

With the military

By Robi Auscher

All in all have spent six years of my life with the military. Have served two and a half years of mandatory service and at least three and a half of reserve duty. If I'm adding these years to those spent on international travel, the inevitable question I ask myself is when did I spend any time at home? The clichéd expression used in this country would be - I spent my best years in the army.

Although clad in uniform, armed sometimes, in uncomfortable conditions and short of a few degrees of freedom, the ultimate of being with the military is after all a social action very much as civil life. In other words you feel well when you reach a certain position, enjoy degrees of freedom and responsibility. You feel bad when haven't reached such standing, a clear definition of responsibilities and superiors could tell you what do at a whim.

Still as student have given a trial lecture to the military agricultural school's staff. I just took a seminar that have prepared at the university and they liked it. At that moment the NAHAL command machinery's wheels were put in action. Before landing at basic training have spent a fortnight at the Tel Hashomer Recruiting Center. My thorniest challenge being the cleaning of lavatories. In the remaining time have been through rigorous medical and some additional examinations focused on IQ, coordination and other mental parameters. After several days have been called to an interview and advised that am assigned for pilot training. I was 24 years old, holding an MSc and got an allocation to NAHAL agricultural school/college and the idea of pilot training seemed preposterous. It didn't garner any interest. We were in the pre-computer era and apparently my future assignation wasn't at the disposal of the center at that point in time. Have refused the idea on the spot. Didn't even have the time or the mood to be flattered by the results. Just wanted to land at the ag school. This happened right after completing the six weeks basic training.

We were 15 instructors at the school which was located in a large military base where NAHAL rookies were undergoing their lengthy basic combat training. We ran annually six or seven training courses of 2-3 weeks in various agricultural branches and a few additional short courses on more general topics. Four out of the instructors were university graduates, exempt from draft at 18, all others carefully hand-picked graduates of vocational agricultural

high schools. For special topics we could call reservists who served with us on a long-term basis as well as external lecturers mainly from the Ministry of Agriculture's research and extension services. We had to sustain a military environment and discipline with our trainees but among ourselves we let our hair down. The rationale of this training unit and activity was the fact that NAHAL's military duty was divided into two spells of service. One of fully-fledged combat duties as paratroopers followed by periods spent usually in kibbutz settlements along the borders. The training in professional agricultural branches assured the smooth integration of the future kibbutz members ending their military service.



Instructors at the military agricultural school, 1960. (2nd from left standing; Y. Katan 4th)

Our daily routine included instructing and lecturing. Instructing in my case boiled down to leading early morning workouts with the trainees and lecturing in areas which fell under my area of specialization. The next step down the road entailed to coordinate a given course, set its full curriculum, assign staff responsibilities, invite external lecturers, prepare field visits with the trainees, audio-visuals, exercises, tests, etc. Usually one of the instructors, the “sergeant major”, was in charge of trainees’ discipline and daily schedule, another the “minister for foreign affairs” would liaise with NAHAL command and with suppliers of videotapes and teaching materials such as the British Council and the American Embassy, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Education-Agricultural Schools, all located in Tel Aviv.

We elected democratically the commander from among the instructors who completed previously squad commanders course and were eligible for officers course. He would complete then the officers training and appointed as college commander.

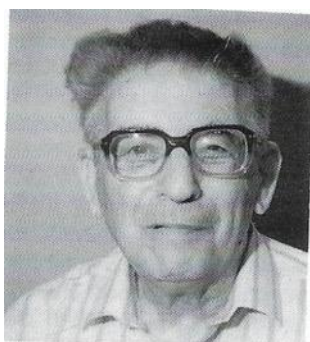
New instructors had to pass an admission tryout. At an evening party they had to go through an observance in which the master of ceremony would demonstrate them a set of moves and words which had to be repeated in precise order by the juiced up novice. Every error was fined with the gulp of booze making coordination, concentration and prospects of finishing the quiz unmanageable down the line. By definition rookies who fail the test should be rigorously rejected. This never happened during my more than two years spent with the unit. We used to check the new instructor's lecturing abilities by listening concealed to them. The two amphitheatres where lectures were delivered had ventilation holes under the sloped seats tiers. One could stay behind the hall, under the seats to watch the action inside. Spent this period together with a good friend from the Faculty, Yaacov Katan, who reached the school almost a year before me serving as my go to person.

