

**MILITARY OPERATIONS OF THE ISRAEL DEFENCE
FORCE IN THE SINAI CAMPAIGN OF 1956**

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**A Thesis
Presented to
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts**

**by
James N. Peters
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MILITARY OPERATIONS OF THE ISRAEL DEFENCE
FORCE IN THE SINAI CAMPAIGN OF 1956

by

James N. Peters

Approved by:

J. Hoder

Chairman of Thesis Advisory Committee

Eratis Williams

Director of Graduate Study

Edward H. Gibson III

Major Professor

Eratis Williams

Minor Professor

INSIGNIA OF THE ISRAEL DEFENCE FORCE



MILITARY OPERATIONS OF THE ISRAEL DEFENCE
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THESIS ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to write a descriptive analysis of the ground warfare operations of the Israel Defence Force during the Sinai Campaign of 1956. An attempt was made to determine the reasons for the Israeli success in this campaign.

The procedure used was the historical method of research. All secondary sources dealing with the Israel Defence Force were examined, especially the works of military observers and historians. Special emphasis was placed upon the works of Carl von Clausewitz and the publications of the United States Department of the Army in analyzing the tactics employed by the Israel Defence Force. Materials which presented the Egyptian point of view were taken from British military observers who were sympathetic to the Egyptian Army during the Sinai Campaign. Sources, supporting the Israeli viewpoint alone, were also used in this study.

This study shows that, during the period between the Israeli War of Independence in 1948 and the Sinai Campaign of 1956, the Israel Defence Force built a strong, hard-

hitting striking force of highly mobile troops to combat any possible enemies which the State of Israel would confront in the future. The armed forces of Israel were on a wartime footing since the conception of the State in 1948. The tactics used by the Israel Defence Force were basically those employed in most Western armies; the Israeli armies followed the principles of war, adapting them to desert warfare and boldness of movement.

The Sinai Campaign itself was one of military daring; the limits of the supporting forces of the striking force were extended beyond all previous bounds. The troops of Israel fought and traveled further over more difficult operational terrain in less time than any other army in history.

It was concluded that the reasons for the Israeli success in the Sinai Campaign were the weakness of the Egyptian Officer Corps and the lack of communication between the Egyptian officers and the men they commanded. The Israelis made several mistakes during the campaign, but they were able to adapt to fluid situations much more readily than were their Egyptian opponents.

PREFACE

The following description of the Sinai Campaign is devoted to operations of the ground forces of the Israel Defence Force only. The Air Force is mentioned only when it contributed directly to land operations. The Israel Navy is mentioned only in connection with one phase of the overall campaign. Only to enable the writer to discuss the operations of the land forces in a consecutive manner have these two arms been ignored.

The writer has also refrained from introducing the international political aspects of the campaign--aspects which have already been covered well in general journalism. Neither does this work concern itself with the general political-strategical planning of the operation; a comparative study whose purpose would be to contrast the prepared plans with the actual execution of the plans is a matter for professional military historians. The description of Operation Kadesh (an interchangeable term with the Sinai Campaign) is concerned, therefore, with the actions of operational military bodies--formations and units--and from time to time refers to levels of command both above and beneath them, according to need for and material available.

There are some subjects about which it is all but impossible to be accurate. One of them is the spelling of place names in the Middle East. Regional maps, and even the

United States Government Gazatteer of Egypt and the Gaza Strip, vary in the spellings used to designate a particular place. In published works on the Middle East, the spelling of a place name varies with the nationality of the author of the various works. This writer has found as many as five different spellings of Qusemi, ranging from Kutsemei to Quesemia; therefore, the spellings used in this work (when a choice had to be made) are those easiest for the English speaking reader to pronounce while still retaining transliterative validity.

The maps in this work were photographed from Edgar O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, and were printed on offset press by Mr. Bill Varner of Appalachian State Teachers College. The charcoal drawings of David Ben Gurion and General Moshe Dayan were done by Miss Greta Vann Padgett of Gastonia, North Carolina. The charcoal drawing of President Abdul Gammel Nasser was done by Miss Teresa Hewitt of Jacksonville, Florida. The three drawings were then photographed by Mr. Varner and printed. The writer is indebted to these three persons for their aid in his work.

By their patience and willingness to listen to the writer discuss his work, many people have supported the writer during the preparation of this thesis. To two of

them especially, Miss Barbara Smith and Mr. David A. French,
the debt is profound.

Boone, North Carolina
April, 1963

James N. Peters

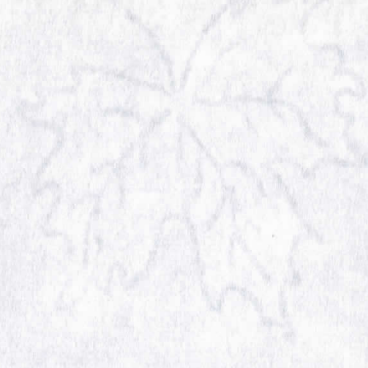


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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Self-interest, that is to say, the basic national needs of a country, determine its domestic and, no less, its foreign policy. This national need may well be an imagined necessity, rather than an actual one, though it may also be true that, as a basic drive, it is supported by numerous actual conditions of a most imperative nature. Thus, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mercantilism, albeit grounded initially upon national defense, became an instrument of an imperialist sort used to satisfy the direct and selfish aims of business men engaged primarily in the pursuit of private gain.

And in the same way war, though not always the immediate instrument of national needs, has always been, in the long run, the ultimate instrument of national policy. It is the means to a desirable end, which is to say, the use of force to compel another nation to adopt policies that do not conflict with our own.

The alternative to force is, of course, diplomacy; and if no solution is worked out by the diplomacy of the nations involved, war is the inevitable consequence.

But what if there is a situation in which there is no means of diplomatic intercourse? In this case, another condition may develop in which warfare is both the beginning

and the end of conflicting interests. This, if we may judge by contemporary events, is the situation prevailing in the Middle East today. The relations between the Arab nations of the Middle East and Israel indicate a climate of opinion in which there has been no means of diplomatic intercourse, a situation in which warfare is the beginning and the end of conflicting interests.

But defense is one thing while aggression, or the threat of aggression, is another. And it is axiomatic that a viable nation will not neglect its defense under the threat or the actuality of aggression. A brief summary of events in the last six years will offer suggestive conclusions on the unrest so frequently manifested in the Middle East during this period.

On October 23, 1956, the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria signed a tripartite military pact, placing the armed forces of the three nations under joint military command. The governments left little doubt as to the ultimate objective of this pact: the liquidation of the State of Israel.¹ President Shukry el Kwatly of Syria announced that the time had come for the Arab strength of the Middle

1. British Information Services, Middle East Background (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1959), p. 22.

East to liquidate the State which had grown up in Arab lands. The Commander of the Jordan Arab Legion, Ali Abu Nawar, who had been placed under Egyptian command, spoke much more bluntly by announcing: "The time has come when the Arabs can choose an hour to open the attack for the elimination of Israel."²

At the time when these threats were being made, the Arab states had the war material to make good the threats. An arms and military supply agreement was concluded between Egypt and Czechoslovakia in the second half of 1955, which provided enormous supplies of modern arms for the Egyptian Army, Navy, and Air Forces. At one stroke, the balance of power in the Middle East was upset in favor of the Arab States, primarily Egypt.³ Czechoslovakia was not alone in supplying arms to Egypt. Great Britain refused to sell arms to Israel, while she supplied the Egyptian Army with "Centurion" tanks, reputed to be one of the finest armored vehicles in the world today. By October 1, 1956, the amount of military equipment held by Egypt from the Communist nations as well as Great Britain had reached enormous proportions. A partial list of this equipment will illustrate:

2. David Ben Gurion, "Israel's Security and Her International Position," Israel Government Yearbook, 5720 (1959-1960), (Jerusalem: Israel Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 30.

3. Anthony Eden, Full Circle: The Memoirs of Anthony

Great Britain:

"Centurion" tanks..... 41
 "Archer" tank destroyers..... 200

Czechoslovakia:

Stalin III tanks..... 50
 T-34 tanks..... 150
 BTR 152 armored troopcarriers... 200
 SU 100 tank destroyers..... 100
 Anti-tank guns (57 mm.)..... 200
 Recoil-less rifles (82 mm.).....1000
 Artillery pieces (122 mm.)..... 50
 Zis 150 five-ton trucks..... 100
 Praga ten-ton trucks..... 50
 G. A. S. scout cars..... 400

In addition to the heavy equipment, many thousands of Czech semi-automatic rifles were received along with thousands of bakelite mines, which were sown along the Egyptian-Israeli frontier.⁴

The voiced threats against Israel by the Arabs might have been dismissed with a smile, but a nation can hardly dismiss thousands of tons of military equipment with indifference when the avowed purpose of this material is that nation's potential destruction. One would naturally assume, in the perspective of reality, that the Egyptian Government did not intend to use these arms supplies for the improvement of the Egyptian masses.⁵

Eden (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, Inc., 1960), p. 469.

4. Robert Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), pp. 26-27.

5. Ben Gurion, "Israel's Security and Her International Position," p. 21.

Wars in our time arise from economic causes because,⁶ as all civilizations have been, ours is an economic one. From May, 1948, the Arab States had imposed an economic blockade of Israel, with the Egyptian Government denying passage through the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping and other shipping carrying "strategic goods" to Israel. On September 1, 1951, the Security Council of the United Nations called on Egypt to terminate the restrictions upon shipping through the Canal, regardless of its destination.⁷ The government of Egypt chose to ignore this resolution and in November, 1953, extended the restrictions to cover foodstuffs and all other commodities likely to strengthen Israel's war potential.⁸

The blockade of the Suez Canal presented grave difficulties for Israel, but the Egyptian fortifications at the entrance to the Gulf of Akaba were perhaps most chafing to Israel's economy. At the northern end of the Red Sea, this body of water splits into two sections: the Gulf of Suez, forming one link via the Suez Canal with the Mediterranean Sea; and the Gulf of Akaba, at the head of which lies the

6. J. F. C. Fuller, Armored Warfare (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1943), p. 4.

7. Israel Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Egypt and the Suez Canal (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Post Press, 1960), p. 1.

8. British Information Services, Middle East Background, p. 9.

southern seaport of Israel. Lying between these two bodies of water is the Sinai Peninsula, where bloody fighting was later to erupt.⁹

The coastline of the Gulf of Akaba is shared by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Egypt. The only ports of significance are Eilat (Israel) and Akaba (Jordan). The uninhabited islands of Tiran and Sanafir are located at the southern end of the Gulf, restricting the navigable area of entrance into the Gulf to a three-mile channel between Tiran and the Sinai Coast. This channel is known as the Straits of Tiran, and it was on this island that the Egyptian gun batteries were placed in order to seal off the straits to shipping.¹⁰

A nation so surrounded (as was Israel in 1956) has to face a tormenting question: Do its obligations under international law require it to resign itself to possible destruction by the armies of its sworn enemies--enemies who have vowed to slaughter every man, woman, and child in that nation? Or, on the other hand, is the nation that is threatened justified in launching an attack to destroy the opposing forces before an invasion can be fully prepared?

9. Abba Eban, Voice of Israel (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 281.

10. Golda Meir, Freedom of the Seas (Jerusalem: Israel Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 2.

Not since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 had the leaders of her government been faced with such a problem, nor had they been in such extreme danger as the State faced in the latter half of October, 1956. Israel was forced into a position of accepting one of two alternatives: she could choose to wait for a more favorable balance of force (which was not likely to transpire) in which she could enlist the possible aid of allies (which was unlikely); or she could attack on one front in an attempt to destroy the more menacing force. She chose the latter of the two evils.¹¹

When a nation chooses to wait for a more favorable balance of force, she is gambling away time that could be more profitably spent in attack. In 1956, the Israel Defence Force had to attack with the material available, without hope of outside aid.¹² At the meeting of the Israeli Cabinet on October 28, 1956, the Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, asked that extensive military operations be carried out in all sections of the Sinai Peninsula and in the Gaza Strip, with the aims of destroying the Egyptian military bases and offensive potential and of occupying the shores of the Gulf of Akaba, in order to safeguard navigation to and from Eilat.¹³ The

11. Ben Gurion, "Israel's Security and Her International Position," p. 31.

12. B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1955), p. 334.

13. Ben Gurion, "Israel's Security and Her International Position," p. 31.

operation was to begin on the evening of October 29, 1956, and to be limited to the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, without crossing the Suez Canal. So began a military operation of limited aim which was to end with a serious threat of another world war. The strategy of limited aim is bound up in the military history of the British Empire and has repeatedly proven a lifeline to Great Britain's allies.¹⁴

A study of military history will lead one to realize that all past tactics in land warfare have been guided by basic principles of war--maintenance of objective, economy of force, concentration of firepower, surprise, security, offensive action, movement, and cooperation; moreover, these hold good whether the action is of limited scope or over continents.¹⁵ A further study of military history reveals that all great military leaders have followed these principles, consciously or unconsciously, in the conduct of military operations. Operations conducted in accordance with these basic principles do not necessarily guarantee success in combat operations, but continued violation of, or neglect of, them is almost certain to lead to eventual defeat of an armed force. In theory, the principles of war are invariable and form the

14. Ibid., p. 33.

15. Fuller, Armored Warfare, p. 11.

basic military doctrine for the conduct of all military operations.¹⁶ Very few military commanders willfully violate the basic principles of war.

The Sinai Campaign of the Israeli Army, in 1956, is a case in point where someone forgot to read "the book" on the principles of war. In this campaign, the Israelis won a decisive victory over a numerically and materially superior force by extending the limits of military daring. Striking forces traveled farther over formidable operational terrain in less time than any other army in history. This operation will be studied in the war colleges of the world for many years. The question has been asked: How was this operation such a phenomenal success? The answer to this question lies somewhere within the principles of war, even though the Chief of Staff at that time, General Moshe Dayan, would deny the existence of any such doctrines in his overall planning for the operation.¹⁷ The Sinai Campaign is a case study in group power and daring command. It is also a study in determination to win against almost insurmountable odds. To fully understand the tactics involved, one must apply the principles of war to the battles on the four battle-

16. Carl von Clausewitz, Principles of War, Translated and Edited by Hans W. Gatzke, (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1942), pp. 12-14.

17. S. L. A. Marshall, Sinai Victory (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1958), p. 18.

fronts: the Northern Axis, the Eastern Axis, the Southern Axis, and the Central Axis. But before studying the campaign itself, one needs to know something of the officers and men of the victor army and also of the opposing force.

CHAPTER II

THE ISRAEL DEFENCE FORCE

In a recent popular novel concerning the establishment of the State of Israel, one of the central characters, an American nurse, attends an outing of an Israel Defence Force unit where she makes an observation:¹

What kind of army was this? What kind of army without uniform or rank? What kind of army where the women fought alongside their men with rifle and bayonet? Who were these young lions of Judah? An electrifying revelation hit her. This was no army of mortals. These were the ancient Hebrews. These were the faces of Dan and Reuben and Judah and Ephraim! These were the Samsons and Deborahs and Joabs and Sauls! It was the army of Israel, and no force on earth could stop them for the power of God was within them!

Perhaps the author became overly poetic in his description of the Israel Defence Force, but there is much truth in his description of the unconventional organization of this army.

The Israel Defence Force is a young army--in the length of its existence and the age count of its troops. It is fourteen years old this year (1962), having been proclaimed an organized military force in 1948.² In age count of all ranks, from Chief-of-Staff to the newest recruit, the army

1. Leon Uris, Exodus (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1958), p. 357.

2. Moshe Pearlman, The Army of Israel (New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1950), p. 12.



Prime Minister David Ben Gurion

is three to four years junior to any army on earth. The reasoning behind the relative youth of the soldier is that the velocity of the striking forces must be kept high. This is the reason that senior officers are released from service in their early forties. The command of the army during the Sinai Campaign was entrusted to Moshe Dayan, who, at the age of forty-one, was the youngest commander-in-chief in the world.³ This idea of low age count is as old as the Israeli Army: the Director of Military Operations (comparable to the United States Army Chief-of-Staff) during the War for Independence in 1948, General Yigal Yadin, was but thirty-three years of age.⁴

The organization of the Army of Israel is constructed according to Western standards, but there are many differences within this organizational structure which are uniquely Israeli. It is a relaxed army. It is a fighting body in spirit and not a group of highly trained specialists competing with each other for higher rank or prestige. The individual soldier is usually clean but not always neat; he may appear at a parade unshaven and looking as if all the barbers of

3. S. L. A. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," Atlantic Monthly, CCVIII:V (November, 1961), 94.

4. Jon Kimche, Seven Fallen Pillars: The Middle East, 1915-1950 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1950), p. 242.

