two infantry brigades, thereby creating a three brigade front, with the attached armor brigade now forming the division's second echelon, or tactical reserve.⁸⁵

Suddenly, during the afternoon of the 8th, the Israelis facing the Egyptian Second and Third Armies found themselves under an artillery barrage and air strikes followed by advancing Egyptian troops determined to expand their bridgeheads. Progress was uneven among the five Egyptian infantry divisions, not all reaching the ten or twelve kilometers necessary to gain control of Artillery Road. In the Second Army sector, however, the 16th Infantry Division proved most successful by occupying the important positions of Missouri, Televizia, Machshir, and Hamutal, the latter overlooking the juncture of Ismailia and Artillery Roads. These four positions would later prove a thorn in the Israeli countercrossing operation to the west bank. In the process, one Egyptian infantry brigade commander, Brigadier General 'Adil Yusri, lost his leg while manning the forward command post.⁸⁶

The Israelis, meanwhile, fought back to regain some of the lost ground.⁸⁷ Keren organized his brigade for an assault on Hamutal hill. While Nahum's battalion provided covering fire, Amir's battalion with twelve tanks and Lieutenant Colonel Dan Sapir with fifteen tanks attacked in a southeasterly direction. Approximately one thousand meters from Hamutal, Egyptian fire killed Sapir, disrupting his battalion's assault. Amir's battalion continued to fight until twilight, but stiff Egyptian resistance forced a pullback of his five remaining tanks.

Just at that moment, an armored brigade under the command of Colonel Haim Erez from Sharon's division returned to the area. By midafternoon, Gonen had realized the gravity of Adan's predicament and, at 1445, ordered Sharon to return to the area he had just vacated. Erez' Armored Brigade arrived in enough time to offer some assistance to Keren, but both brigade commanders failed to coordinate their actions amid all the battlefield confusion. Erez committed a battalion to help Keren, but the battalion commander opted to avoid a major assault with the approach of nightfall and instead committed a tank company in an attempt to retake Hamutal. The company lost three of its eight tanks and failed in its mission.

By the end of the day, growing doubt began to set in among senior Israeli commanders as to Gonen's ability to command the Sinai front. He had pushed Adan to attempt a crossing to the west bank after enticing Elazar to grant his consent. In the end, the Israelis had little to show for their effort on 8 October. Adan's division had suffered heavy losses. Each brigade had lost one battalion, virtually wiped out in frontal assaults against fortified Egyptian positions: Adini's battalion in Amir's brigade; Yaguri's battalion in Nir's brigade; and Joffe's battalion, later transferred to Keren's brigade. Three battalion commanders had been lost too: Dan Sapir killed in action, Haim Adini seriously wounded, and Asaf Yaguri a prisoner of war. Adan, at times, had lost control of his forces and been unable to observe or communicate with them. In terms of combat power, the 162d Armored Division, with the number of its operational tanks dropping



The Heroism of the Egyptian Soldier

Egyptians employing a Soviet-made T-54 in the Sinai



When God Judged and Men Died

Egyptian soldiers using bomb craters as shelters in the Sinai



Knocked-out Israeli tanks near the Lexicon-Tirtur junction

from 183 to approximately 100, now was tantamount to a single brigade. As Adan noted later, “there had been moments when I was no longer sure I had a division.”⁸⁸ Fog and friction had seemingly dominated the battlefield, abetted by a solid Egyptian performance. Gonen, on his part, had prematurely pulled Sharon for a dash to Suez City only to order him back too late. Had Sharon remained in support of Adan in the Tasa area, the Egyptian 16th Infantry Division might have failed to seize its objectives. Furthermore, Adan might have had some success in his attacks on Egyptian positions.

The bad news for the Israelis did not end there. At 2000, or fifty-four hours into the war, the Israeli Air Force reported losses of forty-four planes, a rate that would bring the air force to the dangerous “red line” in just a few days.⁸⁹ Even the Northern Front filed a sobering update: although the Israelis had stopped the Syrian advance and had begun pushing back the attackers in a few places, the Syrians were expected to commit fresh armor the next day. Unfortunately for his reputation, Elazar held his first news conference at 1800 before he had become fully aware of the actual situation on both fronts. Before the media, he bragged how the IDF would soon “break their [the Arabs’] bones,” already claiming to have “begun the destruction of the Egyptian Army.”⁹⁰ These overconfident words would come to haunt him after the war as evidence of unmitigated arrogance.

A number of Israeli historians and analysts have considered the eighth of October the worst day in the short history of the IDF. Numerous mistakes in planning and execution had caused heavy losses in men and equipment, and there had been no tactical or operational gains—a new experience for the Israeli military. On that fateful day, the standard set by the Six Day War and the doctrine of taking the fight to the enemy’s territory as soon as possible compelled Israeli commanders to attempt to defeat the Egyptian Army in quick order. Combined with an arrogant and patronizing attitude toward the Arabs, the Israelis had created a perfect recipe for disaster. As Adan described the situation:

Every IDF commander was deeply imbued with the idea that we would have to cross at some point; this was an organic part of the IDF’s doctrine of transferring the war to enemy territory and terminating it there quickly . . . Virtually no one on the Israeli side doubted that the war would be decided only after we had crossed to the west bank and destroyed the main enemy force. The