Once a year we would visit in teams of two the leading agricultural high schools to look for possible candidates. Once a year the staff would carry out a field trip blended with sightseeing. We would add then girl- and boyfriends and go by military truck. We would put up in hostels dividing the rooms of men and women. In one of the trips have parked in a Druze military outpost in the Negev. My field glasses vanished from the truck. Being classified military equipment, had to appear before a senior military judge. The college commander accompanied me to the regiment's deputy in command and I was judged and fined. My clean behavior file was black-eyed.

We were quite an elite group enjoying loose discipline within the bootcamp. All our trainees were after basic or even advanced training and as such exempt from the camp's harsh rules. The bootcamp's large staff of sergeants and officers had to follow a strict soldierly routine since they were training rookies. It was our commander's role to ward off the camp's chronic attempts to impose same discipline on us. To avoid that the camp's command especially its master sergeant holds a grudge, whenever we left our premises to cross the camp, we wore our caps to toe the line, buttoned up the shirts putting on our best military mien. The regiment's Master Sergeant, Gantz (no kin to former Chief of Staff) used to command the parade of trained rookies at the end of their lengthy training. To this end you need a stentorian voice. But nature blessed him just with a thin tenor. To make up for it he wore wooden soles under his red paratrooper's shoes acting as sound boards to his commands and stiff marching on the parade ground, next to our premises.

Coordinating courses and inviting lecturers brought me in touch with quite a lot of well-known professionals from research and extension and with our steady pool of professional reservists. Being “minister of foreign affairs” for quite a long time exposed me to two officers in the Education Branch. Major Zeev Shoham, NAHAL Command Education Officer, member of kibbutz Sde Nehemia in the Upper Galilee, and his deputy, Hugo Herscovici’s (Timișoara) brother-in-law.

Without any sugarcoating, the two years spent at the ag school were one of the best gigs of my life. I made professional progress, got confidence as lecturer, lived in a loose and friendly environment and had the opportunity to establish contacts with well-known experts in my domain. Towards the end of my service, J. Palti the head of the Plant Protection Division of the Extension Service came to meet with me at the camp. At the end of the visit he offered me a newly created position in his division, namely of state coordinator of extension activities, in charge of outreach programs, training courses, in-service training, publications, audio visuals, radio programs, etc. Had no colleagues working in the area. To seek info had to rely on Dr. Mordechai Vermes. Born in Timișoara as Vermes Pali, he reached Palestine in the 1930s and was Yitzhak Rabin’s classmate at the Kadoori Agricultural High School. He acquired a PhD in genetics in France and worked as entomologist for the Ministry of Agriculture’s Plant Protection Department. Heard his impressive lecture still as student and invited him several times to lecture at the military school. Paid him a visit on a Saturday morning at his Tel Aviv flat to discuss with him Palti’s proposal. Wasn’t aware of the fact that he and Palti deeply despised each other. Vermes discouraged me, telling that he even doubts whether Palti had an approved manpower position for the job he offered me. He might be bluffing. His visitor for coffee that morning who worked also for Plant Protection was much more positive about the prospective function. I plowed ahead and accepted the offer. Was very happy that didn’t have to chase a job but was offered one. Had to play it safe between Palti and Vermes.



Drs. J. Palti (l) and P. Vermes (r).

They were forever locking horns at meetings. Thus, interacting with Vermes was basically constrained to dirty jokes he used to tell me in Hungarian whenever we met. Palti didn't find out about my early acquaintance with him and I didn't take any toll for it. Have ended the military service in February 1963 and in April joined the Division of Plant Protection, Extension Service, Ministry of Agriculture at the Kirya in Tel Aviv. A few months later have been called to a Recruiting Office for reserve duty to be sent to an armored infantry unit to begin this time my literal military service. It ended up in four wars and in three and a half years of eating sand.