Israel were on strike. His uniform may, or may not, be perfectly matched, according to United States Army uniform regulations. Some observers would call this quality lack of discipline and laxness in command level. But there are many kinds of discipline. The primary aim of discipline in the Israel Defence Force is the exacting of undeviating performance of duty, or the accomplishment of success in combat. During the Sinai Campaign, the soldiers appeared much more fearful of the High Command than they were of the Egyptian enemy.⁵ But the discipline of the rank-and-file Israeli soldier is not born of fear of punishment for disobedience. The soldier knows that the military system under which he lives is administered with impartiality and judgment; he knows, too, that he will be justly dealt with in all circumstances. This type of discipline measures the difference between a mediocre army and an army that is victorious in combat. This discipline is an inheritance from the British Army, under whom most of the high-ranking officers of the Israeli Army served in World War II.⁶

The British system is just, but inflexible, as it has been for centuries. The British learned early in the game

5. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 247.

6. Pearlman, The Army of Israel, p. 34.

of warfare that unquestioned obedience to orders received is one of the ingredients which wins battles and wars. Even if the soldier, in his private judgment, has reason to doubt the wisdom or legality of an order, the instinct for obedience is so well ingrained that rejection of the order is out of the question. Such discipline is not acquired by simply donning a uniform. It is the result of training and acceptance of a way of life. The private soldier is seldom called upon to exercise personal initiative of great scope. His duty is to obey the orders given him without rebellion.⁷

The doctrine of the Israel Defence Force, whether expressed by the Chief-of-Staff or by a squad leader, places the emphasis upon task, mission, and objective above everything else. The orders issued to a subordinate tell him what to do only, not how to do it. As in all combat situations, the battle will never go as planned; but the task or objective of the battle remains unchanged. A section leader is given a mission, but he is not told how to accomplish his task. He must exercise his own judgment if he finds his instructions unsuitable to rapid accomplishment, but he cannot withdraw from the assigned mission simply because he encounters superior fire or forces.⁸ If a patrol is sent to destroy

7. "Discipline," United Service Gazette, CLXII, Issue No. 4,240 (April 16, 1914), 305.

8. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 247.

a given objective, it must stay with the task assigned unless, in the judgment of its leader, it has taken too many casualties and the weight of wounded outnumbered the able-bodied. Then, and only then, is the unit able to withdraw from the action without special permission. Even after withdrawal, if the facts of the situation do not prove that withdrawal was essential, the leader is liable for court martial.⁹

The end result of this unconventional doctrine is a performance of duty, with seemingly little discipline, and an undeviating performance of task. Israel demands, and receives, much from her fighting men and women. The army performs its tasks without the normal "spit and polish" found in a standing army. But no Israeli soldier hesitates to spit on his hands and take up the task facing him.¹⁰

The Israel Defence Force is composed of all three fighting arms: the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. All three branches are controlled by a single General Staff, the Chief of which takes his orders from the Minister of Defence, who is a civilian of Cabinet rank in the government.¹¹ A single General Staff for all three services is very convenient

9. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," p. 95.

10. Amos Lev, With Plowshare and Sword (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1961), pp. 271-273.

11. Jon Kimche and David Kimche, A Clash of Destinies (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1960), p. 207.

and economical in a small country such as Israel. This system also avoids the wasteful duplication and inter-service rivalries that plague the defense services of other countries.

The State of Israel is divided into three separate territorial command areas: the Northern, the Central, and the Southern. These three areas face the borders of the country, which is faced on three sides by avowed enemies.¹² The Commands have responsibility for the security, mobilization, training, and military administration within their areas. In the event of national emergency (such as "Operation Kadesh") the Command from which the operation originates is given all the administrative work of the operation, even though troops from the other Commands are involved.¹³ General Headquarters may, at any time, move units from one Command to another to meet the needs of a given situation. The individual Commands must be prepared at all times to receive, administer, feed, and fuel large influxes of men and equipment. This necessitates flexibility in administrative and supply organization. In the Israel Defence Force, improvisation is always encouraged.¹⁴

12. Ibid., p. 208.

13. Edgar O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1959), p. 53.

14. Schlomo Barer, The Weekend War (Tel Aviv, Israel: Karni Publishers, Ltd., 1959), pp. 39-41.

The basic formation in the Israeli Army is a brigade, similar to the American regiment rather than the British brigade. The brigades are stationed on a territorial footing. The normal complement of a brigade consists of its officers, warrant officers, and non-commissioned officers. A number of brigades are activated from time to time for the defense of the frontier, reprisal raids, and to absorb and train conscripts. All reservists are assigned to a specific brigade within their area of residence. These reservists, in the event of mobilization, can be assembled hurriedly to meet the emergency. In any case, the brigades are all activated in turn each year to train new recruits and to exercise for battle. Any number of brigades can be grouped together for a specific operation. This grouping constitutes a "Task Force," and it is the same type of formation known as the "Corps" in the American and British armies.¹⁵

Within a territorial Command the commander is usually a brigadier general. His chief-of-staff is usually a colonel, who is also second in command of the area Command. In the event of national emergency, the commander normally takes over any Task Force operating within, or from, this area. When this happens, another Task Force deputy commander is chosen; and the Command chief-of-staff remains in command of

15. Ibid., p. 44.

the Command Headquarters, while the Command commander is in the field. If more than one task force is required from one Command, a Task Force commander would be designated by General Headquarters, and a special Task Force headquarters would be formed on a provisional basis, not under the area Command.¹⁶

The Navy, Air Force, and Armored Force are stationed within the area Commands. The naval and air forces remain static in an area Command, but the Armored Force is shifted to meet specific situations. The Command commanders have very little control of these three specialized forces; these groups are under direct control of General Headquarters.¹⁷

The manpower needs of the Israel Defence Force are supplied through universal military service. Every able-bodied male and most females must serve in the armed forces. Regular service is a period of two and one-half years for males and two years for females.¹⁸ When the period of active service is completed, the soldier is placed on the reserve lists until he is forty-nine years of age. His reserve duties entail thirty-one consecutive days of active service per year. All Jews in Israel (including resident citizens of other countries if they are Jews) are subject to service in the Israel Defence Force. Of the minorities living in the country--

16. Kimche and Kimche, A Clash of Destinies, p. 243.

17. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 55.

18. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," pp. 96-97.

Christian and Moslem Arabs and the Druse--only the Druse, who are traditional enemies of the Arabs, are conscripted for military service.¹⁹ All citizens of Israel, regardless of race or religion, are registered for military service.

The policy of universal Jewish and Druse military training has proven to be the salvation of Israel. In 1956, the population of Israel was just over two million, including Moslems, Christians, and Druse. The annual conscription was between 40,000 and 60,000 persons. Israel claimed that she could mobilize about a quarter of a million trained personnel, in the event of hostilities, through the reserve-conscription program. Of this quarter of a million men and women, more than fifty percent would be "teeth," which would mean that about 125,000 troops would be available for fighting.²⁰ If the average brigade strength is about 5,000, this means that Israel can field about twenty-five brigades of "teeth." If the home guard and static defense forces are added, almost thirty-two brigades can be placed on combat footing. During the Sinai Campaign, five infantry brigades, two armored brigades, and one paratroop brigade were used to sweep the Sinai. Exclusive of the Air Force, approximately 45,000 troops composed the "teeth" while the rest of the Defence

19. Don Peretz, Israel and the Palestine Arabs (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1958), p. 103.

20. Marshall, Sinai Victory, pp. 251-253.

Force guarded against invasion from any other quarter.²¹

Rapid mobilization is the key to Israel's survival. The mechanics of rapid mobilization have been reduced to a science in the State. The Chief-of-Staff said that the Defence Force could mobilize twelve brigades in as many hours, and within forty-eight hours the entire nation could be mobilized. Mobilization for the Sinai Campaign began on Thursday evening, October 25, 1956. At 1620 hours (4:20 P.M.) Israeli Air Force planes began dropping paratroops at Mitla Pass, deep in the Sinai.²²

There are three methods of mobilization: public radio, special-delivery mail, and word-of-mouth. In the first method, a code is passed over the radio, to be heard by the men concerned or heard by their families. The men then leave immediately for their assembly points. In the second case, the mobilization warning is sent by mail. This method is the usual way that reservists are called for summer training. The brigades which were held in reserve on the Syrian and Jordanian frontiers during the Sinai Campaign were alerted in this manner. The third method is the one which was used for the units taking part in the Sinai operation. The bri-

21. Ben-Zion Tehan, The Sinai Campaign (Tel Aviv, Israel: Israel Ministry of Defence, 1961), p. 3 ff.

22. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 22.

gade commanders concerned were called to General Headquarters and told of the operation. They returned and informed the officers of the sub-units. The unit commanders passed the information to the non-commissioned officers who visited the homes or places of employment and gave the other brigade members instructions for the mobilization.²³

For the individual soldier, mobilization is carried out in four stages. First, he receives the order to report to his mobilization center; second, he draws his stores; third, his transport arrives at the mobilization point (in the case of infantry brigades the transport is usually impressed civilian trucks); fourth, his transport takes him to a concentration area where he is briefed on the impending operation.²⁴

For a student of Western military forces, the Israel Defence Force is full of surprises. Many organizations not found in conventional armies will be found in the Israeli Army. One such unit is the Nahal, which is designed to combine military service with agricultural training. The name of this organization is made up of initials, the Hebrew words meaning "the Pioneer Fighting Youth."²⁵

23. Lev, With Plowshare and Sword, p. 77.

24. Barer, The Weekend War, pp. 22-25.

25. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 62.

Conscripts have a choice of spending all of their term of active service in a Nahal unit or waiting until they have finished basic training before joining. The purpose behind Nahal is the founding of fortified frontier settlements, the theory being that, if the Arabs attack, a strong line of defended points could hold the invader at bay until the Israel Defence Force could be mobilized.²⁶ The General Staff can exert pressure in the matter of siting frontier settlements. In return for this right the Israel Defence Force gives active assistance in working and defending the villages. Members of Nahal perform the dual task of helping to feed and defend the country.²⁷

With the possible exception of the Russian Army, Israel is the only nation in the world in which the women fight alongside the men in combat situations. Usually the women serve in jobs which will allow the maximum number of men to serve in the "teeth" of the army; however, David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Minister of Defence, insisted that women be unrestricted in military occupation.²⁸ Ben Gurion realized the important position of the woman in the Jewish family and

26. David Catarivas, Israel (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), p. 133.

27. Ibid.

28. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," p. 97.

insisted that all women be conscripted and serve. This insistence was directed mainly at women immigrants from the Moslem countries. The Jews living in such countries reflected the customs of the people among whom they were living, and the women had a low status compared to the men. Ben Gurion's aim was to absorb the young women of such families into the army in order to broaden their outlook, to help them learn to be the equals of men, and to mix in a masculine society without embarrassment.²⁹

In 1956, women comprised forty-seven percent of the total Defence Force strength. This was an exceptionally high rate and far more than was necessary. Presently (1962), the total strength of the Women's Army Corps is limited to twenty-five percent of the total Defence Force.³⁰

The third force in the Israeli defensive arrangement is the Gadna. This is a type of educational function designed to give cadet training to pre-military age youths of both sexes. The name Gadna is a contraction of two Hebrew words, Gedudei Noar, which mean "Youth Battalions."³¹

29. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 63.

30. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," p. 97.

31. Netanel Lorch, The Edge of the Sword: Israel's War of Independence, 1947-1949 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961), p. 46.

Gadna units are to be found in every Kibbutz and school in Israel. In addition, Gadna operates training camps and youth clubs in the cities. The primary duty of the Gadna is to assist the civil defense organization as runners and messengers. In the War of Independence (1948), the Gadna boys were used as regular troops to keep the Jerusalem Corridor open.³²

The proportion of "teeth" to "tail" in the Israel Defence Force is amazingly high for a modern field army. Most armies today operate on the principle that it takes four men behind the lines of fire to keep one man in the line. Israel maintains about fifty percent "teeth" in her Defence Force.³³

Many factors have contributed to this high percentage, the primary one being that Israel operated on interior lines of communication, which resulted in a decrease in the number of supply personnel needed to sustain the Defence Force.³⁴ Israel had not planned to build an army capable of offensive warfare over extended periods of time and space. The Army of Israel cannot operate for extended time in alien country because of the paucity of arms and equipment, and it cannot

32. Kimche and Kimche, A Clash of Destinies, pp. 137-138.

33. Department of the Army, Armor Logistics (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1958), passim.

34. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 28.

overextend supply lines because of the geographical danger of having these supply lines severed.³⁵

Operation Kadesh was the "command performance" of the Israel Defence Force. In the 1948 War of Independence, the Israeli troops had no choice but to fight or to die. Eight years later they had fought their way into the textbooks of war colleges the world over. In this campaign--Operation Kadesh--a small, compact, hard-hitting army exhibited a fighting competence that no modern staff college would question.

35. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," p. 95.

CHAPTER III
THE EGYPTIAN ARMY

The Egyptian Army is perhaps the oldest organized military force in the world. Records show that over 3,000 years ago the Egyptians fought in military units, armed with spears, maces, bows and arrows.¹ The Egyptian fighting men were eclipsed by the Romans, after which the military spirit of Egypt seemed to disappear. Little else is heard of the Egyptians until Mahamed Ali, the Albanian soldier of fortune, established himself as Khedive of Egypt by military force in 1805.²

The new Khedive soon found that the mercenary soldiers, who had gained for him his crown, were proving unreliable. He was forced to enlist the fellahin, and by indoctrinating them with some of his own fire, and with the aid of British and French instructors, he was able to push them into a remarkable fighting spirit on the battlefield.³

The British Army came into Egypt at the request of the Khedive during the Arabi Rebellion of 1882.⁴ At the battle of Tel El Kebir, the Egyptian Army was routed and defeated

1. James H. Breasted, The Battle of Kadesh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1903), p. 37.

2. Tom Little, Egypt (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958), p. 57.

3. George Lenczowski, The Middle East in World Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), p. 16.

4. Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1956), p. 750.

within twenty minutes by the British. The old army was disbanded, and a new Egyptian fighting force, commanded by British officers and non-commissioned officers, was organized.⁵

In the first years of the twentieth century, the army was neglected, with a resultant decrease in strength and efficiency. At the outbreak of World War I, the army numbered about 9,000 men in all branches. Owing to the belief that the Egyptian was no match for the Turk, the strength of the army was not increased except for transport and labor battalions used to support the British Army.⁶

After World War I, a movement was begun to mechanize a part of the army. Not much could be accomplished because of the lack of funds and apathy on the part of the Egyptian politicians. The officer corps became discontented; moreover, they were affected by the nationalistic fever, arising in the twenties, which culminated in riots in the Sudan, costing the life of the British administrator, Sir Lee Stack.⁷ After these disturbances, the Egyptian troops stationed in the Sudan were withdrawn. The Sudanese units of the Egyptian Army were severed from it and formed into a completely independent Sudanese Defence Force. Under British pressure, the

5. Ibid.

6. Little, Egypt, p. 128.

7. Halford L. Hoskins, The Middle East (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 86.

Egyptian Army strength was cut, and for the next few years it was neglected.⁸

Some effort was made to improve the army after the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936. This treaty removed many of the limitations which had formerly been imposed upon the Egyptian fighting forces.⁹ New battalions were raised, the military academy was enlarged, and other training camps were established. But money was still in short supply, and lack of it retarded plans for rapid expansion.¹⁰ By 1939 the Egyptian Army was about 22,000 strong, but when World War II broke over Europe and the Middle East, Egypt was defended by the British Army during the long years of the war. In order to become a member of the United Nations, Egypt declared war on the Axis powers in 1945.¹¹

In company with the other Arab nations, the Egyptian Army marched into Palestine in 1948 in an attempt to destroy the infant State of Israel. The Egyptian Army fared badly in this attempt.¹² The Egyptian High Command was faced with a difficulty in mustering men for the initial expeditionary force. Ten thousand men composed the initial force with

8. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 39.

9. British Information Services, Middle East Background, p. 5.

10. Keith Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1960), p. 3.

11. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 39.

12. Lenczowski, The Middle East in World Affairs, pp. 402-406.

the total force involved reaching 40,000 by the end of the war in 1949.¹³

The army blamed the defeat in Palestine on corruption in high government and military circles. In the internal upheaval that followed the defeat, King Farouk was deposed in 1952. A group of "young officers" seized power in the government, under the leadership of General Mohamed Neguib. The General was later ousted by Colonel Abdel Gamel Nasser. After consolidating his position, Nasser turned his attention to improving the condition of the armed forces of the country.¹⁴

At the beginning of the Sinai Campaign in October, 1956, the Egyptian Army consisted of ten infantry brigades, one coastal defense brigade, and three armored brigades. The total strength in standing manpower of the army, including conscripts and reserves, was about 90,000 of all ranks. The brigades were grouped into five divisions, one of which--the Palestinian Division--was territorially based.¹⁵

Another force in the Egyptian military system was the National Guard. It was a volunteer body organized along similar lines of the British Territorial Army or the State Militia during World War II in the United States.

13. Kimche, Seven Fallen Pillars: The Middle East, 1915-1950, p. 232.

14. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, p. 33.

15. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 25.

Its strength was about 100,000 men in July, 1956. The level of training and armament of this body was very low with, perhaps, about half of its members being armed.¹⁶ The National Guard was mobilized during the early stages of the Suez Canal dispute in July, 1956. Some effort was made to give the Guard some active service experience by sending units into the Gaza Strip and other parts of the Sinai for training. But, unfortunately, not much could be achieved with the short period between July and October.¹⁷

The third force of the Egyptian Army presenting any show of strength was the Frontier Force, which was the successor to the old British-led Camel Corps. This unit was equipped with jeeps and half-tracks for patrol and reconnaissance work. A small element mounted on camels was retained for patrol work in the more remote parts of the Eastern frontier around the Gulf of Akaba. Its strength was about 3,000 in all ranks at the outbreak of the Sinai Campaign, and it was considered to be a corps d' elite.¹⁸

Perhaps the weakest link in the Egyptian Army in 1956 was its officer corps. This fact was evident despite the popularity of a military career and the attraction the army

16. Ibid.

17. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, pp. 59-62.

18. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 41.



President Abdel Gamel Nasser

held for a large number of young men. The officers were usually well educated in the art of warfare--from the theoretical angle at any rate. The failure arose when it came to putting the theory into practice. The inbred tradition of distrust between the fellahin and the educated classes created a gulf which tended to cause a breakdown in command under combat conditions.¹⁹

The defeat of the Egyptian Army in the Israel War of Independence can be blamed in part on the officer corps. The officers let their men down badly through their shortcomings. The average Egyptian officer hated hardships and enduring tedious duty. He took unkindly to campaigning and had little intention of risking his life in battle if he could avoid it.²⁰ Nasser, who had taken part in the Palestinian War himself, realized this failing in his officer corps and went to some lengths to strengthen the corps. He introduced German instructors in an attempt to improve the ability, enthusiasm, and morale of the Egyptian officers,²¹ but the whole program was a failure.

Another problem facing Egypt at the opening of hostilities in 1956 was an age-old problem of manpower of sufficient

19. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 100.

20. Ibid.

21. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, p. 59.

quality. The population of Egypt in 1952 was just over twenty million and was increasing by about half a million each year. One may wonder, with such a vast reservoir of people to draw upon, why the army had such difficulty in raising sufficient forces for the Palestinian invasion in 1948 and the small number of troops, relative to the population, in 1956.²² The only answer is that such a huge percentage of the conscripts called to service in Egypt were found unfit for service because of malnutrition, disease, or mental retardation.²³ Another factor is that military service holds little attraction, glory, or prestige for the fellahin. They have no tradition of military service as have the Ghurka of India. But on occasions, when properly led, the fellahin have fought well. They are usually stubborn fighters in a defensive operation, when their officers do not desert them.²⁴

The morale of the Egyptian Army in 1956 was very high, thanks to an efficient governmental propaganda machine. The 1948 defeat by Israel was blamed on the Farouk government rather than any shortcoming of the army itself. Each Egyptian soldier was convinced that he was more than equal

22. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 44.

23. Ibid.

24. Lorch, The Edge of the Sword: Israel's War of Independence, 1947-1949, p. 385.

to any Israeli on the battlefield. The Egyptian soldier was but waiting for the "second round" with the Israelis and firmly believed that it was just a matter of time before the army would sweep the Israelis into the sea.²⁵

The 1948 war was regarded by the Arab nations as merely the beginning of the struggle against Israel. Preparations for the "second round" were openly made in all the Arab nations but none prepared so frantically as the Egyptians.²⁶ In the period 1948-1952, most of the Egyptian Army was stationed in the Gaza Strip and in the eastern Sinai facing Israel.²⁷ Not much was done from a military standpoint until the ouster of King Farouk. As soon as the monarch was deposed, measures were taken to build up the eastern Sinai into a staging area for the projected and loudly proclaimed invasion of Israel, which was eagerly expected, especially by the politicians of the Arab nations.²⁸ Many bases were established and materiel, arms, and equipment began to be stockpiled in the defensive "triangle" of El Arish-Rafa-
Abu Aweigila.²⁹

25. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, p. 59.

26. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 25.

27. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 48.

28. Ben Gurion, "Israel's Security and Her International Position," p. 21.

29. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 25.

When he began consideration of the defense of the Sinai against possible Israeli attack, Nasser called upon some German officers of World War II fame to assist in the construction of a defense system. The Germans advised him to set up a defense system along a natural defense line-- the Central Ridge--extending from the coast to deep into the Sinai. Any attack on this line would place the Israelis at least 150 miles from their nearest supply base. However, Nasser rejected this advice and, instead, decided that the defense system should be placed along the frontier, which is almost impossible to defend; all positions between the frontier and the Central Ridge could be outflanked or encircled. The defense system was not a sensible military decision and was probably reached for political motives or reasons of international prestige.³⁰

The defensive layout along the frontier was improved and strongpoints were well sited with interlocking fields of fire, protected by minefields and barbed wire entanglements. The whole frontier was envisioned as a "killing ground" of the Egyptians' own choosing.³¹

The Gaza Strip presented the Egyptian High Command with its greatest problem in the defense arrangement. In the

30. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 50.

31. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 25.

Strip were 200,000 embittered and discontented Palestinian refugees who had to be controlled lest they come flooding into Egypt proper or become an independent power influence in Middle Eastern power politics.³² In any case, the Gaza Strip is all but impossible to defend. Its general shape is like a long, narrow finger pointed toward Tel Aviv, pressed against the coast, extending from the Sinai. To defend the area requires defensive positions established along the entire frontier, for there are no natural defense points in its entire area.³³

The total strength of the Egyptian Army in the Sinai, including the Gaza Strip garrison, at the outbreak of hostilities in 1956 was about 30,000 men of all ranks. During the first few hours of the campaign, 10,000 reinforcements crossed into the Sinai from Egypt. In all, there were approximately 40,000 men facing the invaders during the campaign.³⁴ But the Egyptian Army commanders made a few slight mistakes in establishing a static defense system. They forgot a few maxims of defense warfare. For instance, a static defense gives the initiative to the attacker. By

32. Ibid.

33. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 49.

34. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 52.

means of this initiative, the attacker is always one move ahead of the defender.³⁵

It is true that the Egyptians had constructed defenses which would have been an honor to Field Marshall Ritter von Leeb, the noted German authority on defensive warfare. But even though the defense network in the Gaza Strip and in the "triangle" area was well constructed, with covered emplacements and interlocking firefields, the Israeli troops had the choice of time and place of attack; they had the element of surprise; they could afford to lose an engagement. In defensive warfare, such as contemplated by the Egyptians, there was a definite wastage of troops; the available troops were scattered over vast spaces with insufficient communication. In a static defense, the defender cannot afford to lose a single engagement. If the attacker strikes ten sections of the line of defense and loses eight of the engagements, he has won, because the defender must win all ten.³⁶

With all its shortcomings, the Egyptian Army should have been able, according to the basic principles of modern warfare, to repel the Israeli invasion in 1956. But it did not.

35. Department of the Army, Armor Operations: Small Units (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 16.

36. Alfred H. Burne, The Art of War on Land (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Company, 1947), p. 17.

This army was beaten by a numerically equal force. An attacking force usually requires a three-to-one superiority over the defending force if the defender is holding prepared positions.³⁷ Perhaps a key to the success of the Israel Defence Force in the Sinai Campaign was the full use made of the intervening eight years between the War of Independence and the Sinai Campaign to build up a small, compact, hard-hitting army. The Egyptians did not keep up and were severely beaten on the field of battle.³⁸

37. Hugh M. Cole, The Lorraine Campaign (Washington: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1950), p. 606.

38. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 197.

CHAPTER IV
THE SOUTHERN AXIS

The military campaign known as Operation Kadesh began on October 29, 1956, at 1620 hours (Jerusalem time) when transport aircraft of the Israel Defence Force crossed the Sinai frontier with the First Battalion of the 202nd Paratroop Brigade aboard. The other three battalions of the Brigade were to join forces with the First Battalion at the eastern exit to Mitla Pass, deep in the Sinai.¹ Had the Egyptian Army mounted sufficient forces to stop the Israeli drive from the frontier, the battalion of paratroops would have been in a very precarious position, 106 miles from the Israel frontier. The objective of the First Battalion was basically the same as that of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions of the United States Army in World War II during the Normandy Invasion: to hold a tactical position of strategic importance until sufficient forces joined them for a forward drive to a more important strategic position.² The ultimate goal of the Israeli drive on the Southern Axis was to be Port Tewfik on the Suez Canal.³

Capture of Mitla Pass was absolutely essential to the success of any large scale operations in the Southern and

1. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 98.

2. S. L. A. Marshall, Night Drop: The Airborne Invasion of Normandy (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), passim.

3. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 63.



General Moshe Dayan

Eastern Sinai. The road network in the Sinai is limited to three lateral routes traversing the peninsula from east to west. The northern route, which follows the coast, goes through Gaza and El Arish to El Quantara. The central route goes from Beersheba to Ismaila. Perhaps the most important route, insofar as operation in the southern and eastern areas of the Sinai is concerned, is that route which runs from Suez through Mitla Pass and branches both north and south of the eastern side of the pass. The capture of Mitla Pass by the First Paratroop Battalion was essential to further land operations in the combat area, because when the pass was held effectively, the road network in the Southern Axis was sealed off.⁴

In land warfare, the road becomes a powerful magnet to the attacking force, as well as the defender. The road is essential to all arms except, perhaps, the air force. Reconnaissance armor patrols gravitate to the road, risking the chance of ambush in order to save wear on men and vehicles; the artillery remains on the road as long as is practicable; infantry loses about five percent of its efficiency when it leaves the road; and tanks in force remain on the road to cover their tracks from air observation.⁵ In the Sinai

4. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 84.

5. W. D. Croft, "Wheels and Tracks: Cooperation of Armoured Cars with Tanks," The Army Quarterly, XVII (October, 1928), 96.

Operation the road was many times the difference between life and death for attacker as well as defender.⁶

In war, the principle of the offensive must be regarded as the key to tactical success. While the paratroop drop at Mitla Pass was a defensive measure, it must also be regarded as a tactical offensive operation. No war, or battle, has ever been won by defensive operations alone.⁷ But during the first night of operations at Mitla Pass, the Israelis were defensive in nature.

At about 0900 hours, October 30, the position at Mitla Pass was attacked by elements of the Second Infantry Brigade of the Egyptian Army, which had moved into the pass from west of the Suez Canal.⁸ By 1200 hours, a company of mounted Egyptian infantry had reached a position about three miles from Israeli positions and had begun to interdict these positions with heavy mortar fire. An assault was attempted by the Egyptians under the cover of a "walking barrage."⁹ The Israelis combatted this action with counter-battery fire


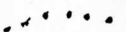
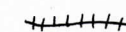
6. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 139.

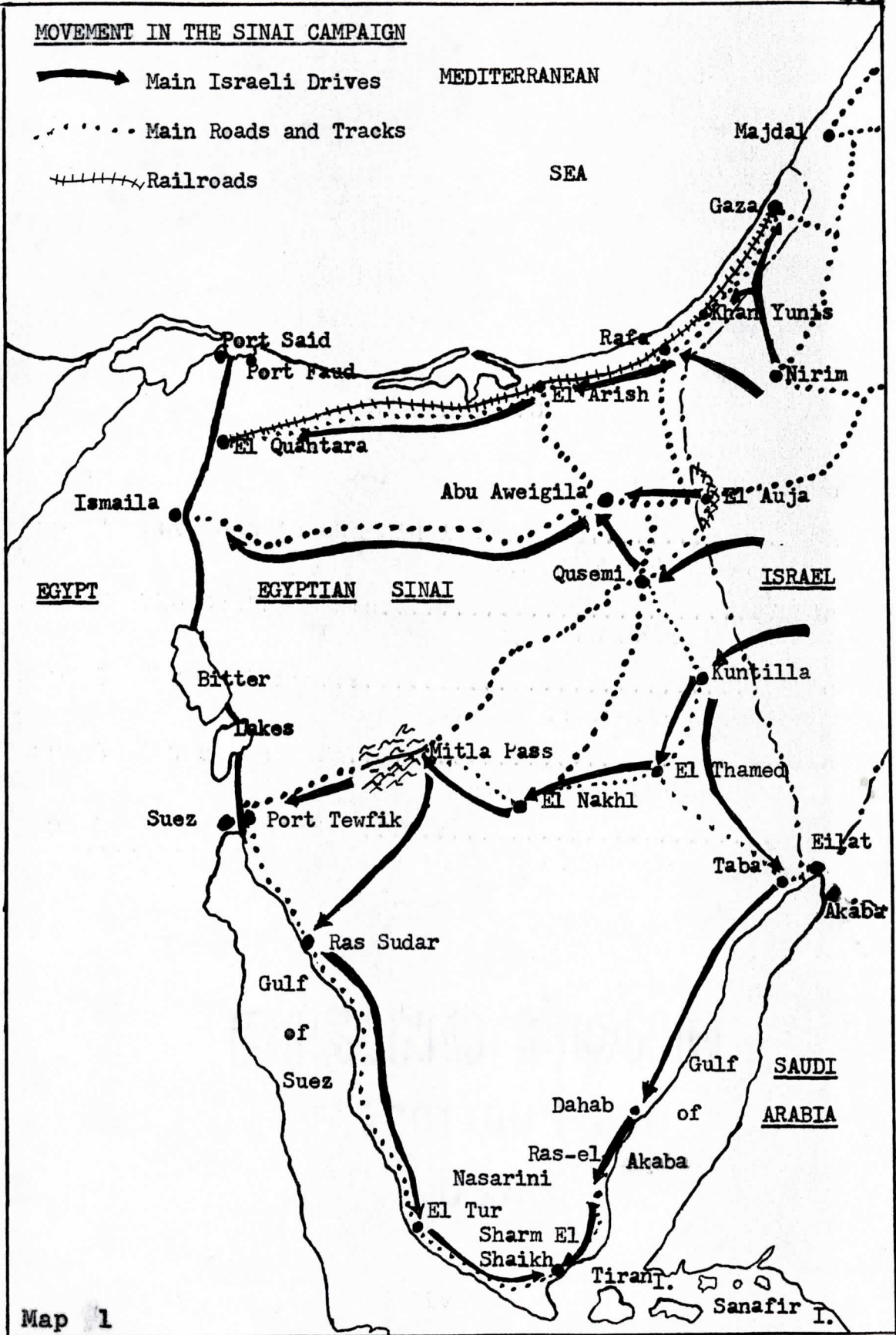
7. This principle can best be illustrated by the operations of Napoleon at the Battle of Mantua in 1796. See Carl von Clausewitz, On War (New York: Modern Library, 1943), p. 140.

8. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 6.

9. A "walking barrage" is a system of mortar or field artillery gunnery in which the point contact of the falling shells is just far enough forward of the advancing attackers to give them protection from small arms fire of a defended position.

MOVEMENT IN THE SINAI CAMPAIGN

-  Main Israeli Drives
-  Main Roads and Tracks
-  Railroads



Map 1

from their own heavy mortars and by mounting a counter-attack on the flanks of the Egyptians.¹⁰

By the time the Israeli commander had his attack under way, he was, fortunately, aided by the arrival of Israeli planes which began to bomb and fire rockets into the Egyptian attackers and mortar positions. Through the combined efforts of the planes and Paratroop mortars, the attacking Egyptian company was destroyed. The Israeli Battalion Commander then began to send his men into the heights at the eastern end of the pass in order to secure the high ground for more advantageous fire positions.¹¹

The planes which had appeared to attack the Egyptian infantry spotted a large enemy column moving into the western exit of Mitla Pass. This column was composed of the Fifth and Sixth Infantry Battalions of the Second Egyptian Infantry Brigade. The Israeli planes launched repeated and concentrated attacks on this column; they also attacked vehicle concentrations which were parked along this road in the vicinity of Mitla. Most of the vehicles were hit and burned out. From aerial observations, the impression was that the Egyptian column had been destroyed, or, at the very least, that it had been put out of effective action. Thus,

10. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 130.

11. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 6.

the Mitla operation settled down to watchful waiting until the arrival of the remainder of the Paratroop Brigade. The First Battalion again assumed the role of static defense in an offensive situation.¹²

The action of parachuting a single battalion into enemy territory was a daring move, for this small unit was the only Israeli force in the vast expanse of the Sinai Desert for many hours. But this seemingly foolish act accomplished its purpose magnificently--that of surprising and causing confusion in the Egyptian Command.¹³

The principle of surprise may shift the balance of combat power in favor of the army, or commander, who achieves it. Surprise is attained by attacking at an unexpected place, at an unexpected time, and from an unexpected direction. In the beginning of hostilities, the enemy can be surprised either in respect to time or space. At all cost, the attacker should keep his enemy ignorant of the day and time of attack and what the deployment of the attacking forces will be.¹⁴ The Paratroop drop at Mitla Pass achieved all the elements of the principle of surprise.

12. Marshall, Sinai Victory, pp. 260-261.

13. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 63.