I landed, thus, in an armored vehicles regiment's support company. Been added later to the company's personnel management unit. At active reserve duty this allocation was uncertain. Although released as sergeant from the mandatory service had to do mostly guarding duties and no frills clerical jobs. These were years of low social standing, acting as reliever without a steady function. Most of the guys around me were in the same position and likewise unhappy. After the camaraderie of the agricultural college, now every man was for himself. Have been saved but once from these dull duties when Ministry of Agriculture's Foreign Aid organized a training course in French for francophone African countries. The topic being their introduction to the NAHAL type of military organization. Have spent as reservist a whole month in nice surroundings with a group of gleeful western Africans and enjoyed it.

June 1967. Bleak headlines mounted and lengthy waiting weeks prior to the break-out of the Six Day War. Everyone who wasn't called up yet felt uneasy. We were among the last to be mobilized. Gathered in the Ben Shemen forest and have been put in the A company commander's armored vehicle. First fully-fledged combat assignment. Put all the paraphernalia on the packed vehicle-kitbag, arms, helmet, etc. Just had a cup of coffee when suddenly the alarm went off. Moment of emotion and just poured the coffee into my bag. We were part of the noted "Harel" (no. 10) division, the one which was under Y. Rabin's command twenty years earlier in the War of Independence and fought in the Jerusalem hills, the beat of our action in this war. In the waiting days Col. Uri Ben Ari was appointed division chief. A seasoned tank commander, he was suspended for some time and been called to reserve service just before the war's outbreak. A white-haired officer with slight German accent visiting his troupes driving an open jeep. Our armored vehicles company was detached from our organic regiment and attached to a tanks regiment. In fact, we were following them fully dovetailed to provide them with mobile infantry. Moved from Ben Shemen on dirt roads toward Jerusalem and crossed the border into

Jordan at Kibbutz Maale Hahamisha to pass arab villages as Qatanna and others which are by now part of the West Bank. After pushing back the Jordanian army from the Radar Hill, the heavy battles of our tanks were at Tel El Pul, followed by Biddu and Sheikh Abdul Aziz. We were moving day and night with short breaks. Although listening in the command vehicle to the regimental network, you don't know much about what's happening around and rely on spawning scuttlebutt. Radio news are a much better source providing the very big but censored picture. We were propelled up to Jerusalem through Shuafat refugee camp which was by now in our hands. Another lengthy wait. Regrouped toward the north-east, directed to Ramallah. Moved down and uphill again and then finally pointed to Bet El and Ramallah. The roads spread with trampled local cars and burnt out military trucks galore who lost their mojo. We were the first regiment to move into Ramallah which seemed to be a ghost town. No resistance. Still moving around the narrow streets in an open armored car gave me the uneasy sensation that something could be easily thrown on us from the roofs. No. We rush downhill to Jericho. Our driver, Pincu, was at the steering wheel for days in a row but refused to be replaced. We watch from above the Jordanian Legion's tanks pulling back and crossing Allenby bridge. The paratroopers reached Jericho before us. Quite a lot of Jordanian and Egyptian commando bodies spread around the ditches and orange groves. We camp out next to Jericho for three days. One misty and hot surrealistic morning scene at around 4 am while we ratchet down, surrounded by white clouds of steam arising from the water, to the Jordan river to blast up the Abdallah bridge. We secured the combat engineers who placed the explosives around the pillars. After three days we're steered a big chunk through the north Samaria road to camp in the Hula Valley and reach the Golan. We mount the heights at Darbashie next to Gonen and moved along the Petroleum Road to Nafach and Rafid junction. Exhausted paratroopers in loose garments do their way downhill. This had the hallmarks of chasing the war. After all we wasted or just spent three days out of the six camping outside Jericho. Camping on the basalt rocks of the Golan Heights under heavy attack of gnats and mosquitoes, enjoyed the alpine view of Mt Hermon, and westward the green hedges and fields of the Hula Valley and the Upper Galilee. After ten days we're headed again a long way southwards to Jerusalem to process through its center. I got a bad cold on the Golan and had to leave the parade through Jerusalem's old center, check into Shaarei Zedek Hospital and touch our home base on my own still coughing, equipped with a bunch of pills. Quite a mileage in six days of war and several weeks of service. As easy as pie at 31. Euphory ensued after that blitzkrieg and the era of victory albums just bloomed. Enlarged Israel unfolded into a complex world of heated internal