14. Waldemar Erfurt, Surprise, [Translated by Stefan T. Possony and Daniel Vilfroy], (Harrisburg, Pa.: Military Service Publishing Company, 1943), p. 45.

The danger in dropping this battalion of paratroops had been calculated, and in order to alleviate the danger, a much larger ground force had been allocated to operate on the Southern Axis, which was to effect a junction with the airborne unit. According to calculation, this junction had to be effected within twenty-four hours, with thirty-six hours being the extreme outside time limit from the moment of point contact. A force of aircraft had been allotted to provide fighter cover for the isolated paratroop battalion and to interdict any ground movement of the Egyptians east of the Suez Canal on the Tewfik--El Nakh1 road.¹⁵

The elements of the 202nd Paratroop Brigade which were to join the First Battalion at Mitla Pass were reinforced by light tanks (French AMX-13), field guns, and vehicles, both tracked and wheeled, for their assault across the frontier. According to some military observers, it would seem a waste to commit a highly trained Paratroop Brigade in the role of armored infantry and not use it in its airborne capacity. There were several reasons for this choice which would tend to outweigh all arguments against it, not the least of which was the difficult route between the Israel frontier and Mitla Pass. The route from the frontier to Mitla Pass was an unpaved desert track, 125 miles in length, which was considered

15. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, pp. 83-85.

incapable of supporting the weight of the many hundreds of vehicles of a regular mounted infantry brigade, or an armored brigade. Any attacking force moving from the Israel road network to the Sinai frontier would be forced to move over dry watercourse, part track, part path, and, in many instances, mere sand desert.¹⁶ This type of terrain will not support full armor or fully-mounted infantry brigades.¹⁷

Another factor involved in using the remainder of the Paratroop Brigade as regular infantry was the psychological one. In order to insure a junction of forces, it was desirable that a special psychological link exist between the two separated units. The desirable link was one which would create in the attacking brigade a sense of mission and a desire to surmount all obstacles to forge a junction between the mother formation and one of its units.¹⁸

The principle of concentration is well illustrated by the Paratroop Brigade's attack across the Sinai frontier. This principle of concentration means the application of superior combat power at the point of decision. Combat power in itself is more than mere numbers of men; it includes the weapons used, the tactical skill of the commanders involved,

16. Ibid., p. 86.

17. Clausewitz, Principles of War, pp. 42-43.

18. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 10.

the physical and mental condition of the troops, and the leadership exercised by the chain of command.¹⁹ At 1717 hours, eighteen minutes after the air drop at Mitla, the forward elements of the Brigade captured Kuntilla, the frontier village. The defenders of the village retreated without a fight. But this first victory had been preceded by ten hours of struggle through formidable sand desert and a struggle against time.²⁰

When the Brigade set out from its area of organization, (already four hours late) many of its vehicles and much of its equipment became hopelessly bogged down in the sandy wastes. Rather than attempt a salvage operation, the Brigade Commander decided to abandon the idea of a complete column and adopted the principle that those vehicles which could push on would do so and the others would be left behind. Thus, many vehicles and pieces of much needed equipment were left by the wayside to be salvaged later.²¹

The confusion within the Israeli column was shortly to be felt. The next point of attack in the push for force link-up was Thamed. From intelligence reports the Israeli High Command knew that the Thamed position was the strongest posi-

19. "Principles of War," Mailing List, XXX (1947), pp. 221-243.

20. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 36.

21. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 132.

tion on the Southern Axis. Two companies of the Second Frontier Force Battalion and several companies of Egyptian National Guard held well dug-in positions around the town and on the cliffs to the west of the town itself. The sole approach to the town and the cliff positions was down the track which was heavily mined on the eastern approaches. But this position stood between the Brigade and its detached First Battalion; it, therefore, had to be reduced.²²

The Israeli advance from Kuntilla began at 2200 hours. At 0300 hours, October 30, the forward elements of the Brigade forced their way into Thamed and secured the town. The Egyptian defenders who escaped the assault on the town retreated westward to the cliff positions. By this time the Israeli column was spread out in a line from the frontier to Thamed.²³

The principle of economy of force implies the most advantageous distribution of one's forces. From this point of view, it would appear that the 202nd Brigade was well distributed in the Sinai, and the principle of concentration was, therefore, a dead issue. But in the upcoming battle of the cliffs, the Israeli Commander appeared to forget, or

22. Ibid., p. 133.

23. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 8.

disregard, these two important principles. The Commander decided not to wait for artillery support but chose to rely on the questionable support of tank gunnery under mobile conditions. Even then, he had at his disposal only three light tanks against fortified positions and emplaced machine and anti-tank guns. One of these tanks was destroyed at the onset of the attack, leaving two for covering fire missions. The Israelis had two natural advantages in the attack: the rising sun at their backs and the dust clouds raised by the tanks. The attackers then split into two columns and attacked from the flanks. The cliff positions were breached by the two tanks followed by infantry mounted in half-tracks. Enemy resistance was heavy at first but quickly disintegrated because of the unorthodox manner of assault. Before the enemy troops knew what was afoot, the tanks and half-tracks were swarming over their positions. The battle for Thamed and the cliffs was over. The Egyptians who remained alive retreated to El Nakhl.²⁴

The last obstacle between the Brigade and its detached battalion was El Nakhl. Intelligence had placed the Headquarters of the Second Frontier Battalion of the Egyptian Army in this town. However, the attack on El Nakhl did not worry the Israeli Brigade Commander nearly so much as the

24. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, pp. 108-110. (See also Burne, The Art of War on Land, p. 18.)

condition of his column. The elements of the column which had stormed Thamed and the cliffs were but fragments of his total force. The early morning hours were spent in collecting the Brigade. By mid-afternoon, most of the elements of the Brigade were concentrated in Thamed, where the troops were given a short rest and the vehicles serviced.

The attack on El Nakhl was begun at 1700 hours by the Second Battalion of the Brigade. The Israelis were expecting the defense of El Nakhl to be stubborn; consequently, the Second Battalion planned its attack with great thoroughness, including an artillery barrage before committing tanks and troops. But it soon became apparent that the detailed plans of campaign were superfluous: the defenders of the town retreated in rout in all directions except toward the Israeli positions. The capture of El Nakhl took twenty-five minutes from the time firing began, without loss of Israeli life.²⁵

The Third Battalion of the Israeli 202nd Brigade was left to hold El Nakhl and Thamed while the rest of the Brigade pushed on to Mitla. At 2230 hours, the disjointed Brigade joined forces with the First Battalion, and the joy at this link-up was boundless. Although the First Battalion

25. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 78.

knew that it would not be left to its fate at the hands of the Egyptians, there was much soul searching on the part of its officers concerning the wisdom of this type of action before the link-up was actually made. Unknown to the First Battalion, three additional operations were going on to protect the Mitla position and to enable its reinforcement by road in the event that the 202nd Brigade did not reach it by the Kuntilla-Thamed-Nakhl route. These operations were:

- 1) the seizure of Taba and Ras-el-Nakeb on the Eastern Axis,
- 2) preparations to parachute another battalion at Mitla, and
- 3) the capture of Qusemi on the Central Axis.

Only one of the planned operations was cancelled--that of the air drop at Mitla Pass. This cancellation was made after the link-up of the Brigade and the Battalion at the Pass.²⁶

The primary objective of the 202nd Paratroop Brigade had been accomplished. The secondary objective--a drive to the Suez Canal through Mitla Pass--was now undertaken and accomplished with relative ease. Except for a minor ambush by survivors of the Egyptian convoy, which had earlier been attacked from the air, the drive to Suez was unopposed. But

26. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 11.

other events on the Central Axis were just beginning to reach full combat proportions while the Paratroops were fighting and waiting.²⁷

27. Ibid.

CHAPTER V
THE CENTRAL AXIS

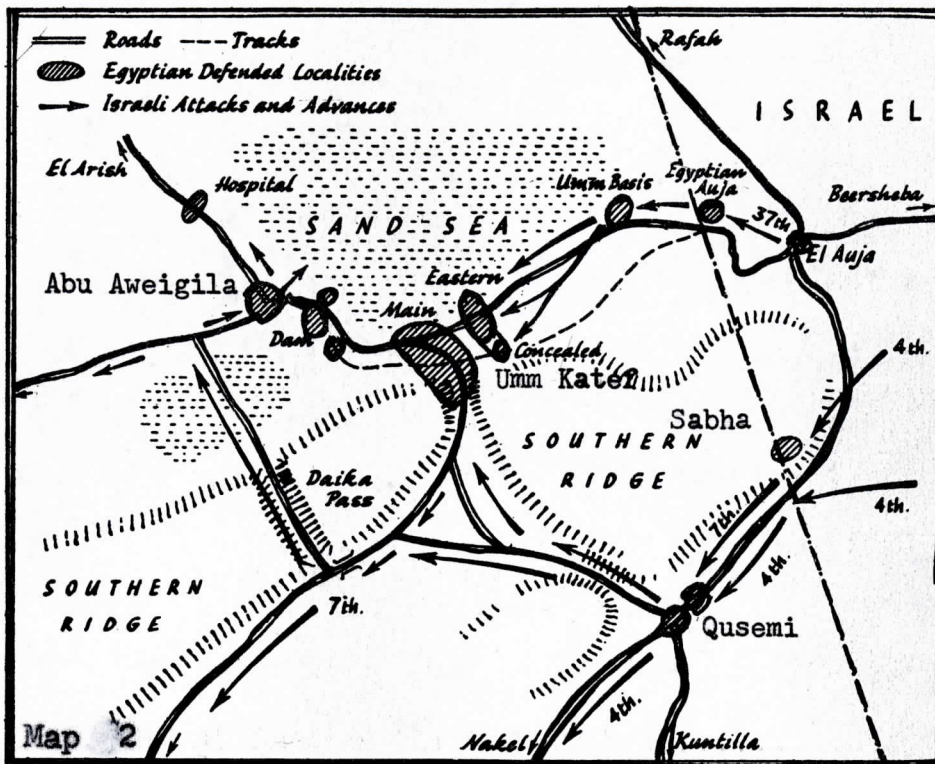
Once an offensive action is begun and all element of surprise is lost, an army attempts to gain its objective in the shortest possible time and to complete each mission within the stated bounds of the objective for full exploitation of any gains made. An offensive action is usually characterized by long-range planning which results in violent execution of organization and employment adaptability. The philosophy of unit employment is embodied in bold, aggressive action which capitalizes to the maximum the most effective military gains with the least number of losses to the attacking force.¹

In any attack, an army masses its strength and firepower against an enemy in an effort to overrun his defenses quickly and reach his rear areas, where his complete disorganization and subsequent destruction may be accomplished. But in order to attain a high degree of freedom in action and to create a maximum of confusion in the enemy defense, an army must, first of all, advance to contact the enemy.²

An advance to contact is a ground movement conducted to place troops in a position from which an enemy force can

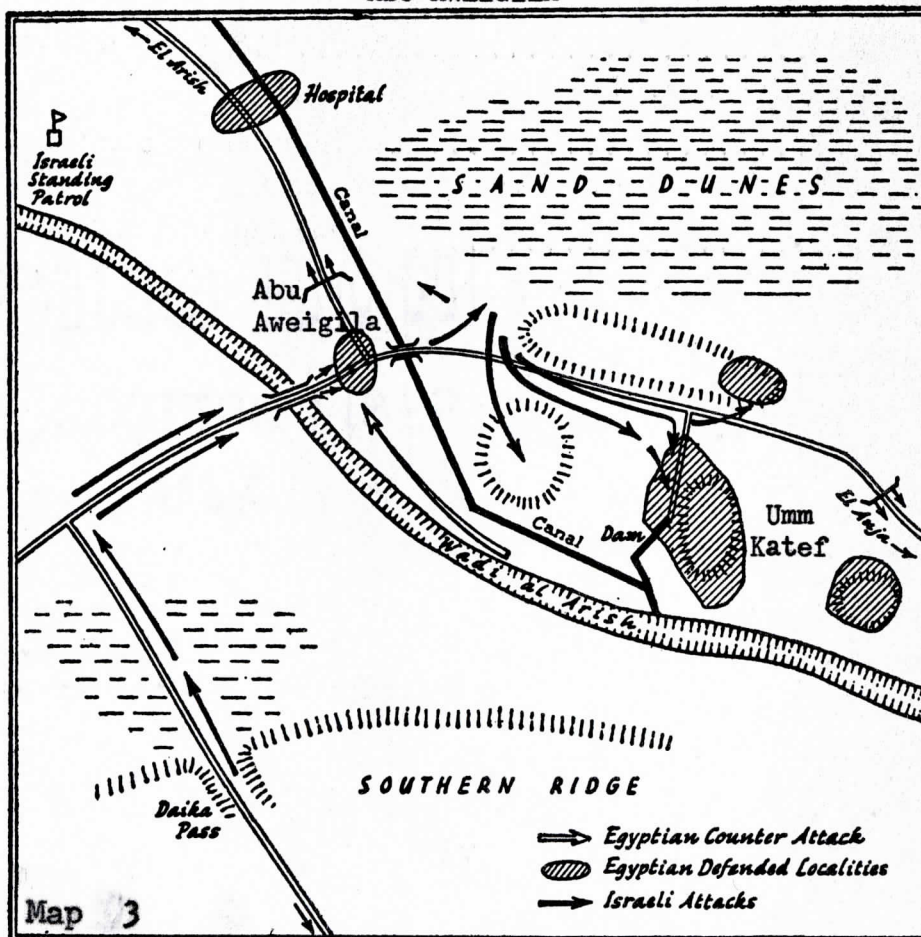
1. Department of the Army, Armor Operations: Small Units, p. 162.

2. Department of the Army, Infantry, Airborne Infantry, and Mechanized Infantry Rifle Platoons and Squads (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 23.



THE CENTRAL AXIS

ABU AWEIGILA



Map 3

be effectively engaged. Such a maneuver takes place whenever an army, or a unit of an army, moves to establish initial contact with an opposing force. In some instances, advance to contact is used to regain contact with an enemy which has been lost, owing to retrograde operations of the opposing force.³

The advance to contact on the Central Axis encountered perhaps every difficulty that can be imagined for a desert military operation. The Central Task Force (Group 38) consisted of two infantry brigades, supported by one armored brigade. These units were the Fourth and 37th Infantry and the Seventh Armored Brigades. These units had concentrated in their assembly area for attack a few miles east of El Auja (called Nitzana by the Israelis) on D-2 (two days before the date of attack), awaiting orders to move into attack positions.⁴

The commander of the Fourth Infantry Brigade received the following orders:⁵

- 1) capture Sabha and the defended areas on the track to Qusemi,
- 2) capture Qusemi, and

3. Department of the Army, The Armored Division Brigade (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 25.

4. Barer, The Weekend War, pp. 36-39.

5. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 108.

- 3) capture the defended positions in the vicinity of Qusemi which would block the tracks to Kuntilla and NakhI.

These orders were regular mission-type orders which are characteristic of Israel Defence Force orders given to field commanders. (see above, Chapter II) Mission-type orders tell a field commander what he is to do, but they are not definitive in methodology or accomplishment of task. In most combat situations, in order to obtain maximum combat power, a field commander's orders must be flexible enough to meet rapidly changing situations. The orders must be adapted to situations as they are and not what High Command expects them to be.⁶

The Fourth Infantry Brigade reached its attack position behind the Sand Ridge, which gave cover protection from the nearby frontier, just before darkness fell on D-Day. This brigade was a full-reserve one and had been mobilized on the evening of October 26. Most of its transport was impressed and included many city buses from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, plus many two-wheel drive trucks, both types of which were all but operational in desert conditions.⁷

At 1300 hours, October 29, the Fourth Brigade force began its advance to contact and crossed the line of departure.

6. Bruce C. Clarke, "Mission-Type Orders," Armor, LXX:6 (November-December, 1961), 24-25.

7. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 56.

The Third Battalion was to attack Sabha; the Second Battalion was to cross the Sand Ridge on foot and follow an axis of advance at almost right angles to the Sabha-Qusemi track; and the First Battalion was to be held in reserve. The First Battalion was to be held in reserve only until the Second Battalion had cleared the Egyptians from the forward fortified positions on the Sabha-Qusemi track, and then the First would phase through the Second Battalion's line and directly assault the Qusemi defenses of the Egyptians.⁸

The principle of surprise in desert operations is sometimes difficult to obtain. But surprise is facilitated by the use of an aggressive counter-reconnaissance screen, by speed in execution of movement, and by deception. When in open areas, a force can conceal its movements by moving only at night. Reconnaissance must extend for greater distances than normal and must be intensified to prevent counter envelopments by the enemy forces.⁹ The Egyptian positions at Sabha were taken in just such a reconnaissance movement. A reconnaissance patrol was sent to the fortified positions to feel out the enemy strength and discovered that the Egyptians had abandoned their positions. One company of the

8. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 92.

9. Department of the Army, Armor Operations: Small Units, p. 346.

Third Battalion was ordered to occupy the positions as a counter-attack preventive. This was accomplished at 0330 hours on October 30.¹⁰

The movement of the Second Battalion from its attack position to its deployment area was filled with difficulty. The troops had encountered extreme difficulty in marching over the Sand Ridge in the ankle-deep sand. However, at 0400 hours the assault units of the battalion attacked the fortified positions on the Qusemi-Sabha track in a pincer movement from the northwest and the southwest. Heavy support weapons (120 m. mortars) did not take part in the attack as they had been left behind in order to facilitate the battalion's march. The Brigade Reconnaissance Unit was ordered to advance to the Qusemi attack by way of the Sabha-Qusemi track. Supported by units of the Second Battalion, the Reconnaissance Unit fought its way down the track from the fortified positions already in Israeli hands into Qusemi. At 0700 hours, October 30, the battle for Qusemi was over.¹¹

A commander's first consideration, once an objective is captured and is physically occupied, is to dispose his forces in order that the objective will not be retaken by the enemy

10. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 14.

11. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 56.

by counter-attack.¹² When the commander of the Fourth Brigade reached Qusemi, he ordered that the First Battalion be consolidated for the defense of the occupied town. (Because of the rapid advance of the Second Battalion, the First Battalion had not been committed to its phasing-through operation.) The commander further ordered that the other units of the Brigade were to concentrate in the town and set up a bivouac and then await further action orders. The orders were shortly forthcoming. Just before noon, General Moshe Dayan, the Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Force, arrived in the town and ordered the Brigade Commander to send a force to Nakhl and effect a junction with the 202nd Paratroop Brigade which was soon to arrive there.¹³

The force which was to effect the Nakhl linkup was composed of the Fourth Brigade Reconnaissance Unit, reinforced by a tank platoon from the Seventh Armored Brigade, and a rifle company riding in buses. It took until almost evening to organize this force into a full mobile unit. The rifle company was forced to return to Qusemi three hours after it left--again the buses were unable to negotiate the sand of the desert. The Reconnaissance Unit and the tank platoon

12. Department of the Army, Armored Infantry Units: Platoon, Company and Battalion (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 71.

13. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 13.

arrived at Nakhl during the early afternoon of the next day (October 31) after a tortuous march over desert track.¹⁴

It would seem that the situation on the Central Axis on the afternoon of October 30 was very encouraging to the Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Force. Qusemi was in the hands of the Israeli Army, and the flank of the Egyptian Third Division, which was based at Abu Aweigila, was exposed to further attack. Furthermore, the relative safety of the Paratroops at Mitla Pass was assured by the Nakhl-Qusemi link-up. Now the Seventh Armored Brigade was ready to extend its steel tentacles to exploit the open flank of the Egyptian Third Division based at Abu Aweigila.¹⁵

Up to this point of operations on the Central Axis, the Israel Defence Force had used one form of offensive operation: penetration. A penetration is characterized by the rupture of an enemy's defensive positions and the creating of an opportunity for the form of offensive operation known as the exploitation. A penetration requires that the attacker achieve superiority in combat power at the point of penetration to carry the attack through to its primary objective. A penetration-type operation is launched on a front that is initially wider than the contemplated rupture.

14. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 66.

15. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 109.

This is done to protect the flanks of the penetrating force. As the penetration progresses, the leading elements of the attack advance, leaving the following units to widen the breach in the defenses of the enemy. As resistance begins to decrease, the penetration elements pick up speed and begin to exploit the success of the penetration. They drive forward to the objective as rapidly as the resistance permits.¹⁶

In the Qusemi operation, the Second Battalion of the Fourth Brigade acted as the penetration force, with the Brigade Reconnaissance Unit and the First Battalion acting as the followup force. Aiding in the final followup of the penetration was the 1st Armored Combat Team (henceforth referred to by the abbreviation ACT with designating number) from the Seventh Armored Brigade.

The commander of the Seventh Armored Brigade had moved into Qusemi in the wake of the 1st ACT and ordered that this unit should advance up the Qusemi-Umm Katef road. The unit was to take up holding positions about two miles south of Umm Katef (meaning Main Position), guarding the approaches to Abu Aweigila. The 1st ACT moved out of Qusemi and continued its advance until it ran into heavy anti-tank and field artillery fire from Umm Katef. The Brigade Commander

16. Department of the Army, The Armored Division Brigade, p. 36.

arrived on the scene and estimated that one ACT was not sufficient combat power to penetrate Umm Katef; therefore, he ordered that the 1st ACT was to hold its position but maintain contact with the Egyptian forces. Meanwhile, during the morning hours, Group 38 Headquarters had given the order that all units of the Seventh Armored Brigade be concentrated at Qusemi, with the exception of the 1st ACT, which was already in an attack position.¹⁷

While the 1st ACT was holding its positions at Umm Katef, the road into the rear of the Egyptian defenses at Abu Aweigila was being opened up by a reconnaissance team from the Seventh Brigade. The Seventh Armored Reconnaissance Unit had been broken up into Reconnaissance Teams (henceforth referred to by the abbreviation RT with the Seventh Brigade designation before D-Day. In the morning of October 30, the Seventh Brigade Commander sent one of the RT's to reconnoiter the Daika Pass defile as a possible axis of advance into Abu Aweigila. When the RT got within 150 yards of the Pass, the Egyptian defenders of the pass set off demolitions charges which blew up a small bridge over a wadi at the entrance to the Pass. The RT observed the defenders retreating down the road to Bir Hasana.¹⁸ The RT then advanced to the pass and awaited instructions from

17. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 97.

18. Ibid., p. 98.

Brigade Headquarters. The Brigade Commander ordered the RT to split its force, and one part of the unit was to advance into the pass while the other part guarded the southern entrance against counter-attack from Bir Hasana. As the unit advanced into the pass, it found that the Egyptians had left the pass and the northern entrance unguarded. From the northern entrance, the unit raced its vehicles to a point about two miles south of the Abu Aweigila-Jebel Lifni road. The RT commander established a roadblock and then sent a part of his unit to establish an observation post which could keep close surveillance on the Abu Aweigila-El Arish road, as well as the Abu Aweigila-Jebel Lifni road.¹⁹

The Daika Pass was the key to the defenses at Abu Aweigila. The Egyptians could possibly have held the positions at Umm Katef and Abu Aweigila if the Daika Pass had been held. But the Egyptian Army had two definitions of the concept of defense. The first definition was to observe and delay the enemy; the second was to hold a position to the last man or to the exhaustion of resources with which to fight. According to Egyptian orders, everything to the south of Abu Aweigila was to be held in the first sense of the definition of defense, and the position at Abu Aweigila was to be held in the second sense.²⁰

19. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 104.

20. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 113.

The penetration of the Daika Pass changed the complexion of operations on the Central Axis and permitted the use of two other types of offensive combat: envelopment and exploitation. An envelopment is that type of offensive operation which seeks to pass around emplaced enemy forces and strike them on the flank or rear and destroy them in their positions.²¹ Exploitation is a phase of offensive action which is usually a continuation of a penetration, envelopment, or a turning movement. The transition from penetration or envelopment to exploitation may be gradual or it may be rapid, owing to a fortunate break-through such as the Daika Pass penetration. After the transition to exploitation, every effort should be made to continue the advance without halting. By-passed enemy resistance and strong-points are left to be destroyed by supporting units, which clear the overrun areas and expand the zone of exploitation.²²

The opening of Daika Pass changed the battle plan in the Central Axis. The Seventh Brigade Commander received permission to move the 1st ACT from the Umm Katef position and replace it with a mechanized infantry battalion from the Fourth Brigade. The 1st ACT, in concert with the 2nd ACT and the 3rd ACT, was to move through Daika Pass and exploit

21. Department of the Army, The Armored Division Brigade, p. 44.

22. Department of the Army, Armor Operations: Small Units, p. 214.

the Abu Aweigila and Dam positions from the west. At the same time the Seventh Armored Brigade was attacking Abu Aweigila from the west, the 37th Infantry Brigade was to attack from the east across the Frontier through Egyptian Auja. The 37th encountered light resistance until it reached Umm Katef, where the Egyptians were in strongly fortified positions. The 37th surrounded these positions and began to reduce them point by point.²³

The 3rd ACT was detached from the combat force that was to attack Abu Aweigila and sent to attack Bir Hasana and secure the Israeli flank from the west. The 1st ACT and the 2nd ACT continued their advance through the pass and linked up with the RT guarding the Abu Aweigila-Bir Lifni road. The commander of the 1st ACT was briefed by the RT commander at the crossroads and almost immediately advanced to contact the Egyptians in the town. At a distance of about three miles from the town, the ACT leading elements came under artillery fire from the Egyptian positions around the Dam to the east of Abu Aweigila. Mechanized infantry was sent from the crossroads to cut off any counter-thrust from the area of the Dam and almost immediately stopped a group of Egyptian troops who were attempting to get to the town. One tank platoon was sent in a flanking movement with the object of blocking the

23. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 10.

Abu Aweigila-El Arish road, but it did not reach its objective owing to heavy anti-tank fire from positions in the town and in the Hospital area. The final assault on the town was made by armored infantry in half-tracks, supported by tank units of the 1st ACT and the 2nd ACT. The town was declared secure by 0600 hours, October 31. But to capture a town and then hold it is an entirely different task. No sooner did the ACT's of the Seventh Armored Brigade arrive in Abu Aweigila than the Egyptian artillery at Umm Katef and the Dam position began to pour shells into the town. The Egyptians counter-attacked from both the north and the east of the town. From the east, the attack was a fully mounted one, complete with armor-supported infantry. From the north, the town was attacked by a tank company sent from El Arish. Each of these attacks was heavily supported by artillery bombardments. The Egyptian attack from the east was beaten off; the Israelis suffered heavy casualties. The attack from the north never fully developed, as the tanks did not attempt to approach close enough for engagement.²⁴

While the rest of the Seventh Armored Brigade was under heavy attack at Abu Aweigila, the 1st ACT of that Brigade was marching toward Bir Hasana. Its march took most of the night but was executed without serious incident during the darkness.

24. Barer, The Weekend War, pp. 204-207.

About two miles from its objective, the unit was attacked by planes of the Egyptian Air Force, which did little damage but did slow the unit's momentum. The attack upon Bir Hasana was delayed but the objective was taken before noon on October 31. This action opened up a second possibility of a junction with the Paratroop Brigade at Mitla Pass.²⁵

The Seventh Armored Brigade Commander was beset with more woe when he received a message from an observation plane to the effect that the Egyptian Second Armored Brigade had crossed the Suez Canal and was advancing rapidly toward Jebel Lifni. Such a move could have placed the Seventh Armored between the "anvil" of Abu Aweigila and the "hammer" of the Egyptian armor. The Israeli Commander decided to stage an ambush operation of his own at Jebel Lifni. After capturing that position from the Egyptians stationed in that area, he sent the 3rd ACT from Abu Aweigila to lay the trap at Jebel Lifni. A message was sent to the 1st ACT to move to the north from Bir Hasana and to act as an Israeli "hammer" against the "anvil" of the 3rd ACT. But these movements were in vain. The Israeli Air Force jets had been called in to interdict the Egyptian armor. About ninety of the Egyptian vehicles were hit by the air attack, which broke its forward momentum. When the Seventh Brigade Commander ascertained the situation which had developed

25. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 25.

as a result of the air attack, he ordered his two ACT's to advance immediately down the Ismaila road. The two ACT's raced down the road toward the Egyptian positions at Bir Hama and Bir Gifgafa, on the Ismaila road. During the late afternoon of November 1, a RT of the Seventh Armored advanced into Bir Hama, the main Egyptian jet fighter base in the Sinai, and found it deserted. The Egyptians had abandoned this important position without firing a shot in its defense.²⁶

The armor of the two combat teams was then sent down the Ismaila road toward the big air base of Bir Gifgafa, but it did not attack this position because of the paucity of armored force in relation to an entire brigade of Egyptian armor. A RT emplaced itself in a position to observe the air base, awaiting further developments. Action was not long in coming, but it was not what the Israelis expected: the Egyptian Armored Brigade began to retreat to the west, in the direction of Ismaila. The RT called up the two ACT's, who began to race in pursuit of the Egyptian Brigade, with the AMX tanks of the Israelis showing their superior road speed over the Russian T-34 tanks of the Egyptians. Within an hour there began a running fight between the rear guard of the Egyptians and the advancing Israeli tanks. This fight lasted until the Egyptians

26. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 129.

crossed the Suez Canal.²⁷ The race was won by the Egyptian Army.

After the Seventh Armored Commander had committed the 1st ACT to the action at Jebel Lifni, he had but one ACT left to continue the battle against the Dam and Umm Katef emplacements at Abu Aweigila. It had become imperative that these two positions be reduced because the 37th Infantry Brigade attacking from the east was being chewed up by the emplaced artillery in these strong-points. After a hurried reconnaissance of the situation, the commander issued his battle order:²⁸

- 1) One platoon of tanks and one platoon of half-tracks to constitute a base of fire to the east of the road. This base of fire to be mobile and move up with the advance.
- 2) A mixed force of tanks and infantry to assault up the west side of the road.
- 3) A force of half-track mounted armored infantry to assault up the road itself.
- 4) A mixed force of tanks and infantry to station on the El Arish road to prevent counter-attack from that quarter.

27. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 29.

28. Ibid., p. 28.

The attack upon the Dam position began at sunset and was fought in the twilight and darkness. This assault was begun with neither adequate artillery preparation nor a system of co-ordination of communication between elements of the assault. As a result of this lack of co-ordination, the ensuing battle was a confused melee, without one element of the Israeli force knowing what was happening to the other, without the assaulting elements actually knowing at whom they were firing. When small arms and tank ammunition was exhausted, the tanks and half-tracks began to use their tracks to mow down any force that they met. But the Egyptians gave a good account of themselves in this short, sharp action. They contested every bit of ground in the entire position. The resistance did not cease until the entire position was overrun and in flames. The Israelis took more losses in this short battle than in any other battle of Operation Kadesh.²⁹

After daylight came, the Israelis discovered that the Egyptians had been firing twenty-five artillery pieces over open sights (flat-trajectory fire), with the aid of several "Archer" tank destroyers in hull-defilade position. (Most of this equipment was captured intact and used against the Egyptians in actions on the Northern Axis.)³⁰

29. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 209.

30. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 28.

The logistics situation on the Central Axis had become desperate by the morning of November 1. The long supply route from El Auja by way of Sabha, Qusemi, and the Daika Pass to Abu Aweigila could not keep the Seventh Armored Brigade adequately supplied because of the distance and condition of the track itself. This situation demanded that the shorter route between Abu Aweigila and El Auja be opened as quickly as possible; therefore, the Central Task Force Commander ordered that the 37th Infantry Brigade press its attack on the Umm Katef with all speed and force possible. A pincer attack was mounted at 2000 hours on November 1; one battalion was to sweep into the position from the north, and another battalion was to attack from the south. These simultaneous attacks were to be accompanied by an artillery barrage from Israeli heavy guns emplaced at Egyptian Auja and at Abu Aweigila.

The Israeli forces hit the Egyptian positions at 0330 hours, November 2, but were immediately thrown back by the strong resistance of the defenders. At 0400 hours, a force of half-tracks joined the attacking infantry, but this unit was repulsed also. The defending Egyptians availed themselves of many advantages: their artillery was well ranged-in on set targets; the machine-guns and machine cannon were arranged in cross-fire patterns; and the trench system was designed so as to be zoned for interlocking fire from many points at

any given time. The Israeli assault did not gain its objective because the units in the assault could not gain enough momentum to carry the position by storm. At daylight the attack on Umm Katef was called off by the 37th Brigade Commander. Central Task Force Headquarters gave the order to encircle Umm Katef--with the exception of the Sand Sea area--and apply constant pressure to the position. Using units of the Seventh Armored, the mechanized infantry battalion from the Fourth Infantry, and the 37th Infantry, the encirclement was to be complete.³¹

The plan to encircle the Egyptians at Umm Katef and pour artillery and tank fire into the positions, leaving the Sand Sea segment of the line open, paid off. On the morning of November 2, the area around Umm Katef was very quiet. The Egyptians had abandoned their positions during the preceding night. The defenders had left their guns and equipment behind. Nothing had been destroyed; no guns had been spiked. The Egyptians simply fled during the night in an attempt to reach El Arish. Later in the day it was discovered by an Israeli observation plane that the defenders of Umm Katef had indeed taken the Sand Sea route. The Israeli observers watched this spectacle but could do nothing to help the Egyptians. Of the three thousand Egyptians who began the trek across the Sand

31. Ibid.

Sea, about seven hundred men escaped death in the sands-- they were the ones who came back to become Israeli prisoners.³²

The battles of the Central Axis were over. A few isolated points of resistance were left to be cleared up but the real battle was finished. The 37th Infantry Brigade was to hold Abu Aweigila, with the exception of one battalion, which was sent north to aid in the battles on the Northern Axis. The Seventh Armored Brigade, supported by a battalion of the Fourth Infantry Brigade, was sent down the Abu Aweigila-Ismaila road to hold that area. The remainder of the Fourth Brigade was to hold the gains made by the 202nd Paratroop Brigade to the south of Mitla Pass.³³ While it lasted, the battle around Abu Aweigila was a fair contest, cleanly conducted, if any war can be cleanly fought. The Egyptian Army gave a very good account of itself in this battle. Nothing can be added to the Israeli bravery in this action, nor can anyone take from the Egyptian his exhibition of bravery. The Egyptian fought well and is to be commended for his action in the Abu Aweigila-Umm Katef struggle.

32. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, pp. 164-165.

33. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 135.

CHAPTER VI
THE NORTHERN AXIS

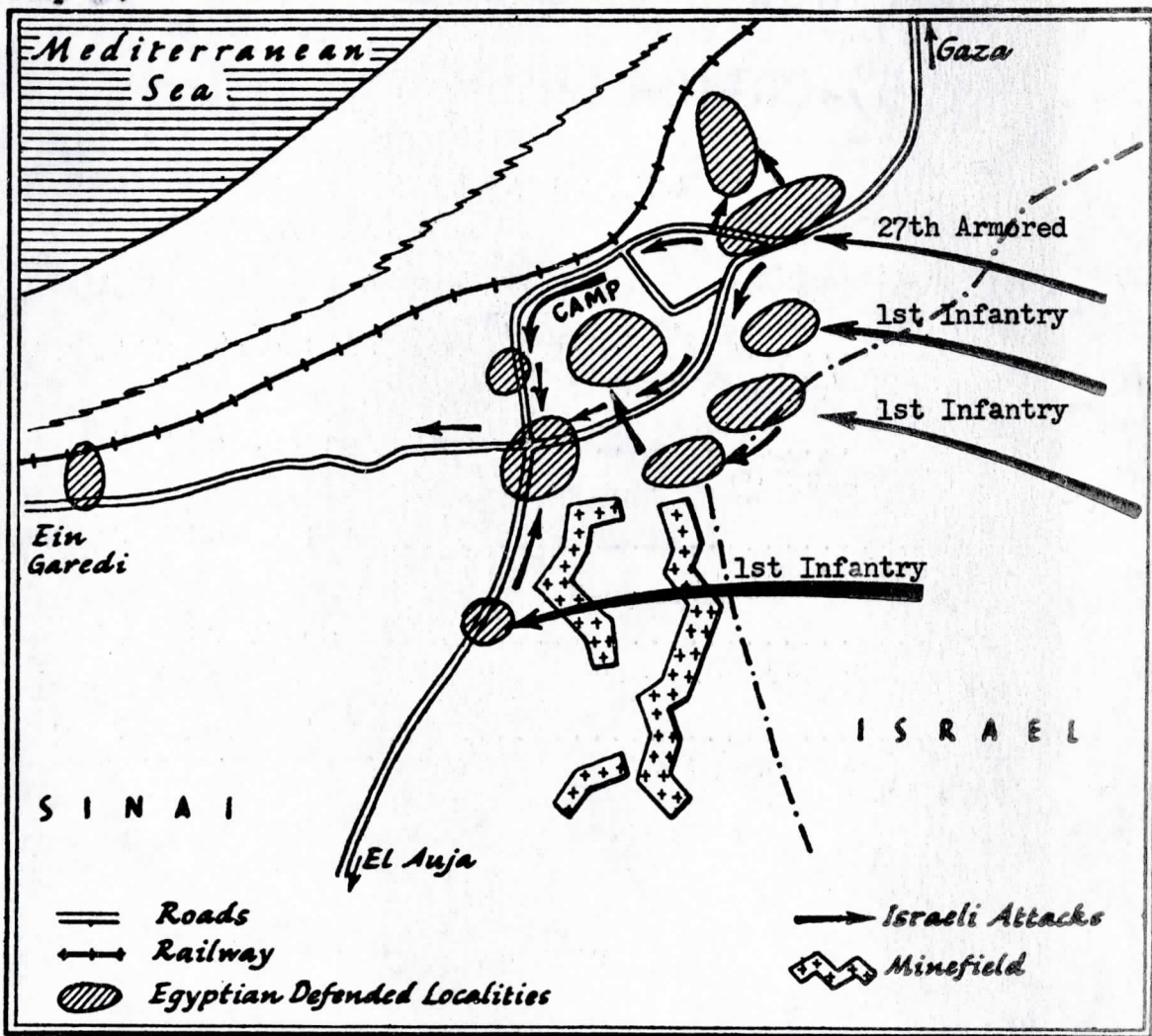
It is to obtain success in battle that armies are created. A good army is a fighting machine complete in all its parts, each part possessing its separate function and fitting into, and working with, every other part; the whole designed for that one specific function--success in battle.

As the different parts of an army are its men, individually and collectively, so their effective value depends upon the power of each unit to perform its assigned function in the time allotted for the task. This power varies with the ability of the individual part to co-operate with the total machine. Without this ability of the individual unit to function with the whole, the whole becomes not an army but a mob. Success in battle, therefore, is dependent upon the co-operation with, and co-ordination of, the individuals engaged in the battle. Each arm of the service, as a part of the machine, is responsible for the successful working of the whole. One arm of the service cannot carry the entire burden leading to success in battle.¹

A campaign over a broad front requires that same kind of co-operation that must be found in an integrated army. Each attack over the campaign front must be co-ordinated with

1. R. O. Van Horn, "Fire Discipline, Control and Direction," Infantry Journal, IX, No. 4 (January-February, 1913), 486-497.

Map 4



ATTACK ON RAFA

attacks all along the line of offensive if a successful operation is to be attained. The attacks along a broad front must be so timed as to be mutually supporting. If one attack fails, then the front has a gap which must be filled.

The attack is the application of the principle of offensive action, because the attacker seizes the initiative and with it gains the liberty of action needed to attain success in battle. At the same time, liberty of action is denied the defender, for he is now bound to his defensive positions.² Operations on the Northern Axis were such actions which were boldly executed, binding the Egyptians to defensive positions and giving liberty of movement to the Israelis.

Of the four axes of operations in Operation Kadesh, the most important phase was won on the Northern Axis. This action was the decisive one of the campaign. Once Rafa had been taken, the defensive triangle had been cracked at its northeastern apex; the Gaza Strip had been cut; and the road to El Arish and El Quantara was open.

According to the original plan of campaign, Rafa and Umm Katef were to be simultaneously attacked on the night of November 1. The attacks would have supported each other in order to keep the Egyptian forces in the Triangle guessing as to the actual direction of the main attack. If either

2. J. H. Unwin, "The Acid Test," Field Artillery Journal, XXXVII, No. 4 (July-August, 1947), 232-234.

attack was held up, it could be helped by the success of the other: Umm Katef could be taken from the rear by way of Rafa and El Arish, or Rafa could be taken from the rear by way of Abu Aweigila and Umm Katef.³

This was a sound military procedure, based upon that type of offensive action known as the turning movement. The turning movement differs from the exploitation in that it seeks to seize an objective deep in the enemy rear to force him to abandon his defensive positions or divert major forces from another area to meet the new threat. The enemy is then destroyed on a killing ground of the attacker's own choosing. The turning movement is normally executed by a force of brigade strength or larger, after an initial penetration in the enemy's defenses has been made. The unit making the turning movement is usually beyond the support of any other attacking ground force; therefore, the turning force must rely upon speed and great combat power, with organizational emphasis on mechanization such as tanks and armored infantry.⁴

The plan had been endangered when the exploitation of the Daika Pass developed on the Central Axis. When the Seventh Armored Brigade was diverted from Umm Katef and replaced by mechanized infantry from the Fourth Brigade, insufficient

3. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 4.

4. Department of the Army, The Armored Division Brigade, pp. 45-47.

forces were left to take the position by assault. This made the attack on Rafa doubly important to the success of the entire Sinai Campaign.⁵

The forces allotted to the Northern Axis were exactly the same as those for the Central Axis: one armored brigade and one infantry brigade, with an additional infantry brigade to exploit the Gaza Strip once Rafa had been captured. These units were the First and 11th Infantry and the 27th Armored Brigades. The First and 27th Brigades were to attack Rafa, and the 11th Brigade was to exploit the Gaza Strip. The Egyptian forces opposing the attack consisted of the Fifth Infantry Brigade (Egyptian), the First Palestinian Battalion, some National Guard battalions, two companies of the Frontier Force, and one battalion of armor. However, the tank battalion was withdrawn on November 1 to El Arish. The armor was to act as a floating reserve between the Abu Aweigila positions and Rafa. In addition to the regular Egyptian forces at Rafa, there were also two battalions of the 87th Palestinian Brigade in the area for training purposes. When the tank battalion was withdrawn, these units were assigned company and platoon positions in the defense pattern.⁶

5. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 130.

6. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 81.

On the night preceding the attack itself, sappers went into the minefields along the Frontier to open a path for the infantry mounted on half-tracks. The line of departure on the extreme left flank of the attack was to be the Frontier itself, and these minefields had to be cleared the night before because of the distance of the axis of advance from the attack positions of the Israelis. The sappers did their work well. The only difficulty was that the Egyptians discovered that the minefield had been tampered with the next day and replaced the mines.⁷

Replacement of the mines by the Egyptians could not be corrected by the Israelis. The attack was planned to move forward at nightfall. The infantry began its advance to contact in a two-battalion front on the left flank of the axis of advance. Almost as soon as the leading elements crossed the line of departure (the Frontier), Egyptian artillery began to fire into the formation. The column reached the minefield with few casualties, despite the excellent fire co-ordination of the Egyptian batteries. It was at the minefield that the trouble began for the Israelis. The replaced mines began to cause havoc with the wheeled vehicles. A half-track and a command car blew up, blocking the only possible pathway through the field. The convoy was stalled,

7. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 135.

and the defending Egyptians began to rain artillery, anti-tank, and machine-gun fire down on the stalled Israelis. The infantry dismounted and continued the advance on foot, taking heavy casualties in the perilous march.⁸

It was at this point that one of the freak accidents that sometimes happen during an attack took place. The tanks and half-tracks began looking for a new lane through the minefield and turned to the right, making good progress until the lead half-track struck a mine. Just when it seemed that the whole convoy would be stuck in the minefield, the driver of the lead vehicle was wounded and began to careen through the mined area. His vehicle reached the western edge of the field before it struck another mine and was destroyed. The remainder of the convoy followed in the tracks of the lead vehicle and came clear of the field. The column again began its advance westward until it made contact with its own infantry, which had earlier dismounted.⁹

With the aid of the tanks and half-tracks, the two battalions of the First Brigade were able to take all their objectives on the left flank. These objectives consisted of a series of mutually supporting positions extending back to Rafa itself. The most important of these positions was astride the road junction from the railway station in Rafa

8. Marshall, Sinai Victory, pp. 154-155.

9. Ibid., p. 155.

and the coastal road from Gaza to El Arish. The road passed through the center of the position, blocked by double-apron wire enclosing minefields. One battalion was divided for a flanking attack from two directions, which hit the Egyptians at daybreak. It was met by heavy fire from the Egyptian positions, and the northeasterly attack was broken up by this superior fire. A penetration was made on the southwest side by half-tracks which overran the position. The Egyptians in the position began a fighting withdrawal down the El Arish road, followed a few hours later by elements of the 27th Armored Brigade.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the two battalions of the First Brigade attacking in the center of the Rafa positions were having difficulties reaching the Egyptian positions. The attackers had less distance to travel to their attack position, but they were on foot, on open ground, the entire distance before they reached the first outposts of the Egyptians. The distance from the line of departure to the Egyptian positions was five miles, and the last mile was under direct fire of emplaced machine guns and artillery. When the Israelis came up against the barbed-wire entanglements, the Egyptians maintained a steady fire which inflicted many casualties on the Israelis. What support the Israeli artillery could give to

10. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, pp. 36-37.

the attackers was not very effective because the Egyptian emplacements were well dug-in and sand-bagged. By daylight, not one of the Egyptian positions had been taken in the center of the attack area, and the Israeli troops were exposed targets to the Egyptian guns.¹¹

A frontal attack upon a defended position by infantry, over exposed ground and in full daylight, would appear to be suicidal. The Israeli attack should have been led by armor, and the troops themselves mounted in half-tracks until the line of departure was crossed. Often, as an attack progresses, unforeseen circumstances develop which will force a commander to change his plan of action. In this instance, the advance over the open ground was an expected condition, but the heavy fire of the Egyptian defenders was not expected. This heavy fire should have necessitated changing the attack plan from one of frontal assault to one of fire and movement, supported by a strong base of fire and led by armor.

Fire and movement is a technique employed by an attacking force to advance upon an objective. In the advance, one element of the force moves toward the objective while another element fires upon the defending force. The movement force takes advantage of all available cover in its advance and

11. Ibid., p. 38.

moves forward under fire cover. If no cover exists (as in the case of the center attack on Rafa), the movement force advances behind a "walking barrage" and counter-battery fire of the artillery. In such an attack, the maneuvering force must close on its objective in the shortest possible time, necessitating close tank support and the use of armored personnel carriers.¹² But in the center attack on Rafa, no armored personnel carriers were available for the infantry, nor were any tanks available until the attack was stalled on the Egyptian wire.

When the Israeli troops reached the barbed-wire, they found that there were five separate entanglements to be traversed before the defended positions could be attacked. Normal wire-removal procedures could not be exercised, owing to the speed of the attack and the mutually supporting fire of the Egyptian positions. Some of the attackers lay down on the wire and became human bridges in order that the other troops could cross the wire and carry the attack to the Egyptian positions. Once over the wire, the Israeli troops took the Egyptian positions by storm.¹³

Meanwhile, the 27th Armored Brigade (Israeli) had gone into the attack on the right flank of the Rafa positions.

12. Department of the Army, Tank Units: Platoon, Company and Battalion (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 87-88.

13. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 137.

The armor force had been divided into three ACT's prior to the attack. This division was made for tactical purposes, in order to give close support to the infantry units and to facilitate movement in the actual assault upon Rafa.¹⁴

Operations for the 27th Brigade began at 0230 hours, November 1, when the brigade came under heavy artillery fire from the Egyptian positions. This fire could not be returned because the Israelis wanted to keep the placement of their own artillery and tanks a secret until forward movement began at 0400 hours. When the time for advance came, the mechanized infantry units of the ACT's moved forward to the point of disembarkation and advanced on their objectives, which were the two northern-most defense posts of the Rafa defense system. No sooner had the infantry units disembarked from their vehicles than they came under heavy mortar fire from the Egyptian positions, and the attack was temporarily stalled. During the last few minutes of darkness, tanks of the 1st ACT were sent into the attack to overrun the two Egyptian positions which were stalling the infantry. These positions were quickly overrun by the tanks, and forward movement began again, the advance carrying all the way to the Rafa-Gaza road.¹⁵

14. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 149.

15. Ibid.

The commander of the First Infantry Brigade asked for armor assistance in the center attack, and the 2nd ACT was sent in to aid this drive. When the tanks arrived and made contact with the Israeli infantry, forward motion was again established, carrying the positions in the drive. The infantry was then assigned to mop up the remaining resistance in the center, and the ACT stopped to refuel and resupply ammunition.¹⁶

By 1000 hours, the Rafa positions had been reduced except for isolated points of resistance. No organized resistance was left in Rafa itself. The infantry units were placed on security duty and prisoner roundup patrols. The tank units were refueling and restocking ammunition for the drive to El Arish, which was begun shortly after 1000 hours by the 3rd ACT.

The 3rd ACT passed through the village of Rafa and continued down the road in the direction of El Arish. A few miles short of El Arish was the village of Ein Garedi, which had been heavily fortified by the Egyptians. The ACT encountered heavy artillery fire from these positions, and forward movement ceased (the 3rd ACT was composed of light AMX tanks). The unit was ordered to hold their positions until elements of the 2nd ACT could move up to aid in the

16. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 182.

attack on the artillery positions. The next phase of the attack had to go forward without Israeli artillery support, and the air force was called in to strafe the Egyptian positions. After the air strike, the 2nd ACT flanked the defending positions from the south and overran them, losing one tank and two half-tracks in the attack. With the capture of Ein Garedi, the road to El Arish was now open.¹⁷

The 3rd ACT was left at Ein Garedi to refuel and re-supply while the 2nd ACT was ordered to El Arish, which was reached by the unit just before dark. The unit was interdicted by heavy artillery fire and deployed to defensive positions north of the town. Night was now upon the Israelis, who were dispersed over a wide area. The attack on El Arish itself was delayed while the brigade reorganized. By 2000 hours, the full brigade was drawn up before El Arish, awaiting the order to attack.¹⁸

The order to attack came about an hour before dawn on November 2. The battle order was that the 1st ACT was to attack on the left flank, the 2nd ACT to drive straight down the road to El Arish, and the 3rd ACT to cover the right flank. Air support was provided to soften up the defenses and to demoralize the defenders. The air support planes

17. Ibid., p. 188.

18. Ibid., p. 189.

reported that the road to the south of El Arish was jammed with vehicles, trying to reach El Quantara and the safety of the Suez Canal. The aircraft were then assigned the task of attacking this column of retreating vehicles and attempting to stop the retreat.¹⁹

The 3rd ACT passed through El Arish and began to pursue the retreating Egyptians. About 0630 hours, the lead elements of the Israeli tank unit caught up with the Egyptian column. The air strike was just over when this contact was made, and the result was devastation for the Egyptians. The Israelis captured 385 vehicles on the road, many with their engines still running when left by their Egyptian crews. Very few of the vehicles were actually hit by the air strike; they were simply abandoned by the Egyptian troops.²⁰

In El Arish itself, which was being mopped up by units of the 1st and 2nd ACT's, the Israelis captured a whole battalion of new tanks, plus hundreds of wheeled vehicles. Approximately 3000 prisoners were taken in the area (including Rafa), but perhaps thousands of others escaped back to Egypt on foot across the desert or down the railway. The area of El Arish was declared secure, with only Gaza to be reduced in the Northern Axis.²¹

19. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 38.