disputes, to call the new territories freed or occupied? A new search for identity, a switch from popular underdog into a military might criticized with fresh ardor by large segments of western Europe. For us, living in this country, threatened by surrounding enemies armed by the Soviets, a sense of auspicious relief of distress. We rushed to newly discovered Jerusalem, to the Wall, to the demolished Jewish quarter, to the green fields of the Golan plateau and to the respite of the Hula valley and Upper Galilee so easily shelled from above, and to Sinai's arid hills and stunning beaches.

Just released in late June and back to duty in August right to the furnace of the Jordan Valley. Forty degrees in the Jiftlik, a former Jordanian army camp. Refugees swarming back from the east at night through our ambushes. Jordanians shelling our positions and patrols along the river. One of our armored vehicles hit by shells and turned over. Regiment commander and his deputy among the wounded. Major Amnon Eshkol, a portly and calm officer striding with a casual Kalashnikov on his back is sent to take over and will lead us for the years to come.

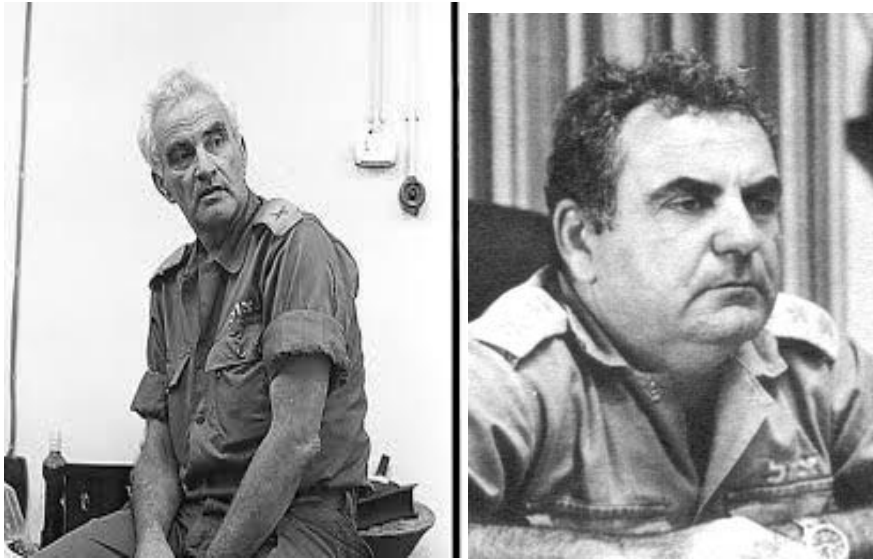


In the Six Day War (2nd from right)

Between 1967 and 1973 we were called annually to reserve duty for at least a month to various areas: the Golan heights, Jordan valley and the Ghaza Strip. While in Ghaza we put up in the former UN camp not far from the beach. Unbelievable today, at that time we arrived to the camp by our private cars. Only restriction: we were not supposed to eat in local restaurants. Insurgents acted mainly in the citrus groves.

These were the great days of our recon platoon who were almost day and night engaged in chasing them and pursuing contact. Mota Goor and later Arik Sharon commanded the Strip leading the chase after armed irregulars. We, the

support company were combing the houses and looking for arms especially at night. The recon platoon became extremely arrogant and no officer, except regiment commander Amnon Eshkol was respected by them. Three or four of their group were vendors at the Karmel Market in Tel Aviv and brought fresh supply of meat, vegetables and fruit. They were grilling and cooking most of the time with Amnon, steady guest of honor. I couldn't find any other flaw in this man.