20. Erskine B. Childers, The Road to Suez (London: Macgibbon and Kee, Ltd., 1962), pp. 300-301.

21. Ibid.

Gaza lies on what used to be called "The Conquerors' Road" between Egypt and Syria. It was at Gaza in 1917 that, in three separate attacks by British forces, the Turks inflicted 12,000 casualties on the attackers.²² The Gaza Strip is about thirty miles long and, in many places, not over four miles wide. It is shaped like a finger pressed against the coast of Palestine, pointing toward Israel. In this area, an entire Egyptian division, the Eighth, was based; its headquarters were at Khan Yunis. The Israeli force assigned to capture Gaza consisted of the 11th Infantry Brigade, supported by an ACT from the 27th Armored Brigade.²³

The Egyptian defenses of the Gaza Strip were well prepared with mutually supporting pillboxes, minefields, and much barbed-wire. The pillboxes were sited for all-round defense. These positions were held by two brigades of the Egyptian Eighth Division, supported by a National Guard Brigade deployed to the north of Gaza town, and a Palestinian brigade deployed to the south, near Khan Yunis.²⁴

The attack on Gaza and the Gaza Strip was begun at dawn on November 1, by advancing the armor of the 27th

22. Liddell Hart, Strategy, pp. 196-197.

23. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 160.

24. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 148.

Brigade across the Strip between Gaza and Khan Yunis. When the coastal road was reached by the armor, the ACT divided its force, one unit turning north toward Gaza and the other unit south toward Khan Yunis. These tank units were followed closely by units of the 11th Brigade mounted on trucks and half-tracks. A short time later, a battalion of infantry of the 11th Brigade crossed the Frontier in buses and followed on the heels of the assault teams.²⁵

The assault unit which headed north received the first fire. About three miles from Gaza town, an anti-tank road-block was encountered which was quickly reduced by the 11th Brigade Reconnaissance Unit. Little other resistance was met until the ACT unit drove into Gaza. United Nations officials who were in Gaza working with refugees in the Gaza Strip persuaded the commander of Gaza to surrender, lest the civilian populace of the town suffer unnecessarily. A message was sent to the Israelis saying that the Egyptian commander would surrender and that he was to be picked up at the Police Station in the north side of the town. A tank-infantry patrol was sent to pick up the commander of the town. On their way, they were attacked by bazookas and machine-guns, killing the patrol commander and wounding several other men of the unit. The patrol was withdrawn

25. Ibid., p. 149.

and replaced by a combat unit of infantry supported by tanks with orders to mop up the town. By then, resistance had ceased, and a United Nations official got the Egyptian commander, General Rajaani, into his car and drove him to Israeli 11th Brigade Headquarters where he signed surrender documents, ending the battle for Gaza town.²⁶

All that remained to finish operations on the Northern Axis was to clean up the Egyptians at Khan Yunis where the Eighth Division Headquarters was located. It was shortly after midnight on November 1 before these positions were assaulted by armor units of the 27th Armored Brigade. The lead elements ran into a roadblock of anti-tank guns and mines between Gaza and Khan Yunis, losing two tanks and a half-track. The other tanks of the assaulting unit reduced the roadblock and by-passed the town itself but reported that the town was not yet cleared of enemy resistance. The armor was then halted and two infantry battalions from the 11th Brigade were moved into the fight. At 0300 hours, November 2, the attack on the town itself was begun. Egyptian resistance was stiff and frequently heroic, with much heroism being shown by the defenders. However, by 0830 hours the battle for Khan Yunis was over. The Egyptian Eighth Division Commander signed surrender papers, handing

26. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, pp. 162-163.

the town and the defense positions over to the Israelis.²⁷

One Egyptian platoon refused to accept the surrender orders of its commander and was still holding out against overwhelming odds at noon. To avoid Israeli casualties, an air strike was ordered against the platoon position, to be followed closely by an armor assault. The position was reduced after an admirable struggle by the Egyptian defenders.²⁸

The reduction of the hold-out platoon ended the battles on the Northern Axis. The Israelis in the Gaza action had captured between 7,000 and 8,000 Egyptian military prisoners, with great stores of supplies and equipment. Losses to the Israeli forces were light, about eleven men killed and twenty men wounded. The Egyptian losses were not much higher in men killed. The prisoners were set free, to make their way back to Egypt as best they could, without their arms, of course. All that remained to end the Sinai Campaign was the capture of the Egyptian fortifications at Sharm El Shaikh and the opening of the Tiran Strait.²⁹

27. Barer, The Weekend War, pp. 260-261.

28. Childers, The Road to Suez, p. 300.

29. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 261.

CHAPTER VII
THE EASTERN AXIS

The first steps in the capture of the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula were taken at the beginning of Operation Kadesh when the border towns of Taba and Ras-el-Nakeb were overrun by elements of the Ninth Infantry Brigade of the Israel Defence Force. However, the operations on the Eastern Axis almost constituted a separate campaign for the Israelis. The operation entailed marching the Ninth Brigade from Kuntilla (earlier taken by the 202nd Paratroop Brigade) into the trackless portion of the Sinai along the Gulf of Akaba.¹

In its strictest sense, the Sinai Peninsula consists of that part of Sinai south of a line drawn from Port Tewfik at the head of the Gulf of Suez to Eilat on the Gulf of Akaba and lies between the Gulf of Akaba on the east and the Gulf of Suez on the west. This area is a mountainous mass, full of precipices and cliffs, rent by ravines, and almost impassable on foot. A paved road runs part of the way down the west coast from Port Tewfik, but for the greater distance, the road is beaten track for 125 miles to the tip of the peninsula. From there the road runs northeast for another fifteen miles to Ras Nasarini on the Gulf of Akaba. In the interior of the peninsula, there are a

1. Eden, Full Circle, p. 602.

few short tracks, none of which will support heavy military traffic. Along the shores of the Gulf of Akaba, there is no route at all between Taba and Ras Nasarini. The peninsula constitutes one integrated geographical-topographical entity having the possibility of being fortified so as to defy capture; but its paucity of roads and population, and especially a water supply, reduces its strategic value and, consequently, its importance to both defender and attacker.²

The value of the Sinai Peninsula (in its strictest sense) in Operation Kadesh lay in Ras Nasarini, where the Gulf of Akaba is confined to a narrow bottleneck between the Sinai Peninsula and the coast of Saudi Arabia. This bottleneck is made even more confusing by the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir, and by coral reefs. At its narrowest point, the Strait of Tiran is no more than 800 yards across, and it was here that the Egyptians emplaced their heavy coastal guns which effectively closed the straits to shipping. In addition to the coastal defense guns at Ras Nasarini, the Egyptian General Headquarters had concentrated the bulk of the military forces in the southern Sinai. Twenty-five miles to the south of the Ras Nasarini positions was Sharm El Shaikh, the administrative center of the area, which

2. Little, Egypt, pp. 18-19.

was also prepared for defense.³ The whole area was under the command of Supreme Headquarters in Cairo and did not come under the command of the Egyptian Eastern Headquarters. The Egyptians felt that if an attack was made by Israel it would come by air or by sea on these positions. The Egyptians well knew the state of the roads in the area; therefore, an attack by Israeli land forces seemed unlikely.⁴ But the reduction of the Tiran Strait positions did, indeed, come by land.

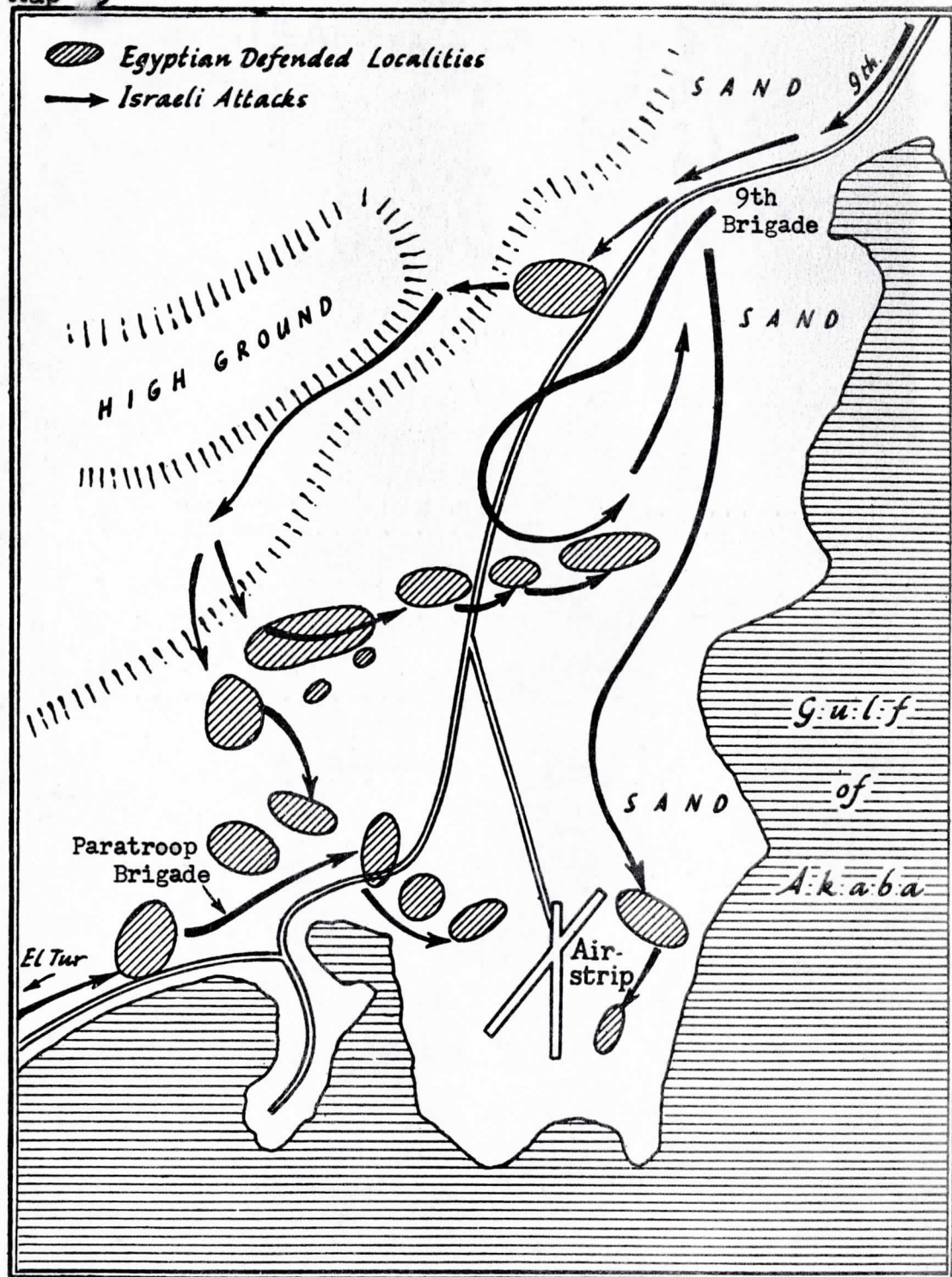
A military unit spends much of its time in the execution of marches, both tactical and administrative. An army commander's objective in marching is to move from one location to another, arriving at an appointed time and place with all his men and equipment in the best possible condition ready to accomplish an assigned mission.⁵ The commander of the advancing forces makes an estimate of the situation and adopts a formation which provides the required degrees of security and readiness for combat. When the possibility of contact with the enemy is remote, march dispositions which expedite movement are adopted. The movement is normally

3. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, p. 241.

4. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 54.

5. Department of the Army, Armor Operations: Small Units, p. 124.

Map 5



SHARM EL SHAIKH

made as a tactical march; subordinate units are kept intact and positioned close to units that they will support or be employed with.⁶

When contact with enemy forces is imminent, tactical considerations govern all actions of a commander or his unit. Forward elements of the command are deployed in a tactical formation suitable for immediate combat. The bulk of the march column may continue as constituted until it, in turn, is required to deploy. When advance to contact is imminent, a highly mobile force must be employed for the safety of the main body. The main body must be so organized as to permit rapid deployment into attack formations should the strength of the enemy encountered be stronger than estimated by reconnaissance. Usually, the type of action anticipated by a commander will determine the grouping of elements in an advance to contact march formation.⁷

The Ninth Infantry Brigade of the Israel Defence Force assembled in the Negev Desert south of Beersheba on October 28 and prepared for a march of over 250 miles, not by air, not by sea, but by land. The Eastern Axis had been assigned as the exclusive combat area of the Ninth Brigade, assisted in its logistics problems by units of the Israeli Navy

6. Ibid., p. 210.

7. Department of the Army, The Armored Division Brigade, pp. 25-26.

operating in the Gulf of Akaba. The route of march was to be the wadis and sand-covered areas leading from Ras-el-Nakeb to Sharm El Shaikh. The brigade mustered, for the purpose of this operation, two infantry battalions (mechanized), the Ninth Brigade Reconnaissance Unit, and the normal support and supply units (artillery and quartermaster units) which were usually to be found in an Israel Defence Force Reinforced Infantry Brigade.⁸

The Ninth Brigade began its march on October 31 at 0600 hours, covered 100 miles (about one-third of the distance over tracks) and reached Kuntilla, where it camped for the night. It will be remembered that Ras-el-Nakeb had been taken two days earlier by detached units of the brigade. On the second day of its march, the brigade reached this locality, ready to proceed on its journey down the shores of the Gulf of Akaba.⁹ The brigade arrived in Ras-el-Nakeb on the day that the heavy battles were fought around Abu Aweigila, and this was the same day that Rafa was captured on the Northern Axis. General Dayan did not feel justified in advancing the Ninth Brigade over a difficult route on the same day without adequate air cover (the Air Force was fully engaged on the Central and Northern Axes on November 1).

8. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 89.

9. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 203.

The brigade was thus ordered to halt and wait at Ras-el-Nakeb until the morning of November 2.¹⁰

Tactical air support is given to ground units by attacking enemy ground forces in their defensive positions or by bringing advancing enemy forces under interdictory fire. Air targets are usually those which are beyond the range of ground force support weapons (artillery and tanks). Air support for ground units also includes protection from an attack by enemy air forces on a marching column. This type of cover is called column cover.¹¹

After the Headquarters-imposed delay, the Ninth Brigade set out on its mission. The lead mechanized elements left the assembly area at 0500 hours, November 2, in an attempt to traverse the first ninety-four miles of the advance the same day. By noon, the point of the column was past the village of Ein-el-Furtaga, which is twelve miles inland from the Gulf of Akaba, about one-third of the distance from Eilat to Sharm El Shaikh. The route of march for that distance followed the Watir, which was fairly flat, broad, and covered with gravel more than sand.¹² Past Ein-el-Furtaga, the route of march lay in Wadi Zala, which rises in a con-

10. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 54.

11. Department of the Army, The Armored Division Brigade, pp. 47-48.

12. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 215.

siderable gradient, its bed composed of shifting sand and massive boulders. Here, there was not one of the wheeled vehicles that did not bog down in the sands. The half-tracks of the column were utilized as tow vehicles for the guns and wheeled vehicles that became bogged. Each wheeled vehicle required individual attention: a half-track would be connected to a bogged vehicle and set to towing, while troops pushed and pulled vehicles which could be extricated without recourse to towing vehicles. The passage of the sands in Wadi Zala took until 0200 hours, November 3, when the point of the column reached Dahab, a fishing village on the coast of the Gulf of Akaba. It was here that the LCM's (Landing Craft, Mechanized) of the Israeli Navy were to meet the brigade with fuel and rations.¹³

It was at Dahab that the brigade encountered its first Egyptian resistance of the march. The tired troops of the Brigade Reconnaissance Unit walked into a trap set up by a patrol of the Egyptian Frontier Force. A sharp fire-fight ensued before the Egyptians evacuated their positions, leaving Israeli dead on the field. This action was a delaying ambush set up by the Egyptians which effectively stalled the advance momentarily, giving the Egyptians time to set up another ambush farther to the south.¹⁴

13. Ibid., p. 217.

14. Ibid.

After refueling and giving the troops a brief rest, the brigade pushed on to the next natural obstacle north of Ras Nasarini and Sharm El Shaikh: Wadi Kaid. At the entrance to this wadi, the boulders were too great to permit the passage of vehicles; therefore, the brigade lost more time while the engineer unit dynamited a roadway through the rock formations. As an additional hazard, the Egyptians set up an ambush in the wadi; but after a brief fire-fight, they retreated to Ras Nasarini whence they had come. Once again the brigade continued its advance all through the night with only a few hours rest for the troops.¹⁵

On the previous day (November 1) an additional movement was begun to expedite the capture of the Ras Nasarini-Sharm El Shaikh position. Time was beginning to press the Israeli General Headquarters, and these positions at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula were the only stumbling blocks to the completion of Operation Kadesh. It was obvious in the beginning that the Ninth Brigade's route of march was perilous, exhausting, and lengthy. General Headquarters, therefore, decided to divert the 202nd Paratroop Brigade from the Southern Axis down the coast of the Gulf of Suez to Sharm El Shaikh.¹⁶ At sunset on November 1, the First Battalion

15. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 55.

16. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 173.

of the 202nd was sent southwest across the desert from Mitla Pass to capture the town of Ras Sudar on the Gulf of Suez. When the Ninth Brigade forces were fighting their way (against natural obstacles) through Wadi Zala, the First Battalion was nearing the Port Tewfik-Sharm El Shaikh road. About an hour after the First Battalion of the 202nd left their position at Mitla, an Independent Paratroop Battalion (a unit held in reserve in Israel) was air-dropped at El Tur, 106 miles south of Ras Sudar. The First Battalion took Ras Sudar on the morning of November 3 and began to advance to El Tur, leaving behind a platoon to guard that locality.¹⁷

The Egyptian High Command desired to evacuate the Sharm El Shaikh area as early as November 1. The Area Commander explained to higher headquarters that, owing to a shortage of transport, he could not carry out the orders of evacuation. The commander requested permission to defend the area against the impending Israeli attack, and High Command granted his request. On November 1, this commander began to concentrate his forces in and around the heavily fortified area of Sharm El Shaikh. He brought back to the mainland two gunnery sections, which were stationed on the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, on the frigate Rashid, which later took refuge in a Saudi Arabian port to avoid capture by the Israelis.¹⁸

17. Ibid., p. 172.

18. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, pp. 99-100.

When the Egyptian commander received the information that Dahab had been captured by the Ninth Brigade and that El Tur had been overrun by the 202nd Brigade, he decided to concentrate his forces even more and evacuated Ras Nasarini, bringing this garrison to the defensive dispositions of Sharm El Shaikh. Before leaving the emplaced guns at Ras Nasarini, the Egyptians spiked these weapons lest they fall into Israeli hands.¹⁹

Sharm El Shaikh itself was a strongly defended position, having a garrison of about 1,500 men in all. It had about thirty Bren Carriers (a lightly armored personnel carrier, usually mounting a heavy machine-gun), six anti-tank guns, and a number of anti-aircraft guns. The troops consisted of a regular infantry battalion, a National Guard battalion, and two platoons of the Frontier Force. There were many medium and heavy mortars emplaced in the position, but the commander had no heavy howitzers to fight off an approaching attack. The defensive position itself was a strong one and a wide one. It completely blocked the narrow beach area, with one flank resting in the water's edge and the other flank up against a high ridge on the west, which merged into the mountainous mass that rose from the beach.²⁰

19. Ibid., p. 100.

20. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 55.

The assault upon the Sharm El Shaikh positions began at 0330 hours, November 5, by an infantry company from the First Battalion of the Ninth Brigade. The company moved on foot across the open ground in front of the Egyptian position, blocking the road from Ras Nasarini. This first contact was more of a reconnaissance, or probing, movement than a direct assault, as the Israelis did not know the defensive layout of the positions. This first probing assault was soon detected by the defenders, who opened up on the attackers with small arms and machine-gun fire, pinning the Israelis down. Supporting fire was given the first position by the three positions to the south of the roadblock. The Israelis were unable to advance or withdraw, and another company, mounted in half-tracks, was sent up to assist them by the First Battalion Commander. Under cover of a mortar barrage and the diversion of the half-tracks, the trapped Israelis were able to withdraw to the line of departure. However, one detachment of the half-tracks overshot its objective and blundered into the eastern-most defensive position in the "hedgehog" and found it deserted. The men of the half-track unit found four anti-tank guns in the position, hooked them up to the half-tracks, and returned to the brigade attack position.²¹

21. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 55.

The firing from the Egyptian positions died down, and this, coupled with the information concerning the empty eastern strongpoints, caused the Israeli commander to believe that either the Egyptians were withdrawing or that the three defensive road positions were not going to be manned.²² The order was given to the Ninth Brigade to attack Sharm El Shaikh itself frontally with six infantry companies mounted in half-tracks. The attack was to be a charge down the narrow beach. A charge, in other words, executed over the open sands for about 900 yards.²³

The charge against the three defensive positions and against Sharm El Shaikh would seem to be a rather foolhardy tactic without the support of tanks to lead the half-tracks into the action. In a mechanized infantry assault, the normal procedure is for armor and infantry to attack abreast, the tanks in the lead with the infantry following closely. If the infantry is dismounted, the tanks should follow closely on the heels of the infantry in order to destroy enemy defenses with their heavier firepower, with the infantry closing with the enemy to destroy individual anti-tank weapons.²⁴ The charge did, indeed, prove to be ill-planned.

22. Henriques, A Hundred Hours to Suez, p. 101.

23. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 57.

24. Department of the Army, Armored Cavalry: Platoon, Troop and Squadron (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 132.

As soon as the half-tracks began the race down the beach, the Egyptian anti-tank guns opened fire on the assaulting elements, and within minutes three of the half-tracks were hit and destroyed. The defenders then began to fire on the attackers with heavy machine-guns and mortars, which slowed the Israelis almost to a standstill. The attack wavered and had to be discontinued, with the attackers withdrawing to their attack position.²⁵

At 0700 hours an Israeli air strike was made against the fortified positions. The Israeli infantry, now dismounted, worked their way around to the right flank of the positions, under the cover of the air strike. They then assaulted downhill to the fortifications. The leading elements reached the barbed-wire entanglements on the perimeter, but the Egyptian defenders held the attack at the wire. After a desperate battle, using smoke to cover the action, the Israelis penetrated the outer defenses and began to exploit the breach. The penetration was hurriedly widened and the attackers forced the Egyptians into withdrawal action. At 0900 hours, the Egyptian Commander formally surrendered Sharm El Shaikh. During the closing few minutes of the action, the 202nd Paratroop Brigade from El Tur arrived on the scene and joined the action.²⁶

25. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 178.

26. Ibid.

In the fight for Sharm El Shaikh, the Israeli casualties were over eighty men killed and wounded. The Egyptians, who had put up a good defense of their positions, lost 200 dead and 300 wounded; roughly, this was about one-third of their force. The defenders had taken a terrible pounding from aircraft bombing and mortar fire, which made their number of dead run much higher than the Israelis. The battle was over and the military action known as Operation Kadesh was successfully concluded.²⁷

27. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, p. 59.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In the seven days after the transport planes crossed the Sinai Frontier carrying elements of the 202nd Paratroop Brigade, the men and vehicles of the Israel Defence Force traveled hundreds of miles, over roads, by desert track, and over trackless wastes. These army units attacked and seized prepared defensive positions, defeated the Egyptians in their own areas of operations, and captured a land mass two and one-half times the size of the whole State of Israel.

In the opening stages of Operation Kadesh, the opposing forces were roughly of equal size in manpower. The Egyptians held a vast superiority in equipment of modern design and possessed a stronger potential of firepower. So what, then, were the real reasons for the Israeli victory and the Egyptian defeat?

A number of factors contributed to the Israeli success on the field of battle. Perhaps the main one was the high standard of leadership of the Israeli officer corps, especially the senior officers of brigade command level and above. Knowledge of their jobs combined with their aggressiveness in the field seem to mark the officers with a high degree of military acumen; moreover, their competence was not deterred by rigid operational plans, such as are often found in modern armies.¹

1. Eden, Full Circle, p. 584.

The average age of the Israeli officers was well below that to be found in most standing armies of today. The relative youthfulness of the Israeli officer would tend to imbue him with an aggressive spirit so necessary in successful combat. The traits which are necessary to defeat an enemy are "offensive-mindedness" closely allied with a will to win in situations which appear to be impossible. These traits the Israeli officers held in a large measure.²

Another factor, perhaps more important than the officer corps, was the high state of morale that prevailed throughout the ranks of the Israeli Army. The human element plays a decisive part in all battles, large and small. The enthusiasm of the Israelis was perhaps sharpened by the knowledge that should they falter in the Sinai Campaign, or fail, the watching Arab countries would sweep down on them like a pack of wolves. Much the same situation has existed in Israel since the War of Independence in 1948: the Israelis cannot afford to fail in battle because if they do, the State of Israel might disappear from the map. In the Sinai Campaign, as in 1948, the Israelis not only had a poor opinion of the Arab boasts to annihilate Israel but also were determined to destroy the myth of Arab invincibility.³

2. Marshall, "The Young Army of Israel," p. 96.

3. Kimche and Kimche, A Clash of Destinies, pp. 13-16.

Better by far than that of the Egyptian opponent, the standard of training in the Israel Defence Force showed the usefulness of universal conscription and annual reserve training. Discipline, while of a less formal type than is considered absolutely essential in most large armies, was none the less good: the soldiers all fitted into the war machine and did what their officers told them to do. However, the punitive discipline was summary and sometimes ruthless when men and officers failed in an assigned task.⁴

In the Sinai Campaign, strategy and tactics were made to fit developing situations; most situations were exploited to the fullest as they arose. The overall plan of attack was flexible, and the Chief of Staff, General Moshe Dayan, was always well forward where he could personally direct individual battles as he chose. Being present on the battlefield at the critical moments, Dayan was able to make immediate use of battle reports and thereby turned a developing situation to Israeli advantage, as well as being able to react to unexpected or unforeseen enemy movements. Ordinarily, the Chief of Staff remains in a headquarters area and directs the battles from field reports. During the operations in each sector of the campaign, Dayan was constantly on the move, from axis to axis, contacting column commanders by light

4. Lev, With Plowshare and Sword, pp. 53-57.

plane or jeep. The primary reason that he was able to devote so much time to the battles was that no other Arab country rushed to the aid of the Egyptians; therefore, he was able, as Chief of Staff, to interfere far more than is normal in most armies in what was essentially a Southern Command battle.⁵

The Task Force Commanders themselves seemed to have a wide latitude as to how they achieved their objectives. They enjoyed full freedom to exploit any favorable opportunity without reference to a higher command or co-ordination with other units in the same operation. In the battles around the Dam position at Abu Aweigila, each unit seemed to operate as an individual, without the basic communications co-ordination expected in conventional warfare.

Forward motion--the initiative--was maintained by the Israelis throughout Operation Kadesh. Perhaps an explanation for this situation was that the officers, whether of company or Task Force level, were always well forward with their men, much farther forward than is usually found in conventional military formations. Almost half of the total Israelis killed were officers.⁶

Supplies, other than fuel and water, were never waited for in the forward drive. It was the task of the logistics

5. Marshall, Sinai Victory, p. 193.

6. Ibid., p. 30.

services to keep up with the "teeth" of the columns. If food supplies could not keep up with the fighting troops, the advance did not slow down; rather, the troops managed on captured Egyptian supplies or else did without food. Fuel, water, and ammunition had priority in the supply vans.⁷

These are the main reasons for the Israeli victory in the Sinai Campaign. But many other factors are involved in this success, not the least of which was the Egyptian forces that they were fighting.

The chief reason for the Egyptian defeat was the quality of the Egyptian officer corps. Their lack of ability, lack of aptitude, lack of keenness, lack of aggressive fighting spirit, and poor morale were reflected in the men they were supposed to be leading. The officer, especially on the company and battalion level, is the mainstay on the battlefield, and upon him depends the success or failure of a military operation. The Egyptian officers failed miserably in all respects, on many occasions deserting their men under fire situations. In the instances where the officers stayed with their men, such as at Sharm El Shaikh, the troops fought well. In some cases, such as the hold-out platoon at Khan Yunis, the Egyptian troops fought on without their officers.⁸

7. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 193.

8. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, pp. 58-59.

The morale of the average Egyptian soldier was not high at the time of the Sinai Campaign. He was mostly an unwilling conscript, ignorant, illiterate, and unhappy and miserable at serving in the desert away from home. The non-commissioned officer usually came from the city and held his position because he was able to read and write. He was contemptuous of the men serving under him, and the commissioned officer had little sympathy for either group under him.⁹

There was little, if any, aggressive spirit in the Egyptian Army of 1956. The one counter-attack attempted during the entire Sinai Campaign (at Abu Aweigila) lost its momentum very quickly. Under their former Nazi advisors, the Egyptians had constructed tactically well-sited defensive positions, especially in the Gaza Strip and in the "defensive triangle". Indeed, it might be said that the whole army was permeated by a "defense-mindedness" which tended to leave the idea of the "attack" out of the thinking of the Egyptian higher headquarters. Although equipped with ample vehicles, especially armor, the army had practically no mobility. While the army was not exactly road-bound, there was always a reluctance to leave the roads and maneuver in the open desert. Had the armor that was attempting to escape El Arish on the Northern Axis used the open desert, perhaps more of

9. O'Ballance, The Sinai Campaign, 1956, p. 43.

it would have reached Egypt rather than falling into Israeli hands. When the Egyptians did leave the roads, they appeared to be uncertain of themselves and were consequently outwitted by the Israelis.¹⁰

The Egyptian Army itself was well armed and well organized, and although Nasser claimed that the Sinai Campaign caught him in a transition period of material assimilation (replacement of British arms and equipment with newer Soviet material), the key to Egyptian failure lay with the officer corps. There was so much wrong with the Egyptian Army in 1956 and it was beaten so decisively that a complete reorganization was necessary. Many high-ranking officers lost their positions and many more their lives. Often, when an army is beaten so decisively, as was the Egyptians, it takes many years of orientation to rebuild a battle psychology sufficient to go into the field again.¹¹

In contrast, on the face of it the Israelis would seem to have had a perfect war machine; however, as in most machines, if one listens closely enough, one can detect a few smothered groans and creaks from internal stresses and strains. Good planning and good fortune, as in most warfare, played an important part in getting the Israeli troops on to the battlefield and keeping them there.

10. Ibid., pp. 46-47.

11. Wheelock, Nasser's New Egypt, p. 59.

The greatest problem that faced the Israelis was mobility--the transport problem. The 202nd Paratroop Brigade, for instance, had great difficulty in obtaining the allocated four-wheel and six-wheel drive vehicles necessary for the open desert trek to Mitla Pass.¹² The Israeli infantry brigades engaged were made mobile and supplied by impressing civilian vehicles (about 3,000 of them), the driver of the vehicle being allowed to accompany the vehicle if he wished, whether he was in the army or not. This brought into a combat situation a vast human problem not ordinarily found in most armies.

Another "creak" in the Israeli war machine was the problem of communications. Since the War of Independence in 1948, the Defence Force had never had over one brigade fully mobilized and in action at one time; therefore, communication between brigades, and between brigades and Task Force Headquarters, in Operation Kadesh left much to be desired. There were periods during the campaign when there was no inter-unit radio communication at all, and contact had to be maintained by jeep or liaison aircraft (Piper Cubs). Relatively short distances between units made such communication procedures possible. Had the Sinai Campaign been

12. Barer, The Weekend War, p. 195.

fought on the scale of the Battle of France (1940), for example, the Israelis would have been at a definite disadvantage.¹³

The Israeli tactic of charging a fortified position at night, in half-tracks with headlights blazing, would have spelled disaster had they been faced with a determined enemy. One would assume that this practice was designed to take full advantage of the psychological effect an attacker possesses in a night attack. Simplicity, secrecy, and surprise are very important in night operations; however, to charge an enemy with headlights blazing is tempting fate. All movements before reaching the objective are ordinarily made without any illumination. Only when the attacker is upon the defender is illumination used.¹⁴

These flaws in the Israeli machine were revealed in the battles in the Sinai. In spite of these flaws, Operation Kadesh was a "command performance" for the Israelis. The picture presented by the Israel Defence Force was of a small, compact, hard-hitting army, with high morale and an aggressive spirit, overcoming an opposing force of equal (as claimed by the Egyptians) quality. The Israelis had made full use of the years between the War of Independence

13. Tehan, The Sinai Campaign, passim.

14. Department of the Army, Armor Operations: Small Units, p. 225.

and the Sinai Campaign; the Egyptian Army had not kept the pace, and as a result was badly beaten on the field of battle.

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