Brig. G-ral Uri Ben Ari Brig. G-ral Amnon Eshkol

I was attached to the personnel unit, sometimes in charge of interminable lists, sometimes pulling or pushing mail, newspapers or artists. Didn't get the feeling that my capabilities are intelligently used. One year before the October war, in 1972 our armored unit was upgraded to tank corp. The three armored vehicle companies departed and we have incorporated three Centurion companies. The support company remaining in place and providing its usual services. It was a challenging change and a drastic modification of the human scenery. Two of the tank companies were manned by orthodox (Yeshivot Hesder) tank operators still in their early twenties, at their mandatory service. The third company was manned by young reservists. The orthodox were extremely disciplined, spot-on and cooperative. We at personnel enjoyed very much to work with them. Amnon Eshkol underwent a tank officers lengthy training and got the charge of the new unit's command. He was always soft-spoken and calm, dispersing a sense of quiet leadership. He was a kibbutz member who used to work as bus driver. He knew by name many of the regiment's soldiers, showed much respect to everyone and talked always at eye level. However,

when he had to judge someone because of misbehavior, he was always very strict.

Just got back from the US a fortnight earlier when on **Yom Kippur, October the 6th 1973** the Egyptian and Syrian forces launch their well-concerted attack crossing the Suez Canal and rushing over the Golan heights. Called up the same day, we get together in Tel Aviv to move towards the Egyptian front. Our tanks take positions along the canal while the support company and lots of jobless individuals from the regiment follow in buses and get caught in artillery fire. We back up and regroup and am joining my company. We support the combat units with fuel, ammo, food, medical services, etc. Amnon Eshkol is the oldest regiment commander in the division and in lower esteem vs. the younger, brash ones such as the notorious Amiram Nir, who died later in a mysterious plane crash in Mexico. He manages the campaign by the book, with bulletproof patience and care for his people. The tanks move up to their ramps, target the Egyptian tanks and positions, fire and back up again. Patience is the name of the game. No one is injured. Amnon quite stubby, afflicted with back pains has to be eased into his tank. His calm and secure voice create an ambiance of quiet leadership. We crossed the canal and camped near Fayid in the middle of the north-African desert for almost 6 months. Have been sent to the division commanders command wagon to work for him. He was surrounded by a steady and well-knit group of assistants. Quite a mafia. I didn't fit into their web and fortunately have been sent back to my regiment after a few days. Chief clerk retired and I took his place. Finally had a responsible function. After some time, several personnel officers just came and left and I got the function. As master sergeant got a seat in the regiment commander's close staff. Got Amnon's full backing and we hit it off pretty well. To get to know the whole regiment, not only from faceless paperwork but in person, have moved among the tank companies to put a face behind the names and was able to react flat out to all personnel matters at the staff meetings. There were two agronomists in the company with whom could chat to break the drudgery. They were both radio operators. Operations sergeant was Israel Schatzmann. No one in his tent knew that he is a professor of history at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. We just heard strong cries: Schatzmann (!!!) whenever field phones or walkie-talkies emitted new data and he had to update the operation maps. We used to get home leaves of 72 hours. Been flown home by C-130s (Hercules). They flew 10 m above water level when crossing the Suez Canal to dodge Egyptian radar. Desert is hot at day and cold at night, but in the winter months, living in tents, we needed much extra wrapper.

On October the 20th 1973 our first daughter was born and I got a couple of days for a home visit. We camped in the Great Bitter Lake area next to Fayid on the canal's Egyptian side, 150 km from Cairo for half a year. After six months our camping was axed and we performed a big move in the spring of 1974 to regroup in the Golan Heights to spend there the months of April and May



At the Suez Canal; on the move; camping by Fayid, 1973



In fact we dropped into an attrition warfare with Syria following the agreement. The Petroleum Road was almost daily targeted. We retaliated daily with heavy artillery but all movements were very unpleasant especially in vehicles which were not well-armored. The attrition grew even more as

the Agreement on Disengagement between Israel and Egypt was finally signed in January 1974. Attrition continued throughout the negotiation process with Syria and became more intense every time it was interrupted. Only on 31 May



1974 an agreement between the two countries was signed in Geneva.

The agreement delineated two disengagement lines, with the buffer zone between them monitored by the newly-established United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). We spent time with Scandinavian UNDOF officers. They

looked like underachievers who haven't been promoted in their own army and joined the UN. Their main concern was their duty-free liquor. We recall the cheap stunt of UN forces buffering between Israel and Egypt. When did they desert their posts? When in need. Right before the outbreak of the Six Day War. UNDOF, UNWRA, all wasted worlds' taxpayers money. After eight months of uninterrupted service have been finally released. My long absence and the stressful days took a toll on us. Our two-years old son began to stutter for some time. A new appointment awaited me, Director, Division of Crop Protection, Extension Service.

The next reserve duties were all intensive. Being positioned in the north, we spent much time in the Golan heights. Amnon Eshkol signed for career service as Deputy Division Chief and we have met at our base. We climbed almost every year and even twice a year to the Golan which featured its green meadows and mosquitoes in the spring, its yellow and dry weeds in the summers and its cold and rainy winters. Developed an aversion to its grey basalt formations and volcanic rocks. Our unit used to be regularly visited by military dignitaries such as Yanush, the brilliant general, head of the northern command, and colonel Meir Dagan, who served later as Mossad chief for 8 years. Have spent one month at A Tur in the southern Sinai on the Gulf of Suez serving with another unit. As "stranger" you're at the bottom of the social ladder, slated for night shifts at the worse hours. Awake at night, sleeping through the hot days. We completed a continuous month-long service with no home leaves.

In 1982 the First Lebanon War began ("Operation Peace for Galilee") After attacking the PLO, as well as Syrian, leftist, and Muslim Lebanese forces, the Israeli military, in cooperation with their Maronite allies and the self-styled Free Lebanon State, occupied southern Lebanon and reached Beirut. Our division played a backup role. We didn't enter Lebanon but stood by in the Tabcha Valley along the Sea of Galilee watching close how things will play out. IDF troops pulled back from Lebanon only in the year 2000.

At 39 we were about to be relieved of reserve duty. Have been asked by the recruiting officers to stay on and give them a hand this time at their office in the country's central part. I cannot fully explain the psychology of saying yes, but this is what I did. Not a matter of patriotic flare or the sensation that I owe more to society. After years of hassle just felt at ease with the people and the place. Personnel management came along and was fully computerized by now.

Thus, for several years to come have volunteered and spent a few weeks every year getting up our recruiting systems.

In sum, been a late bloomer, recruited at 24 have ended my military career after 22 intensive, often mind-numbing but mainly thrilling years of service, culminating in four wars. Have many friends who live abroad and am afraid they're just unable to grasp the heavy load our generations do carry. I hope I was successful never to appear in any kind of heroic posture in front of them. I hoped that my kids wouldn't have to follow suit and spend so much time in the military. Too late, they did. Our son and both daughters lived up to their duty. It's the turn of my grandkids. I use to talk about it with my sons-in-law. One of them was career military. We hope that my grandkids will have a different destiny. Much depends not only on exogenous factors but on our own politicians. At this point in time they don't seem to have vision or integrity. Even the talented ones don't seem to be woven from the tissue of grand leaders. The outlook is grim. It reeks "1984". The scene being dominated by the Machiavelli-likes who instead of brilliant minds prefer to be surrounded by vulgar valets to serve their narrow sakes.

Going through an ample military service didn't alter my basic fiber. It imparted me, however, new angles of life experience. You get to know people from various layers and places that otherwise you would have never met. Learnt a lot about people under stress or precarious conditions, such as being shelled or moving along unsafe roads. Have lived in the same tent with generous guys and with utterly egoists, with bold and filled with dismay. Have seen dead and wounded, have realized that not everyone is blessed by the stroke of luck to return safely from war. I understood first-hand how turbulent military clashes are and war has to be left as last ditch. Had the chance to work under a commander like Amnon Eshkol (decorated three times for courage in action) from whom have learnt the basics of quiet, thoughtful and inspiring leadership, to reach your goals with zero injuries while risks always lurk in the shadows. While he served as commander of the NAHAL brigade as Brig. G-ral, have visited with him together with Director of Extension, Sagiv. We offered to provide intensified professional support to NAHAL outposts. At such occasions, Amnon never missed to mention my top-dog status, that I was the one who put his regiment in order. After ending his military career, Amnon acted as chairman of Western Galilee's Growers association and we used to have common meetings. We met by chance, for last time before he passed away, at Frankfurt airport.